

Washington State Library

Needs assessment topline findings

To prepare for their 5-year LSTA evaluation and strategic planning, the Washington State Library (WSL) commissioned a needs assessment to identify issues that may impact how libraries in Washington, including those operated by WSL, serve their patrons. This includes changes in technologies, the expectations of patrons, issues facing library management and staff, and ways the library field supports community and statewide goals. To help prioritize issues and initiatives, the needs assessment also explores state priority issues and projections, how WSL supports state goals, and ways WSL might contribute to those goals in the future.

The data used for this analysis came from public records and datasets, records and data provided by WSL, and through group meetings with library leaders and library staff around the state. Further analysis of demographic changes in the state, funding of the state library, and state library programs will be contained in the full needs assessment report. This summary report identifies a number of trends and changes in the library environment, and discusses areas where action by WSL could result in better outcomes for libraries and residents of the state.

Library management and engagement

Six overarching areas of concern and struggle for the library community emerged from the needs assessment. These are areas where library managers would like to see WSL take a leadership role in organizing the field's response to changes in the library landscape and supporting staff development to meet the emerging needs of patrons:

- **Forming partnerships.** Library managers recognize the benefits and the necessity of forming partnerships with other organizations to extend their reach, meet the needs of underserved communities, and deliver services efficiently. They have been successful in many cases in forming partnerships with local community-based organizations, but have been less successful in forming partnerships with other libraries. WSL is seen as a potential agent in helping libraries form partnerships with each other, particularly between libraries of different types (e.g., between public libraries and Community and Technical College libraries). The most significant barriers to forming partnerships are having time to cultivate relationships, uncertainty about how to share resources, and concerns about equity in contributions and benefits.
- **Communications and collaboration.** Even in the absence of formal resource-sharing partnerships, library managers and staff are keenly interested in learning from each other and sharing information about best practices. They are also interested in collaborating with each other to develop new programming, digital literacy curriculum, and other services. WSL facilitates several library leadership groups and listservs, and in many cases, libraries are engaged in some forms of collaboration. However, these individual efforts are difficult to maintain and libraries look to WSL for assistance in providing collaboration tools and opportunities for libraries to reduce redundancies and enhance their ability to quickly respond to community needs as they emerge.

- **Evaluation and metrics.** To communicate with their communities and key stakeholders, library managers recognize the need to have clear and meaningful data about how people use library services and the outcomes they achieve as a result. More and more, library managers are expected to show outcomes from their services and defend the necessity of library services in the age of Google. However, they struggle with developing evaluation frameworks, metrics, and data collection procedures that meet the expectations of their audiences and show the important ways libraries help individuals and communities. While some of the difficulty producing evaluation data is connected to concerns about patron privacy, a larger issue is uncertainty about what to measure and how to gather reliable data. WSL's leadership in this area could be aimed towards increasing training opportunities about evaluation practices and facilitating work on common metrics among libraries in the state.
- **Staffing.** WOIS/The Career Information System projects about 450 annual vacancies in library positions through 2023. Many libraries struggle to fill these vacancies, often because of low wages compared to educational requirements. Additionally, managers are concerned about the diversity of their workforces and their ability to reach underserved communities. With the state's non-English speaking population projected to increase, librarians with proficiency in other languages are both in-demand and increasingly rare. Managers are seeking WSL leadership in cultivating new librarians and working with library schools to ensure graduates are equipped with the skills they need to be successful.
- **Professional development.** Some library staff related they do not receive adequate support for professional development. At the same time, many library managers had questions about what to do with staff who are reluctant to improve their skills and shared worries about succession planning. Both discussed the rapid development of new technologies and the difficulty keeping up with what the public expects them to know. With a great deal of focus on technology, some library staff expressed concern that traditional library training topics, like reference interviews and book mending, are not being taught to new librarians. WSL provides many professional development opportunities and surveys to determine what topics to offer. Nonetheless, it seems there is still room for more continuing education, particularly in management topics.

The concerns specific to certain types of libraries (i.e., public, tribal, academic, K-12, CTC, law, and special) will be addressed in the full needs assessment report.

