



Community Engagement Report

Summary of Engagement

The Midwest Collaborative for Library Services (MCLS) undertook a series of Community Conversations. The Conversations were based on The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation’s model of community engagement, which seeks to “Turn Outward” to the community to determine their aspirations, and, in turn, to prioritize services that are in alignment with the true needs of the community. This report summarizes the process and resulting themes that were identified.

Consultants from MCLS’s Engagement, Consulting, and Training team facilitated ten (10) virtual Community Conversations in February 2023. The Conversations were opportunities for staff from libraries, affiliated associations, and organizations throughout Indiana and Michigan to discuss their aspirations for the community and the concerns they have about reaching those aspirations, and to identify areas of potential action to help the community reach their aspirations and to identify trusted organizations that could help facilitate that action. Fifty-eight members of the Indiana and Michigan library community participated in the Community Conversations; 33 from Indiana and 25 from Michigan; 28 from public libraries, 24 from academic libraries, 1 from a school library, and 5 from special libraries or other affiliated associations or organizations.

The notes from the Conversations have been themed and summarized into a blended community narrative and public knowledge summary.

Community Narrative

MCLS Community members openly shared their aspirations and concerns. The following is a narrative of the information, summarized in a blended form of The Harwood Institute models of “Community Narrative” and “Public Knowledge Summary.”

It is important to recognize that this was written in a specific time frame and context. Locally and nationally, there is incredible political polarization and division, and there are clearly frustrated people across the community and across the political spectrum. These issues came through clearly in the interviews and are important to consider when using the community narrative and public knowledge summary to guide long-term planning.

The MCLS Community Narrative/Public Knowledge Summary

The MCLS Community aspires to be open and inclusive; to build collaboration and relationships and share knowledge freely to remain relevant to our communities; to promote professional integrity with plenty of opportunities for professional development; and to create thoughtful, future-thinking strategies that support all staff in all types of libraries.

A community that establishes and deepens collaborative, relationship building, and knowledge-sharing efforts

Everyone who was engaged shared the aspiration to be a part of a library community that is deeply collaborative, builds meaningful relationships, and engages in knowledge- and resource-sharing efforts. People expressed a strong desire to establish and deepen collaboration within their library systems, regionally, at the state level, and across state lines between Indiana and Michigan. There was a desire to “connect rather than compete” with other libraries, where all library types could share resources, knowledge, and experience.

This was expressed specifically around the sharing of physical materials where many felt that we could strengthen and build on processes already in place, including seeking more standards across library cataloging systems to improve communication and efforts. There was also a clear desire and need, however, to push beyond and to combine efforts for collection development, programming, in working with and negotiating with vendors, and more. Participants expressed that libraries all have shared goals of providing for the needs of their communities and that the profession would only benefit from combining efforts to fill resource gaps. Many also felt that widening efforts across state lines between Indiana and Michigan would increase “buying power” with vendors to increase available resources to the residents of both states and felt this is more important now than ever due to vendor consolidations. The myriad of large vendor consolidations has caused a loss of relationships with the vendors and “failed technology”

ventures. Many also expressed a desire to explore opportunities for traditional resource sharing between Indiana and Michigan, and people felt that we should be working toward a way to smoothly share resources across state lines. Many would like to see funding go toward these collaborative efforts, as well as making sure there are opportunities for smaller libraries to take part equitably.

Those from the community also want opportunities to build and deepen relationships by connecting and engaging with each other, both virtually and in-person. Many shared that the combination of three years in a global pandemic and the large amount of turnover in libraries have them feeling disconnected from the wider profession, but also feeling disconnected by the state line between Indiana and Michigan. Some shared they would like state and regional organizations collaborating to promote opportunities to connect, engage, and share between people in both states. People also want to go beyond opportunities for “networking” and to connect and engage more deeply around topics of need or interest.

Those in the library community want to feel supported and to have the opportunity to reach out and support others as well. People expressed many times the importance of having access to or building a network where people can reach out if they need help or to talk through ideas, issues, or concerns, including opportunities for people to gather in-person to build collaborative knowledge and capacity. People shared they would like to build those networks with others from similar library types, but they would also like to build networks with others from all different types of libraries. Some also felt that larger libraries could partner with smaller libraries to help build skills, knowledge, and capacity that would strengthen the profession. This type of partnership would help fill gaps due to smaller staff sizes but would also expand the reach of programs and services from larger communities to smaller communities.

