Mapping the Public Library Landscape for Evaluation Training & Tools

At the 2017 American Library Association Annual Conference, 27 people representing public libraries, state library agencies, library associations, and research organizations came together for a one-day meeting to discuss the public library landscape for evaluation training and tools.

At the beginning of the meeting, the group agreed to the following theory of change:

*The ALA RIPL/PLA meeting will identify evaluation training/tools needs for the public library profession so that...*  
*Library staff have a more comprehensive set of professional development opportunities and that...*  
*They are more aware of the available training and tools that will help them so that...*  
*They are able to gain knowledge, competence, and confidence that makes them more data proficient so that...*  
*They are more aware of the importance of data-based evaluation in their work so that...*  
*They have more commitment to use different datasets and evaluation practices so that...*  
*They are better able to gather, understand and use data for library management, strategic planning, communications, and advocacy and have more opportunities to advance into leadership positions.*

Then, throughout the day, the group engaged in a series of four activities:

1. Developing a Data Skills Spectrum  
2. Reviewing the Current Landscape of Public Library Evaluation Training and Tools  
3. Identifying Gaps Between Needed Skills and Available Training/Tools  
4. Creating a Plan to Address Gaps

**Data Skills Spectrum**

Participants developed a data skills spectrum for public library staff, ranging from “Data 101” to “Data Geek” to “Data Guru.”

Examples of skills identified within each part of the spectrum include:

**Data 101**

Determine what data to use to make a decision  
Interpret basic charts  
Administer a survey using templates such as Project Outcome  
Understand the difference between an anecdote and evidence

**Data Geek**

Design a data collection instrument (survey, interview guide, etc.)  
Conduct a focus group or interview  
Understand the concepts of validity and reliability  
Demonstrate knowledge of government datasets
Data Guru

Understand various statistical analyses such as regression
Conduct statistical analysis using software such as SPSS or R
Able to enable others to understand the results of statistical analyses
Able to combine data from various sources to identify issues, assess trends, etc.

Takeaways from this activity included:

- The importance of establishing staff-wide buy-in for the importance of data
- The need for staff at all levels to have basic skills such as data collection strategies to meet various reporting requirements
- The challenges of making data accessible to laypeople
- The value of determining the characteristics of data-driven organizations/staff (e.g., curiosity, failure tolerance, flexibility, etc.)
- The recognition that not all staff need to progress along the data skills spectrum

The Public Library Landscape for Evaluation Training and Tools

Following the spectrum-creation activity, participants reviewed the current landscape for national public library evaluation training and tools. This spreadsheet contains information about the nine efforts that were identified (e.g., Project Outcome, Edge, Impact Survey, Research Institute for Public Libraries, etc.).

Identification of Gaps and Possible Solutions

Participants then engaged in a discussion to identify gaps between the needed skills and the types of training/tools currently available, as well as to propose potential solutions. The gaps fell into four categories: technical skills, management/leadership skills, communication/advocacy skills, and field-level coordination. The following table describes each category and possible solutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Possible Solutions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical skills: data collection strategies,</td>
<td>• Develop online trainings for data collection strategies in conjunction with</td>
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<tr>
<td>statistical analysis, best practices for establishing benchmarks and metrics, etc.</td>
<td>Measures that Matter</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Use existing online resources for statistical software such as Lynda.com</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Identify “best in class” data-driven curricula in existing institutes and trainings</td>
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<td>Management/leadership skills: gaining staff buy-in for evaluation, communicating data effectively with board, change management, etc.</td>
<td>• Create trainings in various areas – board, management, strategic planning, community assessment</td>
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<td>• Develop consensus around benchmarks and metrics</td>
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- Create self-assessment rubric
- Develop guides to select evaluation tools

| Communication/advocacy skills: developing proactive strategies to communicate library impact, optimizing relationships with local media, etc. | • Create communications plans that are connected to other strategic priorities
• Offer PR instruction, possibly built around existing curricula (Toastmasters, Harwood, etc.)
• Create trainings in storytelling with data |
| Field-level coordination: common set of talking points about the purpose and value of data, coordinated exposure among projects/products, mapping data and reporting needs with trainings | • Develop a coordinating group at the national level
• Establish data gurus as subject matter experts and champions
• Raise awareness/value of data-driven organizations
• Learn from international challenges and solutions |

**Plan for Addressing Gaps**

At the end of the meeting, participants committed to meet online in subgroups during fall 2017 to create a plan for addressing the gaps. The following subgroups were formed:

**Benchmarking and Metrics**

**Self-Assessment Rubric**

**Creating Mind Shift in Public Libraries**

**National-Level Coordination of Evaluation-Related Efforts**