Trends in library practices

National trends affecting libraries will likely impact the expectations for resources, services, and management practices in libraries in Washington as well. Across the country, public libraries are expanding their roles as central players in digital inclusion efforts; academic libraries are pushing forward with innovative approaches to digital collections and curating data; and community and technical colleges are relying on librarians to curate open educational resources (OER) for classes. While some libraries in Washington have been able to keep up with new trends, and indeed some have been leading the way, others have struggled to keep up with patron expectations while also managing legacy services their communities need and value. The following sections highlight practice areas where trends may affect patron expectations and library service delivery.

Privacy and security

Libraries have been strong advocates for patron privacy, often fiercely rejecting attempts to gather data through patron records and maintaining confidentiality around reference services. Traditionally, privacy has been achieved by purging lending records and not keeping records of other kinds of transactions. As more library content goes online, and libraries seek to increase their presence online, they also need to protect library systems, public computers, and patron data from security breaches, hacking, and malware with as much commitment. Specific areas where libraries need to increase effort, and may benefit from centralized training and resources from the state library, include:

- Ensuring the use of secure communication protocol (HTTPS) for all website properties, including catalogs, to protect website communications against third party attacks, eavesdropping, and tampering with content.
- Improving security of public Wi-Fi connections and public computers by instituting practices and policies such as separating public networks and internal library networks, providing patrons with access to secure connections, monitoring network traffic to identify security threats, and sweeping public computers of malware between users.
- Embedding online safety instruction and disseminating online safety information for patrons and library staff in all technology-related training, including while providing one-on-one help.

Content

The proliferation of online content has brought its own challenges, especially in licensing and copyright. eBook and periodical database vendors have created their own rules about how libraries can lend or give access to electronic resources which are often at odds with traditional practices and the needs of libraries. Issues of price and portability are also disrupting interlibrary loan relationships and consortia agreements. Areas where further discovery and leadership may help libraries adjust to the changing content landscape are outlined below.

- Many library leaders expressed the expectation that electronic resources, and in particular eBooks, would lead to decreased demand for print books and periodicals. However, the decline in print reading has not materialized, or has declined much less than expected, even at academic institutions where it was assumed young people would be more likely to use electronic materials. Maintaining resources in both formats is costly and library managers struggle with balancing collections between print and electronic materials, especially knowing that not all patrons have devices that can access electronic materials.
- Interlibrary loan practices have been disrupted by electronic content and made the tradition of sharing collections among libraries far more complicated. ILL of electronic journal articles are often restricted by vendors and libraries may have to purchase access to individual articles for patrons, which can be very expensive and limit funding available for collection development.
- Prices for electronic materials have been increasing for libraries in Washington without any corresponding increase in funding for materials. Community colleges that are transitioning to Baccalaureate programs can expect an increase in library database subscription prices based on their new Carnegie Classification; leadership at these colleges may not be aware of this consequence, and many libraries are absorbing the increase by cutting other resources.

- Open educational resources (OER) is a promising development in Washington's CTCs and K-12 schools. CTC librarians are taking a lead role in developing methods for working with faculty. However, the digital divide still exists and OER may not be accessible to students not on-campus or at a library. OER also presents copyright compliance issues, which librarians need support and training to address.

Data

Libraries are integrating two new kinds of data into their collections. In Washington, some libraries are involved in these initiatives, but more coordination and leadership from WSL could help advance libraries in the state towards these new practices and resources.

- Linked data is a method of publishing structured data so that it can be shared across different platforms. The Library of Congress has created new standards through the BIBFRAME initiative to eventually replace MARC. Linked data will allow library collections to be more discoverable through search engines. Some libraries in Washington have started experimenting with linked data, but centralized efforts will be required for it to be adopted throughout the state.
- More libraries are beginning to curate collections of data and get involved in helping their communities interact with data, for example by providing online visualization tools. Data literacy and instruction on using and manipulating data are also areas where some libraries are taking a more active role. As with linked data, collaboration among libraries to provide access to data collections and data literacy instruction could help advance access to data for Washington residents.

