

Report on Ontario Public Library Focus Groups - February 1-5, 2010, Toronto

Prepared by Wendy Newman, Facilitator

Purpose

The Focus Groups were convened to flesh out the five priorities selected by the online and in-house participants at the Symposium: Libraries 2020, held September 24, 2009, and to describe success in 2020, assuming that Ontario's public libraries, their organizations, and their partners, including governments, took concerted action on these priorities. They were not mandated to create plans or to assign roles and responsibilities to any of the lead organizations. The results of their discussions were intended to be shared at the OLA SuperConference session in February 2010. They would also inform the work of both individual libraries and their lead organizations.

Composition

The Focus Group volunteers were drawn from the diverse public library systems of Ontario. Populations served ranged from 1,600 to 2.5 million. Northern, southern, urban and rural, and First Nations public libraries were all represented. Most participants were CEOs or senior staff, although some board members did participate. Groups varied in size from 12 to 19. As a majority of Ontarians live in larger cities, the focus group volunteers were disproportionately representative of smaller libraries.

Preparation

In addition to the video of the full day, focus group members had access to a specially prepared one-hour summary on the Symposium Web site. This Power Point with voice-over included four video excerpts from the keynote speeches in addition to the reactor panelists' explanations of their suggested priorities.

Process

Each focus group met for three hours. Each participant was asked to list five points that would characterize success in 2020 for the assigned priority if concerted action were taken. Participants were then grouped in pairs representing contrasting library sizes and asked to discuss their answers and create a combined list of five items. All groups reported their results to the whole group and a list was prepared, the many common points being noted. The facilitator prepared a list of common themes for group comment, editing, and validating. Participants were then asked to identify what is currently going well in relation to the assigned priority, and to identify implications of this for collaborative action towards success in 2020. While mention of funding was inevitable, the focus of discussions on money was to be on influencing improvement. Gwen Harris recorded the discussions and transcribed the flip charts compiled during the sessions. Lorraine LeBlanc booked all participants and made supporting arrangements.

Priority 1: Create a library culture that supports continual innovation

Success looks like (selected comments by participants)

- “barrier free culture” – seamless access, one-card system for the Province
- “community hub”
- “services accessible through multiple channels”
- “culture of risk taking” with education programs (LIS) that “create risk takers”
- “library as a destination place”
- “self service and automation; use technology - staff doing value-added”
- “don’t have to beg for money”
- “better cooperation and partnership with other libraries”
- “a culture that is visionary and driven by excellence”
- “Profession of choice. Anything in information starts with a degree in librarianship.”
- “funding model that allows for risk taking”
- “community sees library as innovative institution”
- “staff are thinking about the ‘next thing’ – the emerging area”.
- “culture of continuing education”
- “working together to leverage resources, e.g., ILS consortium”
- “a culture of results”
- “advertising that communicates value”
- “a culture of staff confidence”
- “stronger roles as leaders in education”
- “empowered staff who can put ideas into action”
- “showcasing cultural events happening in the hub”
- “technology enhances services but does not overpower”
- “R & D culture”
- “digital space should provide the same opportunities as the real world”
- “culture of critical evaluation”

Themes evident in the discussion

- Awareness and proactive response – antennae out to discern community needs and preferences, leading-edge responses
- Aspiration – aspiring for excellence
- Continual learning – live library life
- Risk tolerance– acknowledges, tolerates, indulges in risk; sees it as a way of doing business
- Collaboration – link to seamlessness
- Communication – proficient, strategic – communicate value to media, decision makers, hub and showcase
- Accountability and assessment (evaluation)
- Visionary and creative: leaders in design, education, and services

What goes well now, and what does that imply for collaborative action towards future success?

Record of collaboration, e.g., ILS, consortia, JASI	Do on larger scale, e.g., one-card system. Don't see ourselves in isolation. Engage provincial government – vision, bigger dreams.
Examples: Human Library program (London PL), Salons (Toronto PL)	[Learn and adapt]
Models that work across distances (e.g., Skype)	[Learn and adapt]
Education Institute (“everyday learning”)	[Learn and adapt]
Access to international models (e.g., Aarhus PL, Denmark)	Be open to these models and set benchmarks higher
Merchandizing	Put everything on wheels and create more flexible spaces
Partnerships – experience in reaching and serving newcomers, Service Ontario	[Learn and adapt]
Unified front – FOPL – collaboration, agreement, and clarification re message and voice.	[Learn and adapt]
OLS publications and tool kits.	[Learn and adapt]
Associations – but some weakness here and risk of fragmentation.	[Learn and adapt]
Collaboration of OLSs, FOPL, OLA, KO in Symposium	[Learn and adapt]
SuperConference	Venue for learning and sharing.
Canadian research in public libraries that demonstrates value and impact	More intentional engagement of researchers; need accessibly written reports that practitioners can use.
Investments in leadership	Strengthen.
Networks such as the Working Together collaboration, which created a network of innovators	Performance indicators.
Standards and guidelines (accreditation)	Raise the bar and thus stimulate innovation
Success stories	Greater attention to communication with stakeholders and populations

