

Libraries and Literacy: Making the Case for State Funding

University of Michigan School of Information
SI 699 Mastery Course

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Executive Summary

Libraries are often thought of as vital organizations in our communities, including for literacy initiatives, but they rarely receive appropriate funding to make this happen. Our two clients, the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services (MCLS) and the EveryLibrary Institute, are both completing important work regarding resource sharing, political library, and funding initiatives for libraries, including in the state of Michigan. This report details the semester-long experience of working with our two clients to answer the question: “Where do libraries complete Michigan’s existing literacy policy agenda?” This report includes information on the initial problem statement and summarizes the work we completed for the clients in the form of a significant literature review, annotated bibliography, and white paper analysis. Additionally, this report aims to justify allocating further state funding for libraries in Michigan.

The literature review and analysis address the potential benefits of drawing a clear connection between advancements in literacy and the resources available through school, public, and academic libraries in Michigan. In order to understand this opportunity gap and support our clients, this report first introduces the problem, describes the methodology and results for our literature review, analyzes potential conclusions, and concludes with recommendations for our clients to use on future projects. It finds that there are significant and varied connections between robust library systems and improved literacy rates for all. The recommendations drawn from these conclusions focus on the relevance of literacy in current Michigan politics, and how our two clients can shape their future research on this topic.

Introduction

Libraries are often thought of as vital organizations in our communities, but they rarely receive appropriate funding to make this happen. This project was presented to us as “Research and Publications for Proving Library Positives Across a Spectrum of Stakeholders” by our clients, the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services (MCLS) and the EveryLibrary Institute. MCLS is a nonprofit organization that focuses on resource-sharing services in the Midwest region, specifically in Michigan and Indiana. The EveryLibrary Institute, a companion organization to the library political action committee called EveryLibrary, aims to research library impact, train librarians, and garner library support. Together, these organizations are working to assist libraries with utilizing and expanding their funding.

Our clients asked us to provide evidence to "prove the positive" case for library funding, in the form of an annotated bibliography. Additionally, we wrote a white paper compiling our findings and analyzing the impact of libraries on literacy. Our research focuses on the current state of literacy in Michigan for people in different regions and demographic groups. Despite all the work that the two organizations have done on behalf of libraries, there remains a significant opportunity for lobbying for an increase in state funding for libraries within the state of Michigan. The work we have completed will help MCLS and EveryLibrary prepare documents to inform legislators on this issue and gain advocates in the state government.

To support the mission of MCLS and EveryLibrary, our annotated bibliography will provide them with ample sources of information about literacy and libraries so that they can continue the work after we leave the project. Our white paper draws a connection between funding libraries—including their materials, digital resources, and programs—and improving the literacy rates and overall reading comprehension of the communities they serve. We provide

evidence for how state, public, academic, and school libraries support and improve literacy to demonstrate to legislators that libraries need funding. We will also present a poster summarizing our process and findings at the UMSI Exposition in April.

This report intends to answer the question: “Where do libraries complete Michigan’s existing literacy policy agenda?”. In order to do so, we will first discuss our research process, any challenges or support we received along the way, and our deliverables. Next, we will describe our findings related to the “Michigan Literacy Profile” and how well-funded libraries support literacy. Finally, we will conclude the report with recommendations for our clients based on our conclusions in order to potentially guide their own future work.

Methodology

We met with Scott from MCLS and John from EveryLibrary for the first time at the end of January 2026. They explained the project to us and provided background information about the work they do to increase funding for Midwest libraries. We agreed that the deliverables for this project would be for us to conduct research, create an annotated bibliography (see Appendix A), and potentially write a white paper (see Appendix B). After this meeting, we received a draft workplan from our clients (see Appendix C). This workplan divided the process into 3 main components: 1) Create a “Michigan Literacy Profile”, 2) Look at Michigan Library and Literacy Domains, and 3) Name the Library Contributions and Capabilities. We started by tackling the “Michigan Literacy Profile” and began our in-depth research.

In order to complete the goals of the client's workplan and our own workplan, we had to access an extensive variety of resources and research. We had an extensive list of resources to check out, provided by our clients, but we felt there were gaps in the types of educational research we were finding. Our work in the UMSI program focused primarily on libraries, but not

on education or general literacy trends. To fill this gap, we reached out to the University of Michigan School of Education librarian, Karen Downing. Karen spoke with us for an hour, first going through the goals of our project and then introducing us to different educational resources. This included describing how to navigate e-resources like ERIC and EBSCO, as well as showing us how to access data on the Michigan Department of Education Website. This set up our group well with beginning to crawl e-resources for data and literature related to the state of literacy in Michigan and the impact of libraries on literacy initiatives.

