

Empowering Citizens, Empowering Readers Convening

Washington, DC | Planet Word Museum

March 1-2, 2022

I. Event Background

Expanding access to literacy and increasing reader engagement across the nation is a priority for Director Crosby Kemper and the entire IMLS leadership team. Specifically, IMLS seeks to use the power in promoting literacy development and reading practices as key tools for improving social wellbeing and increasing civic engagement. In March 2020, IMLS hosted a one and half day convening of 100 invited participants to discuss the current state of reading and public library engagement, with the stated mission of the event being, *"to facilitate knowledge sharing across stakeholders from libraries and local community organizations to generate new ideas and innovations for empowering readers."* To achieve this mission, the convening was anchored by the following two guiding questions:

1. *Building upon learnings from the IMLS social wellbeing study, how does literacy contribute to improving outcomes for community members/library patrons?*
2. *If library usage is declining, as evident in circulation rates, what is at stake and how can libraries increase community engagement?*



II. Event Overview

IMLS staff from the Office of the Director (OD), the Office of Library Services (OLS), and the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) partnered with Capital Meeting Planning (CMP) for approximately 13 months to plan, organize, and execute this convening, which took place on March 1 and 2, 2022.

Invitees: Planning of the event included carrying out an intentional process of selecting a limited number of invitees to ensure a broad representation of perspectives. The Office of the Director (OD), the Office of Library Services (OLS), and the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) selected approximately 100 librarians, library directors, educators, researchers, grantmaking organizations, and community-based

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program directors from across the country. In addition to participants and event coordinators, additional IMLS staff attended, serving as notetakers and facilitators.

Structure: The format of the convening included keynotes and interactive panel. At the conclusion of the panel discussion, participant input and reactions were solicited via a Question-and-Answer segment. Following each Q & A, IMLS staff facilitated an activity and discussions at each table.

III. Content Overview

The content was divided into three sessions, each of which contained distinct keynote speaker(s) and panelists, designed to strengthen literacy networks and further understand barriers to reading to inform future innovations.

Session 1: Libraries and Social Wellbeing – The goal of Session 1 was to discuss differences of variables in ascertaining what works well in communities, the extent to which libraries are a significant factor in promoting social wellbeing and identifying indicators for measuring social wellbeing. Panelists supplemented this discussion by sharing models of success and outlining different pathways to success—e.g., addressing homelessness—with the understanding that there is not just one answer to questions about where attendees see themselves in their communities, specifically related to literacy and the importance of the libraries and their work on literacy. These discussions build upon findings from the IMLS report released earlier this year, *Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation’s Libraries and Museums*.

Keynote Speakers



Robert Putnam
Political Scientist,
Researcher, Author



Shaylyn Romney Garrett
Author, Researcher



Dianne Connery
Pottsboro Library



Carmen Patlan
Highwoods Public Library



Felton Thomas, Jr.
Cleveland Public Library

Expert Panelists

Session 2: Strategic Alignment of Library Resources – Session 2 centered on Tim Coates’ recent research on the declining public use of public libraries, made evident by low circulation rates. His Freckle Report challenges libraries to rethink community member engagement tactics. The panelists responded to his argument, offering their insights on strategically aligning resources to combating the decline.

Keynote Speakers



Tim Coates
Researcher,
The Freckle Report



Tony Ageh
New York Public Library



Jennie Garner
North Liberty Library



Patrick A. Losinski
Columbus Metropolitan
Library



Kelvin Watson
Las Vegas-Clark County
Library District

Expert Panelists

Session 3: Prioritizing Literacy Development – Session 3 closed out the convening with a rich discussion of what is at stake when there is a decline in literacy. After Professor Maryanne Wolfe’s keynote presentation on brain science discoveries for how children (up to teenage years) come to literacy and overall personal development through reading, the panelists shared experiences and insights from their literacy programs and how these are affecting social wellbeing in their communities.