Priority 2: Expand public library role as a community place and public space

Success looks like (selected comments by participants)

- “Aesthetically successful” “
- “Warm, open, inviting, welcoming”
- “Well-promoted spaces”
- “Outdoor space use – beyond walls”
- “Budget for premium service rather than basic”
- “Partnering with non-traditional partners”
- “Trained, engaged, passionate, informed, connected staff”
- “Staff embedded in the community”
- “Need a cognitive shift – responsive staff”
- “Diversified outreach mechanisms”
- “Special areas of the library have special access arrangements”
- “One card system”
- “Proactive outreach to niches”
- “Seen as vital to community capacity building”
- “The ‘Third Place’, where to hang out, the place we want to be”
- “Hangout place, happening place”
- “Seamless and transparent access”
- “Accessible space”
- “Totally engaged with communities”
- “Engagement of leading, respected community advocates”
- “Continuous relationship building – relationship is backbone and not just input”
- “Libraries provide veracity and authenticity”
- “Moments of WOW”
- “Simplicity in funding, all three levels of government”
- “Robust funding”
- “Strong brand – vital, essential to the community”
- “Part of community planning”
- “Everyone feels respected, wants to be there”
- “Network capacity understood and used by government”
- “Need a paradigm shift on what we should be doing – not just being good at what we do now”

Themes evident in the discussion

- Staff excellence – shift
- Indoor and outdoor space flexible and responsive
- Funding
- Partnerships and collaboration
- Library as destination
- Branding and advocacy

- Continuous engagement in planning
- Standards, including. First Nations, scaleable and linked to funding

What goes well now, and what does that imply for collaborative action towards future success?

Self-promotion	Target effectively Elections – run for office Intensify partnerships Find new partnerships
Community advocates	Intentional and focused Proactive Grow advocates
Ownership	Board recruitment – proactive
AODA opportunity	Springboard
User initiated systems	Add more
Impacts	Increase impacts and raise awareness Diverse
Next gen	Inform, target, listen and learn
Engagement of councils	Share, intensify, be proactive
Staff background and knowledge	Have more embedded staff, raise community profile
Education of future professionals	Target educators Engage part-time workers, Talk to guidance counsellors. Expand opportunities
Branding	Collaborative branding and promotion, especially re authoritativeness. Example of partnership with Media awareness Network. Local participation, examples
Existing partnerships	Strengthen impact Engage advocates Assessment tools Analysis and recognition Complementarity
Examples	Diversify advocate base
Access to local and provincial strategies and priorities	Position libraries
Information about value	Promote, inform, engage
Infrastructure programs for PLs	[Advocate]
Provincial level documents and organizations	Intensify government relations, especially messages re collaboration

Priority 3: Ensure all physical and virtual libraries are high quality, visible, and well used spaces

This group began with an affirmation of the advice of Joan Frye Williams and George Needham to identify the ten most compelling assets of the library's physical space and apply them to the digital space.

Success looks like (selected comments by participants)

- “Equity – in buildings, too”
- “Partnerships where organizations see libraries as partner, not rival”
- “Governments see libraries as contributors to public sector, not just a drain on money”
- “Funding from multiple jurisdictions”
- “Sustainable financial support from public and private sectors”
- “Libraries that are flexible and big enough”
- “Buildings and Websites completely accessible”
- “Focus on best practice, sharing successes”
- “Training geared to change”
- “Commitment to blending physical and virtual – seamless experience of service”
- “Website draws people into library and vice-versa”
- “Every household uses library as community portal”
- “Nimble models and mindsets”
- “Stronger influence on proprietary systems”
- “Easy common interface for everyone”
- “Library as leader in programs and services moves to virtual, e.g., seminar in library on Webcast”
- “Mechanisms for equity, streamlining, and access”
- “Boards more savvy”
- “Don't just bring anyone to Board”
- “Robust technology infrastructure”
- “Leadership role for larger libraries that do have the resources”
- “Actively involving the user in two-way discussion – BiblioCommons, group gatherings”
- “The ‘Library as Conversation’ concept”

Themes evident in the discussion:

- Staff and board development, including recruitment.
- Diversified recognition and support, including partnership and recognition of libraries by government and private sector.
- Collaborative development and sharing, including best practices for success and model sharing.
- Seamlessness and convenience – with provincial scope and equity (including one card), extending to physical and virtual space, and characterized by nimble processes.
- Strong, flexible infrastructure, including buildings and technology, systems.

- Collective influence and positioning on systems, including proprietary systems, and collaboratively developed library sector systems such as Bibliocommons and Knowledge Ontario.
- Promotion, advertising, marketing, advocacy – all related and all to be strengthened to position libraries in the competition for health and related funding.

What goes well now, and what does that imply for collaborative action towards future success?