Once we received Karen's helpful recommendations, as well as research suggestions from our clients, we began conducting secondary research across databases and other electronic sources. We searched journals like *Frontiers*, *Journal of Electronic Resources Librarianship*, *Journal of Library & Information Services in Distance Learning*, and *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian*. We also utilized databases such as *Library Literature & Information Science Index*, *Library & Information Science Source*, ERIC, and LISA. Utilizing these resources provided us with informative secondary research, mostly consisting of studies published by researchers, educators, and other library science professionals focusing on the positive impact libraries have on literacy. We turned to other resources to find statistical data. We searched platforms like the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Data Driven Detroit, Michigan Department of Education, MI School Data, the Kaufman Foundation, and the National Center for Education Statistics. The sources provided insight into the literacy crisis in Michigan, including literacy scores amongst school-aged children and adults.

We used a wide variety of search terms to achieve a holistic and all-encompassing overview of literacy and libraries in Michigan. Using Boolean search methods, these terms included, but were not limited to: Michigan, literacy, literacy education, reading skills, emergent

literacy, reading achievement, information literacy, student reading levels, literacy testing. Using these search terms across databases and other resources, we discovered a large quantity of research to be used in our annotated bibliography and white paper. We recorded and organized this research in our research log on Google Sheets (see Appendix D). This log was divided into three tabs: General, Children's Literacy, and Adult Literacy. Within these tabs, each resource was labelled to further identify its topic and relevance to the literacy profile we were building. These labels included: Health & Civic Literacy, Workforce & Economic Literacy, K-12 Readiness, English Language Proficiency, Foundational Early Childhood Literacy, Digital Literacy & Broadband Access, and Incarcerated & Re-entry Populations, which we took from the clients' workplan.

Between Ellie, Madeline, and Sofia, we met several times a week and maintained constant communication over email and during class sessions. Through this communication, we consistently iterated our research process. We worked through questions together and decided which search terms, topics, and kinds of articles would be best to use in our research log. We also checked each other's work for clarity and consistency. By working together, bouncing ideas off one another, and talking through research roadblocks, we were able to create an expansive research log.

Additionally, throughout the course of the semester, we continued to meet regularly with Scott and John to discuss updates to our research, timeline, and initial writings. This included email communication, resource sharing, and remote Zoom meetings. Although our schedules were sometimes difficult to align between all members of the project, we were able to keep up communication and receive feedback from our clients for all stages of the project. This communication shaped our process and the focus of our research. Initially, our group had

planned to focus on general library funding in Michigan, rather than focusing on a specific goal. However, after speaking with our clients, we learned that it would be beneficial to choose an area of focus like literacy to build a more structured and convincing argument for increasing state library funding in Michigan. This idea was built primarily from client feedback, but also from current trends in Michigan, including the recent announcement from Governor Whitmer regarding the literacy targets in the proposed state budget (Michigan Department of Education, 2026). For later stages of the project, we used these meetings with our clients to confirm the direction of our annotated bibliography and the relevance of the research we conducted.

After conducting thorough research, we began writing the annotated bibliography. Initially, we organized the bibliography based on the categories we used in our research log, however, we soon realized that we needed to break these down further. We decided to divide our findings into the following groups: *Michigan Literacy Profile*, *Literacy Domains* (broken into: Foundational & Reading Literacy, Digital & Information Literacy, Workforce & Economic Literacy, and Health & Civic Literacy), and *Library Contributions*. These categories were provided in the client workplan as guidance for our research, so we thought it would be best to follow these here as well. Our final annotated bibliography contained over 15 pages with more than 40 sources, providing valuable information to support the cause.

After creating the annotated bibliography, we began designing our poster for UMSI Exposition. Because we had already compiled our findings in the annotated bibliography, it was much easier to summarize our research on our poster. Our poster articulates the need for library funding for a general audience and specifically identifies how increased funding will positively impact our communities.

At our final meeting, Scott from MCLS told us that the white paper was a bonus for their team, but we decided to take the challenge. As we began working on the white paper, we were provided with help from our teaching team. We explored the many ways to write a formal paper, which diverged from any format we had used before. We also learned how to make IEEE citations for the references in the white paper. The paper came together quickly, with 6 pages detailing the state of literacy in Michigan, how libraries currently support literacy, and why these factors should be considered when increasing funding for libraries.