Keynote Speaker



Maryanne Wolf
Author, Researcher

Expert Panelists



Dipesh Navsaria
Reach Out & Read



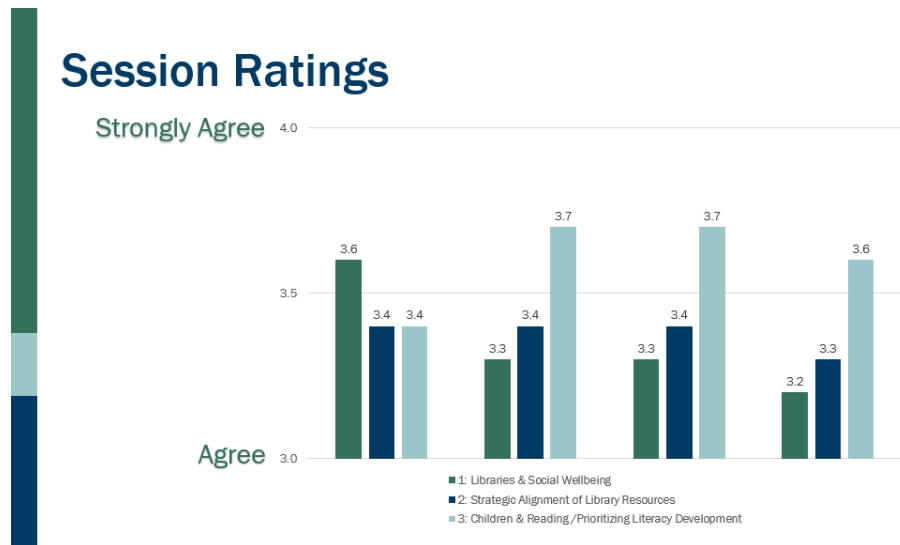
Munro Richardson
READ Charlotte



British A. Robinson
Barbara Bush Foundation

IV. Convening Takeaways

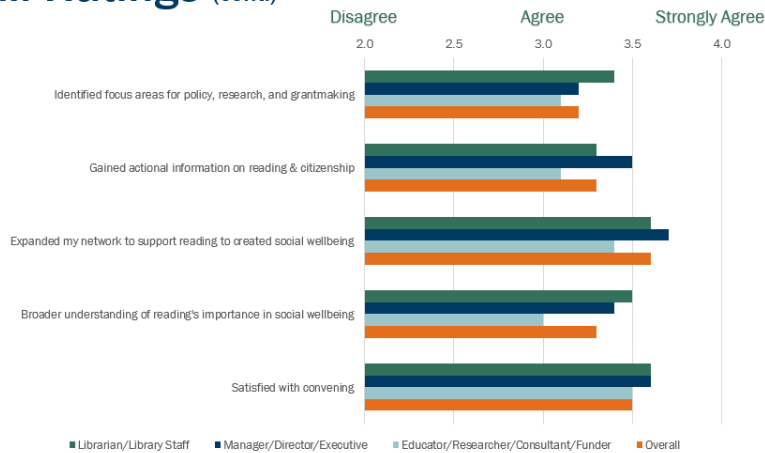
Event Evaluation: Overall, participants engaged in meaningful ways during the convening, through Q & A sessions that advanced collective learning and through active participation in activities and networking breaks. The ORE created and circulated an official evaluation among participants. Evaluation respondents indicated satisfaction with the event with positive ratings for each session and general experience. Nearly half of the respondents expressed interest in continuing the conversations that emerged over the course of the convening. Figures below reflect data from the event evaluation, which was administered at the conclusion of convening using a printed copy and digitally via email.



Overall Ratings



Overall Ratings (cont.)



Stakeholder Suggested Strategies: Throughout the event IMLS staff members recorded written notes on the conversations happening at their tables. Additionally, participants submitted questions and comments throughout the event to an idea “parking lot” area, comprised of a note pad and post-it notes. Afterwards, ORE staff analyzed all 600+ comments that emerged from the convening, drawn from table discussions, activities, post-it notes, and emails about literacy and social wellbeing. They coded all ideas into six different themes listed below, along with sample comments from participants:

Theme 1: Library Identity, Purpose, & Branding

- *What is our “brand”: reading, information, or something else?*
- *Books should not be the only brand for libraries.*
- *How do we increase the perceived value of a free public goods?*
- *Equity Question: What is the role of the library in improving racial equity? - "Equity and diversity get me to the table, inclusivity gives me voice."*