Technology and library spaces

Technology has redefined the role of libraries and transformed not just day-to-day operations, but also the physical space libraries inhabit. The public and patrons of libraries want and expect libraries to embrace technology and provide services to help people make use of it. Libraries have responded to these demands by offering Internet access, computers, and digital literacy instruction. Many have also adopted makerspaces to allow patrons to experiment with new technologies like 3D printers, robotics, and multimedia tools. To make room for these innovations, some libraries have reduced the size of their print collections and created more flexible spaces for patrons to work collaboratively. WSL could encourage and support this trend by sharing best practices and lessons learned.

Patron trends and expectations

Technology has driven patron expectations for what they want from libraries. Libraries are seen as centers for life-long learning, community anchors, and shared spaces for communities to come together. They are also seen as a place to get help with technology, including devices owned by patrons. With devices and software in endless development, some libraries struggle to keep up with trends and keep up with expectations. In the next five years, this will likely continue to be an ongoing struggle, however certain developments can be seen on the horizon that libraries may want to anticipate.

- Mobile devices will increasingly be used as primary personal computers, and patrons will be more frequently engaged in cloud computing (for storage and applications) and synching across multiple devices. This may result in changes to how patrons interact (or expect to interact) with library technology. As a result, library websites will need to be made mobile-friendly, librarians will need to be familiar with many different kinds of devices and synching protocols, and Internet bandwidth may need to be increased to accommodate cloud computing and increased use of mobile devices.
- Mobile users, especially those who first learn to use technology through a smart phone, will need a different approach to digital literacy training that incorporates training on using apps, as well as transitional instruction on using workplace technology. Patrons will continue to come to libraries for help with their own devices.
- Patrons will continue to expect libraries to provide both print and electronic resources. The demand for electronic materials may be driven increasingly by previews offered by internet-related service providers, links to journal articles in popular media, and exposure to the holdings of other libraries when linked data becomes more common.
- Virtual reality headsets, 3D printers, digital audio and video recording equipment and editing software, cordless charging stations, wireless printing, and other peripheral equipment and services will likely be in demand in some areas.

State priority issues

While libraries in Washington are mostly guided by their local community needs and patrons, statewide trends and priorities also affect patron expectations and should inform strategic priorities for WSL and libraries in the state. Governor Jay Inslee identified five goal areas for focus during his term: 1) world-class education; 2) prosperous economy; 3) sustainable energy & clean environment; 4) healthy & safe communities; and 5) efficient, effective & accountable government. These are all areas where libraries can (and do) make an impact.

Education

WSL has a good track record of supporting early literacy. As a member of Thrive Washington's Early Learning Partnership and a promoter of Supercharged Storytimes, among other programs, WSL supports quality early childhood programming in public libraries. While school libraries have been decimated by funding cuts, WSL has continued to support K-12 librarianship as much as possible. Washington cannot have world-class education without funding for K-12 libraries and teacher-librarians who can address digital and information literacy and provide students with the foundation necessary to excel in school.

With changes to the GED program, public libraries now have the opportunity to partner with community and technical colleges to offer GED preparation and testing. For some residents in Washington, entering an adult basic education program for GED at a community college is out of reach. Physical distance, time commitments, lack of technology, and expense can all be barriers to pursuing GED. Community colleges would like to partner with public libraries to provide GED instruction and, in some cases, do GED testing at the public library. This would be a good opportunity for libraries to assist their communities and contribute to education. WSL could facilitate this by supporting collaboration and pilot programs.

Prosperous economy

WSL offers the Imagine Academy to help learners gain technology skills that can increase their employability, and many public libraries offer classes in workplace technologies. Additionally, some libraries also have resources and services for entrepreneurs. WSL can support these efforts by providing collaborative opportunities for libraries to develop workforce development programs, facilitate partnerships with workforce agencies, and support more resources and programs for entrepreneurs.

Sustainable energy and clean environment

Libraries can help with the environment in several ways. They can improve their own environmental practices, particularly around recycling and energy use in buildings; they can also be encouraged to incorporate environmentally friendly features when remodeling or building new locations. Libraries can disseminate information about the environment, build environmentally-oriented collections, and develop programs about practicing stewardship. WSL can be an active partner in this effort by pushing out information about environmentally green best practices and providing guidance in capital improvement projects.