Remain relevant, embedded in, and valued by, our communities

The library community wants to be bold, innovative, flexible, and adaptive to change to remain relevant in our communities. People want libraries and library staff to be valued by community members and to have support at all levels of the community. Academic library staff expressed they want administrations to better understand the role of libraries in student success and to value, fund, and support library initiatives. Public library staff would like to see greater understanding among community members about what the library provides for the community and to have “active and involved” community members and library board members. Preserving access to information is important to the profession and “people need the full perspective and libraries can offer that.”

Library staff are feeling increasing hostility, division, and polarization from “culture wars” that are impacting libraries from some in their communities. Some feel the need to be cautious and “not ruffle feathers” as issues get raised and then get escalated quickly by people and expressed the need for more collaboration and knowledge to navigate through these challenging situations. Others expressed that we need to be bold and increase efforts in advocacy and

legislation to protect intellectual freedom, libraries, and library staff, and that need was especially felt from Indiana participants because of past and recent legislative sessions. Questions were also raised around the concepts of “advocacy vs. neutrality” in libraries and the need for guidance around these important topics.

People shared that libraries and library staff need to “tell our stories better” and feel that libraries “have an image problem” right now. Many find that there are many difficulties in “marketing” and “publicity” for libraries, often struggling to find good avenues of communication in communities, recognizing that social media is not the best way to reach many people in the community and that formal local news sources are dwindling. Libraries provide needed perspective and information for communities, and many feel that larger societal concerns around how people are accessing information are impacting issues and concerns locally.

Many in the community find it difficult to know the best way to share information or publicity about the library, and many struggle to have the resources to devote to it, especially in smaller institutions. The community agrees, however, that we need to find a way to better share what libraries of all types provide for people and communities, and fully demonstrate our relevance and role in the information profession. Some shared that the library community needs to “de-mystify” library processes and services in order to demonstrate relevance to those we serve.

The community also shared concerns around libraries’ ability to meet needs as communities are changing. Demographic trends are a cause for concern among many in the library community. Decreasing rural populations and decreasing high school students and graduates in many areas are causing declines in enrollment in many academic institutions, which is impacting academic libraries. Many shared that high school students are often underprepared when reaching higher academic institutions, which is changing what services need to be provided. The decline in certified school librarians is also concerning in school library communities, as well as the impact of that when reaching academic institutions.

In general, communities have changed since COVID, and many feel that libraries are struggling to adapt and keep up with them. There are fewer people returning to the physical buildings, sparking the need to continue to reach more people through outreach or virtually. Many shared that the promotion and expertise in using eResources is more important due to changes in how people are interacting with libraries now. How libraries use physical space has also changed because more people are using virtual services now. Some are concerned that physical library collections became stagnant due to the shutdowns during COVID. Academic librarians shared the importance of meeting needs for students has shifted as student enrollment is changing, with more participating in hybrid and remote learning environments. These changes have increased the importance of libraries keeping up with changing technology, incorporating the technology into library practices, and providing current technology for community members.

An open and inclusive community

The library community aspires to be diverse, inclusive, and open to ideas. Many would like to see a more “diverse cast of librarians” and to be more equitable to those working in libraries. People also want to foster, strengthen, and promote diversity, inclusion, equity, and openness in the communities they serve, and would like to see more acknowledgement and conversations happening around these issues in communities. Many acknowledged there is work to do in our professional standards by looking at library collections as well as cataloging practices and standards, and by working to make library staffs more representative and reflective of our diverse world.

A community that values and highlights the importance of professional integrity and ethics

Many would also like to see a reaffirmation and reiteration of professional ethics, with the solid foundation of being information professionals who uphold the belief and right to intellectual freedom and value providing access to information for all people. With the introduction of legislation in many states, including Indiana, criminalizing librarians for materials they select, ensuring that we continue to educate ourselves on professional standards and changing policies is crucial.

A community that values professional education with opportunities for mentorship

The community also values educational opportunities for professionals and paraprofessionals. People want to see staff well trained and able to meet communities’ needs. Many shared they would like better training and more educational opportunities for library staff without librarian credentials, and many would like to see more funding that supports people attending “library school.” People expressed concern about the high turnover in libraries in 2022-2023, leading to the loss of institutional knowledge and the hiring of library directors who have less background in libraries. The community is seeking an emphasis on having knowledge or training opportunities that highlight the importance of our profession, including professional ethics and values. There were also concerns about whether the cost of earning a library science degree is ultimately beneficial to the degree holder due to lower paid positions and availability of positions.