Results

We conducted thorough secondary research to create an annotated bibliography that not only answers our clients' main question but also provides insight into the literacy problem Michigan currently faces. First, in accordance with the directions from our client about how to conduct our research, we built a Michigan literacy profile. We found that Michigan ranks 44th in education nationwide, which is lower than its ranking in 2022 at 40 ("Education rank in Michigan"). Furthermore, 45% of Michigan fourth graders perform at below basic reading achievement levels ("Fourth grade reading..."). Students across the state, in rural and urban areas, are struggling to achieve adequate literacy standards. Only 14% of third graders in Detroit met or surpassed English Language Arts (ELA) grade level standards, and 91% of students scored below college readiness on their SATs in all subject areas in 2023 ("State of the Detroit Child: Education").

The literature revealed significant opportunities for improvements in literacy for adults as well as school-age children. Individuals now have access to large quantities of information on the internet, and often need more instruction in digital literacy (Gross, 2023). In addition, incarcerated adults in Michigan are vulnerable to bans on library items (like a ban on

non-English dictionaries that lasted until 2022) and further gaps in literacy compared to non-incarcerated adults (Norton & McGowan, 2023). There is also a connection between literacy success and health outcomes. A 2024 study conducted by Yale found that diabetes patients with higher literacy skills were able to maintain better glycemic control (Shulman et al., 2024). Additionally, patients with lower literacy skills were less likely to seek preventive medical care. The researchers also found that children with lower literacy levels were more likely to engage in violence, substance abuse, and be exposed to sexually transmitted infections (Shulman et al., 2024).

After completing a profile on the current state of literacy in Michigan, our research then turned towards building a connection between libraries and positive literacy impacts. One point of entry towards building this connection in Michigan for school-aged children specifically is the decrease in qualified librarian staff in Michigan schools. There was a 60% drop in the number of certified librarians at Michigan schools between 2003 and 2013 (Lester, 2021). However, the Michigan Department of Education named librarians as a key resource for schools in their 2021 “Equity in Literacy” guide (Lester, 2021). Studies also show that schools with smaller library collections had lower achievement scores, especially for lower-income black and Latino students (Lester, 2021).

Multiple studies have confirmed the significant role school libraries and certified school librarians play in boosting the test scores of students. Studies conducted in both North Carolina and Michigan found that when school libraries were staffed more, had larger collections, and librarians collaborated with classroom teachers, the students scored higher in reading and literacy (Burgin & Bracy, 2003; Rodney et al., 2003). When students are given access to such rich

resources, like libraries, and instructed and guided by certified librarians, they thrive academically. In turn, this positively impacts their lifelong learning and achievement.

This is not only true for K-12 students. When Hostos Community College in New York implemented digital literacy modules in instruction with the support of the academic library team, it supported college students as they learned to adapt to technology in the workplace (Cormier et al., 2022). Additional studies note the positive impact of financial literacy through training programs (Hastings et al., 2013) and the importance of prison libraries in demonstrating equity in material and resource sharing (Norton & McGowan, 2023). Not only do literacy skills positively impact physical health, but they can create lasting impacts on one's emotional and mental health as well. Positive attitudes about literacy skills are connected to higher confidence, resilience, and motivation. Additionally, exposure to works of fiction improves social ability, as well as understanding the world by engaging the psychological processes that allow comprehension of a character's personal experience (Shulman et al., 2024).

Conclusions

Throughout this research project, we have come to realize just how vital libraries are for the development and success of communities, regardless of size, demographics, location, and more. When libraries are well funded, their patrons are able to access countless resources, participate in civic engagement, and grow academically and socially. School libraries, public libraries, and university libraries—these institutions are all integral to the improvement of literacy rates. We are aware of the poor literacy rates in Michigan; steps are being taken by the current governor's administration to improve them. However, they fail to include libraries and school librarians in these plans. From our research, we have learned that well-funded libraries

result in improved literacy across all ages and demographics, so we believe that Michigan should be doing more to support libraries.

When libraries have increased numbers of qualified staff, larger collections, more resources, and are open for more hours, users are consequently more successful academically. Literacy also leads to improved outcomes in health, physically and emotionally. Furthermore, library programs can be used for more specific scenarios for Michigan residents, including building up financial literacy and independence, as well as opportunities for learning and advancement for incarcerated populations.