Healthy and safe communities

Health information seeking is one of the primary uses of library technology. Libraries can contribute to healthy communities by offering quality health information in collections and databases, and also by educating patrons about evaluating information. WSL could facilitate greater involvement with National Library of Medicine librarians for professional development, creation of resources for libraries, and other initiatives to improve the quality of health information accessed in libraries.

Institutional libraries can support decreasing recidivism through additional programming that supports offenders finding jobs and being connected to social support upon release. For example, institutional and community and technical college libraries can provide digital literacy and information literacy training, and institutional libraries can connect offenders with their children and families through reading programs at public libraries. Innovative programs such as these would require investment and time on the part of WSL, but could greatly increase the impact of its institutional libraries program.

Efficient, effective & accountable government

Increasing evaluation efforts in libraries, including the Washington State Library, is the most direct way WSL can demonstrate its contribution to accountable government. As noted previously, libraries continue to struggle with what and how to measure their performance. Since most libraries perform similar essential functions and are working towards similar outcomes for their patrons, common metrics, if developed, could be used for evaluation in libraries across the state.

Certain library policies and values inhibit evaluation activities, which in turn deprive libraries of data that could be used to improve efficiency and effectiveness. While this may seem insurmountable by some in the field, the discussion of how to collect meaningful data should not be prematurely foreclosed on this

basis. As in other areas, WSL can provide leadership for this type of effort and provide tools and resources that could encourage adoption of evaluation in libraries.

Washington State Library Funding

The Washington State Library develops and manages its own physical and digital collections focused on Pacific Northwest history and culture, manages the state's institutional libraries, and operates the Washington Talking Book and Braille Library. WSL serves as a regional Federal Depository Library and maintains Washington State publications. It provides services and support to public, academic, school, and special libraries with federal funding from the Library Services and Technology Act.

WSL and its programs have been subject to frequent budget cuts over the past 10 years which has deeply impacted its ability to fulfil its mandate. In 2015, it was able to change its funding stream to receive a new \$3 surcharge on each "recording instrument" related to housing permits and transactions. WSL hopes this change will stabilize its funding. The short term housing market projections support some optimism—building permits are forecasted to grow in 4.6% in 2017 and 3.5% in 2018 and then slower through 2020. In 2021 permits are projected to begin a slow decline.¹

Even with this new funding stream, however, WSL is likely to continue to be one of the poorest funded state libraries in the nation unless the legislature takes action to fund it at a level consistent with other states with similar populations and leadership goals. Despite WSL having some of the busiest state library outlets in the nation, and maintaining a high level of service to libraries in the state, in 2012 WSL ranked #34 in state library funding, which placed it just below Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Alabama and among only 19 state libraries with revenue less than \$10m.² WSL was also among only 10 state library agencies to rely on federal funding support to provide licensed databases.

Washington State can better reach the goals Governor Inslee has set out with the contributions of libraries to fill in the gaps around education, workforce development, health care, and other areas critical to the health of the state and its residents. Libraries fill in gaps around education by providing early childhood literacy services, homework help, and summertime enrichment programs. They fill in for workforce development programs by providing adult educational opportunities, job skills, and access to the means to look for work. And they are among the few institutions prepared to provide digital literacy help and training for people of all ages.

Through its professional development programs, consulting services, consortial purchasing, grant making, and other activities, the Washington State Library helps libraries across the state fulfil their missions and serve their communities, while also providing direct services through its libraries. However, it's restricted funding and years of cuts have seriously eroded its potential to improve libraries and the services they provide. Prioritizing raising the visibility of libraries, facilitating partnerships and collaboration, and developing meaningful metrics and evaluation activities could increase the effectiveness of services and improve prospects for future funding.

¹ Washington State Economic and Revenue Forecast Council, "Washington State Economic and Revenue Forecast."

² IMLS, "State Library Administrative Agency Survey 2012."