Many also expressed concerns around a dwindling job pool. Many libraries are having difficulty retaining library staff and are experiencing high staff turnover rates. Finding qualified candidates for open position searches is becoming more difficult and many positions remain unfilled. Participants from academic libraries also shared concerns that positions have been cut or hiring

remains frozen by administration, causing libraries to reshuffle responsibilities. Across all types of libraries, people shared that they are “expected to do more with less,” and some expressed concern with how embedded this concept has become in the profession. People would like to see more planning and transparency around what the library is able to offer and achieve based on available resources and staffing. Many shared they would like to have more opportunities for mentorship or learn best practices for forming mentorships to help build capacity and provide more support to library staff. Some shared that this is especially important for newer libraries’ directors who may not have had as much experience or background in libraries.

Having access to more training and educational opportunities for library staff is important to people, and administrations that are supportive of this effort are needed. People would like administration to support libraries in closing for a day to provide staff development and training, or for staff to attend training sessions or conferences so they are able to keep up with changes in the profession and continue to learn the best ways to meet communities’ needs. People especially expressed a need for more training and opportunities around technology. Many feel it’s difficult to keep up with training when there are ever-changing technology demands, and that some staff are resistant to providing technology support. They emphasized the importance of having more knowledge about providing help and support to users with technology.

A community that thoughtfully and intentionally plans for the future

Due to the challenges and changes of the past few years due to the global pandemic and political climates, it is unsurprising that many shared aspirations and needs around thoughtfully and intentionally strategizing and planning for the future. People aspire to be a part of a well-funded profession, where libraries are fully staffed and financially stable, and feel that planning for that future will help to successfully reach those aspirations. Concerns were shared around the community not returning to the library’s physical spaces post-pandemic, and the impact the long-term closures have had on physical library use, as well as other impacts that are still being discovered. These concerns paired with concerns around the job market for libraries have left people with a desire to place more intentionality and emphasis on future planning rather than continually “firefighting.”

Many are concerned that funding for all libraries is limited, diminishing, or not sufficient to meet community needs, to remain fully staffed, or to offer library staff wages to remain competitive. People also shared concerns that funding seems to be increasingly going to “innovation” rather than funding towards collaborative efforts, staffing, or current initiatives or priorities.

People feel that many library staff are “working in silos” and aren’t tied to a greater mission, and that having a greater strategy or plan that all staff are aware of, and base decisions on, would help keep everyone working towards the same goals. Having goals and strategies in place will also help to prioritize initiatives. Many are feeling overwhelmed with “trying to do more with less” and recognize that the library “can’t be all things to all people.” The lack of strategy and

focus leads to staff scrambling to “do all the things,” but doesn’t allow time to “reflect and learn.” With priorities in place, operational needs (such as updating job descriptions) can be examined and updated to ensure that the library is meeting community needs.

A community that cares about the wellbeing of those who work in libraries and to be, and feel, valued and supported at all levels

People also aspire to be a part of a community that cares about professional and personal wellbeing and who are valued and supported at all levels, from administration to communities. Library staff feel that libraries, library staff, and librarians are “under attack,” and have a general sense that “things are getting worse.” Those who participated in the conversations that have been in the profession for many years shared that they wanted to leave the profession better than they entered it and are “in mourning for the profession” as there is a general sense that “library staff are professionally tired” and have a “nostalgia for the ‘good old days.’” Ensuring staff have a “safe space” is more important than ever, as people described feeling frustrated, weary, exhausted, tired, jaded, numb, fatigued, discouraged, and that “everything is very raw right now.” People shared that “providing all things” for the community is “creating burnout” for library staff, and people are experiencing increased anxiety, a loss of wellbeing, and a lack of work/life balance, and there is a general sense of overall concern about library workers’ mental health. Concerns about the physical safety of staff are also top of mind from events such as active shooter situations.

What could be done that would make a difference?

Participants were asked what could be done to make a difference in reaching their aspirations and concerns. The following ideas are loosely themed and recorded in no particular order of importance.