Theme 2: Literacy Development & Engagement

- *How do we define engaged reading? How do we define literacy?*
- *What about cultures and traditions that do not rely on print literacy consumption, i.e., oral traditions like storytelling.*
- *Who is responsible for teaching children to read?*
- *What impact are eBooks having on libraries?*

Theme 3: IMLS Funding & Grantmaking

- *Why do libraries have to rely deeply on philanthropists for funding? Where is the government?*
- *Libraries desire grants that require more collaborative projects between libraries and across sectors - theory and practice together.*
- *Offer and support new ideas with the possibility of failure into the grant process to support innovation.*
- *Equity Question: How can funding directly target the eradication of the wealth gap?*

Theme 4: Research, Data, & Evaluation

- *What data matter to our public and what matters to people that are not using libraries?*
- *What is more important to libraries – national data or local data?*
- *We need to look at data from a subculture level to better serve our communities*
- *Equity Question: How can libraries identify inequalities and gaps in service without collecting demographic data on whom we are reaching?*

Theme 5: Supporting the LIS Field/Library Workforce

- *There should be more accountability for libraries in creating community change and IMLS needs to better track that work.*
- *How do we nurture and retain diverse LIS cohorts? How to better empower and encourage them to be social change agents?*
- *Equity Question: Does the workforce have the cultural competencies to reach minority children if they come through the doors?*

Theme 6: Best Practices & Programs

- *The statement "programs don't matter," is wrong, especially with youth. Two examples:*
 - *Local authors' reading and storytelling circles, which encourage children to write and draw their stories; children's creations become part of the library's collection.*
 - *Initiatives like tours and meet the librarian events -> building trust with our community library -> safe & useful space*
- *Equity Question: How can libraries do a better job reaching disadvantaged communities?*

Each of the themes identified by the ORE team was further divided into subthemes to reflect the stakeholder ideas and strategies more accurately in their scope. Each subtheme and its respective set of strategies was matched to IMLS strategic goals and assigned a hypothesis about how they relate to advancing social wellbeing and literacy development.



V. Next Steps

Operationalizing stakeholder strategies: The IMLS core project team with staff from OD, OLS, and ORE reviewed all stakeholder strategies based on ORE coding and personal reflections and prioritized potential sets of strategies before follow-up. The IMLS Leadership reviewed these selections as well in deliberating on how best to operationalize prioritized strategies. Currently, IMLS has begun follow-up investments using FY 2022 funds for further informing a longer-term research agenda and grantmaking. Four projects currently under development for implementation in FY 2023 are listed below:

1. Constructing a statistical methodology that builds on prior research by Raj Chetty and others to enable a way to test the hypothesis that American neighborhoods with strong libraries positively influence literacy by improving children's reading. The outcome of this activity will be a proposed statistical model to test meaningfully the hypothesis.
2. Researching about the efficacy of contemporary literacy practices that are seeking to improve youth literacy through reading; research will focus on reading practices used with digital reading content and physical content as well as highlight potential library best practices associated with IMLS grants.
3. Planning a convening of targeted researchers and practitioners in examining the availability and gaps of data for measuring reading across diverse groups of youth. The assessment is intended to inform deliberation by IMLS and other partners for ramping up library capacity to innovate approaches towards youth reading, using potential experimental pilots.
4. ORE and OLS will support a cooperative agreement between the Urban Library Council and Barbershop Books to develop a series of case studies to examine the social networks and dynamics at play in fostering a targeted subset of the youth population's reading in non-traditional spaces. The cooperative agreement also includes facilitating engagement between local public libraries and Barbershop Books to establish program partnerships in select ULC member library communities.

Reconvening: Since nearly half of the Convening participants expressed interest in continuing engagement on literacy and social wellbeing, IMLS is currently designing a reconvening strategy to gather

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researchers and library practitioners to discuss best practices for studying social wellbeing and neighborhood-level impact of the libraries, and best practices from the field.

VI. Acknowledgements

This event was made possible by IMLS leadership and staff, event planners from Capital Meeting Planning, and partners at the Planet Word Museum.