There is a demonstrated need for improvements in literacy in Michigan, as seen by the results above. It is vital that the state of Michigan takes steps to provide more funding for libraries. If their goal is to improve literacy rates across the state, then they need to invest in the libraries that can enact that change. By developing policy and making space in the annual budget for library funding, lawmakers have the power to improve literacy and set Michigan residents up for lifelong learning and success. Without a project like this, Michigan libraries may not receive additional funding to improve literacy for all populations. It is important for funding on a state level to remain stable or even increase in order for libraries to continue functioning. Drawing a clear and accurate link between libraries and literacy using our research will help our two client organizations to further their work in making that goal happen. This would be beneficial in Michigan specifically, but also for other states with a similar literacy profile that the MCLS and EveryLibrary Institute both conduct work in.

Recommendations

One recommendation for our two clients is to look at the current trends in politics in Michigan to find opportunities for advancing library funding. On February 11, 2026, Governor

Gretchen Whitmer identified literacy as the number one priority of the state in the proposed 2026-2027 budget (Michigan Department of Education, 2026). The literacy initiatives in the proposal are focused on school-aged students, including paying for teacher training, investing in Pre-K For All, and adopting literacy curricula and tutoring support (Michigan Department of Education, 2026). There remains a lack of connection between literacy and libraries of all aspects (school, public, and academic) in the proposed budget.

The literature review and analysis described above help to bridge the gap between library funding and positive impacts on literacy for all members of the Michigan community, regardless of age or status. Because of the recent developments in Michigan politics regarding funding for literacy initiatives, we recommend that our clients use this literature review and analysis to take advantage of a significant opportunity for libraries. As the Governor's proposal does not highlight libraries specifically as tools for literacy advancements, this data could be used directly by political lobbyists to support the case for an increase in library funding across all levels in the state of Michigan.

Furthermore, we recommend that our clients broaden their focus to look at additional positives that libraries have on Michigan communities, beyond only looking at literacy. The initial client proposal did not list literacy as the main target for our research, and instead proposed a general research project on the positive impact of libraries and promoting more funding efforts. While this ended up being beneficial, as our research was able to build a bridge between libraries and literacy, there are many other areas of focus connected to library programs that could be used to argue for more state funding. We recommend that our clients continue to monitor trends in politics and social priorities in Michigan and other midwestern states. By doing so, this ensures that if trends move away from literacy and towards other areas of focus, our

clients can then adjust their future work towards alternate targets beyond literacy. Additionally, further research conducted on different positive outcomes that libraries have could be used in tandem with the research we conducted.

A final recommendation for our two clients is to potentially increase the scope of their data collection for future projects related to library funding or literacy in Michigan. After feedback from our classmates, we posited the idea of conducting primary research with library patrons and/or staff in order to gain personal perspectives on the impact of libraries on literacy. However, after talking with our clients, we decided to stay focused on only conducting a formal literature review with secondary research, in order to provide peer-reviewed and actionable data for our client. We recommend that, for future research, our clients potentially consider conducting primary research or even conducting secondary research from resources that are not necessarily peer-reviewed (like personal blogs or local news articles). These more informal forms of research offer interesting insight into the personal experiences the public has with libraries. Conducting or finding this research could provide valuable insights into the literacy needs and trends in Michigan. Especially, relevant research that is easier to obtain, time-wise, rather than a formal study that takes more time, labor, and money to conduct.

The above recommendations could be used by our two clients for future work, potentially in collaboration with other student groups in UMSI or other University of Michigan programs. This research can act as a starting point for creating a convincing and relevant connection between libraries and literacy in Michigan, which can be built upon in future projects by our clients and potential students in order to best reflect the constantly changing political landscape in our state. We are grateful for the guidance our clients provided, as well as the assistance from our teaching team for the SI 699 course. We hope that the results, conclusions, and

recommendations detailed in this report support our clients in their work. We appreciated this opportunity to learn more about conducting a literature review and analysis on such an important and relevant topic, and to be able to present our findings to our clients and to the broader University community.

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Appendix A

Annotated Bibliography

 Annotated Bibliography

Appendix B

White Paper

 White Paper

Appendix C

Draft Workplan from Clients

 Client Draft Workplan.docx

Appendix D

Group Research Log

 Group Research Log