Collaboration & Supporting Each Other

- Provide shared standards across all library types and library systems
- Investigate options around how libraries are supported at the local level
- Public libraries should have more agreement around what libraries lean into overall for consistency
- More grassroots collaboration efforts
- Provide professional development opportunities that address skill deficits
- Collaboration, resources, and opportunities especially for small libraries
- Training to specifically prepare for safety issues / intellectual freedom issues
- Promotion of Michigan Right to Read Toolkit (how to handle various intellectual freedom situations)
- Library staff could take “field trips” to different libraries to gain ideas and build collaborative relationships
- Opportunities for library program sharing (possibly between MI & IN also)
- Create social media-like technology program or tool that provides easy connections/sharing among library staff
- Create formalized eResource collection development policies and plans and standardized user training
- Engage with the community to bring other voices into the library (e.g. student “take-overs” for library displays)
- Library support organizations could share their expertise on various topics, such as marketing, technology, and future thinking

Statewide Needs and Resources

- Provide opportunities for statewide service prioritie
- Create shared standards across library systems
- More clarity and cohesiveness, especially in Indiana, around the various statewide organizations and their responsibilities
- Statewide initiatives that all libraries can “lean into” for consistency

Strategy Thinking

- Define and create parameters for collaboration before attempting it
- Fund and incentivize the behaviors and initiatives we want to see in libraries (e.g., collaboration, community awareness, etc.)
- Libraries should make sure that desired priorities are in the strategic plan (e.g., collaboration)
- Budget decisions should be based on strategic plan priorities
- Establish or re-establish shared goals for libraries statewide (e.g., intellectual freedom, privacy standards, etc.)
- Look to industries outside of libraries to learn how they're handling issues.
- Be bold, unafraid, and engaged
- Focus on quality over quantity
- Strategize increased funding/millages to match increased costs for resources; create marketing campaigns to help get the word out
- Encourage an engaged and involved profession – “It’s hard to ignore when you’re part of a group.”
- Foster a collaborative mindset across organizations
- Build strategic foundation in libraries:
 - Always be aware of organizational mission
 - Prioritize initiatives to provide quality service rather than trying to spread resources too thinly
 - Recognize that libraries have finite resources

Community Advocacy

- Libraries could partner with people and groups in their communities to promote awareness and build capacity
- Create avenues of communication with library advocacy groups
- Engage with the community to determine their needs
- Promote and encourage political activity/advocacy by librarians
- Promote awareness of libraries and their role in the community
- Guidance to create prepared elevator speeches to help promote libraries/the profession

Demonstrate Value

- Collaborative thinking around demonstrating value to administrators/library boards/library advisory groups
- Discussions and guidance on how to appropriately create relationships with board members/decision makers

- Create “day in the life” promotional materials about the library
- Guidance for academic library staff in talking with their political representatives (i.e. What is an academic library staff person’s role in state/national politics vs. the academic institution’s stance/role?)
- Guidance specifically for academic library staff in “sharing our stories” with administrators

Encourage Legislative Actions

- Promote legislative action protecting intellectual freedom, libraries, and library staff
- Creation of legal defense funds or insurance for libraries

Support and Sharing of Physical Resources

- MCLS is specially situated to advocate for libraries with vendors
- Take advantage of opportunities to create and promote joint buying power
- Opportunities to support smaller libraries (e.g. sharing resources, training/mentorship to staff who are new to the library world, address gaps in professional literature, publish more materials by staff of smaller libraries, etc.)
- Explore opportunities to change or expand resource sharing networks, including collaboration between Indiana and Michigan
- Explore how courier systems might cross between Indiana and Michigan
- Create an online tool as a platform for sharing promotional tools or ideas
- More information or promote how Project Reshare might benefit libraries

Professional Engagement, Networking, Communication

- Focus on providing more face-to-face meetings, especially regionally
- Explore creating communities of practice
- Engagement and collaboration with other libraries
- Communication and support between statewide/regional library groups and organizations
- Build relationships between organizations
- Support and relief for librarians
- More engagement and communication between school, public, and academic libraries
- Bring people together for conversation and dialog
- Continue to support each other in forums and dialogs
- Promote the development of grassroots networking systems/efforts among library staff
- Provide “tips” and guidance on opportunities for collaboration, forging relationships, etc.
- More opportunities to engage
- Create partner/mentor programs for new library directors