Library buildings – design of new ones, renovations.	More tours and packaging to share experience. Stress green design.
Existing collaboration, e.g., KO, TD summer reading, training and development – Symposium and its follow-up, regional initiatives, digital availability, Education Institute	Expand content. Expand access mechanisms. Promote value. Do more measurement and raise awareness. Have more distance access/products.
Experience in digital service delivery	Exploit, adapt for access.
Library credit system	Leverage.
Libraries as venue for videoconferencing	Publicize and emulate.
Web 2.0 presence – e.g., BiblioCommons	Support, spread collaboratively
Systems such as Listservs to share thoughts and help each other.	Have more social groupings within library community.
Learning programs – “25 things” program, “technology petting zoo”	More collaborative development and distribution. More Education Institute.
Evaluation / measurement and assessment mechanisms	Develop and apply to web 2.0. Update definitions and measurements.
Year-end stories and statistics	Share models. Demonstrate impact of service.
OLS – South and North	Strengthen sharing of mechanisms to communicate.
Federated search – convenient, quality	Create provincial interface. Leverage. Role for KO.
Research on HR needs	Promote careers in public libraries.

Priority 4: Engage people and leverage community connections and resources

Success looks like (selected comments by participants)

- “Library and staff positioned as early literacy specialists”
- “Library is building community of tomorrow by engaging community, though engaged youth”
- “Value of public library is recognized by decision-makers and residents”
- “Library’s role is integrated into other community services, buildings would include arts programmers, employment offices, youth workers”
- “Library has capacity building role to support grass roots”
- “Community-led libraries – meeting people where they live and supporting their aspirations”
- “Warm, welcoming centre, a community hub with ambience”
- “Buy-in and support of the council, school boards, and teachers and trustees and all the other power brokers in the community”
- “Growth of collaborative endeavours with the aid of technology – our job is to dream big”
- “Economic impact is demonstrated when mills close – librarians have helped people do resumes, etc.”
- “Library and community are embedded within each other”
- “Library is not defined solely by the building. It’s a concept”
- “Library is the place to start. The go-to place for recreation and information”
- “Library draws on knowledge of the community to inform the community”
- “Policies are broadened and refreshed”
- “Burgeoning programs”
- “Employees are dynamic, extroverted, risk takers, connected with the community”
- “Staff represent demographic and ethnic make-up of the community”
- “Effective sharing of best practice”
- “Nimbleness and responsiveness to community in ways that matter to them”
- “Value their capabilities. Maybe library is to provide support and not lead”
- “Simplified, responsive grant programs”
- “Integration of the library in all areas of planning”
- “Community agencies advocate for library”
- “Basic level of standards”

Themes evident in this discussion

- Community-embedded and connected staff, board, and service.
- Library as hub: learning, culture
- Effectiveness in leveraging, enabling, collaborating.
- Partners and residents as resources and advocates.
- Proactive and intentional inclusion.
- Branding and positioning.

- Nimbleness, pilot projects – urgency and responsiveness.

What goes well now, and what does that imply for collaborative action towards future success?

OLSs	More financial support, better lobbying, more sharing of info and examples.
High measured value	Strengthen profile strategically. Recognize and acknowledge partners, give and get. Build community advocates.
Friends groups	Identify and engage “zealous nuts” as advocates by building relationships and researching their priorities.
Recognized shortcomings in community and stakeholder understanding.	Same.
Basic how-to documents – “Working Together”, “Library Advocacy Now”	Learn and adapt.
Culture of collaboration	Value, use, expand, live it. Don’t lose it.
Collaborative mechanisms: KO, EI, OLA conference, FOPL, Leadership by Design	Strengthen training uptake. Update resources.
Symposium 2020	Update.
Recruitment – 8Rs research, HR needs projections	Advocacy for subsidized summer youth placements. Mentoring of younger staff.
Sharing information	Develop better repositories of experience.
Relationships with funders	Strengthen awareness and relationship building.
Models for concerted neighbourhood action – e.g., Toronto Neighbourhood Action Groups	Be proactive in using these. Package this experience for adaptation or replication.
Stakeholder recognition as leaders.	Be proactive.
Location of branches – high use, safe, neutral, hours open	[Increase awareness and leverage these qualities.]

Priority 5: Collaborative program models

Success in 2020 looks like (selected comments by participants)

- “Aggressive collaboration” (quoting Mike Riddell at the Symposium)
- “Trust – people recognize that the library is there to help people collaborate to make a better community”
- “Communication and networking among libraries and groups doing the programming”
- “Effective communication of models within the library sector and between libraries and the wider community”
- “Organizations look to the library as a model for collaboration – a nimble community, with the library leading the dance”
- “Cross-sector collaboration at the community level is mirrored at the provincial level”
- “Learning from First Nations” (reference to State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada)
- “Goals and outcomes of library must equal goals of community”
- “A cultural shift in libraries – think beyond comfort level, be more visionary”
- “Preparation of collaborative funding proposals with other community groups”
- “Pool resources within library community for awareness and promotion – work together to develop the tools”
- “Embedded librarianship”
- “One card, one province”
- “One-stop to agencies and resources – URLs into catalogues, etc.”
- “Repository for community plans and activities”
- “Collaborative repository of program ideas and instruments”
- “Publisher of social capital information”
- “Understand and reflect the real assets of the library community”
- “Street librarianship”
- “Collaborative advertising campaigns – be where people look” (e.g., Wyoming mud flap girl, Calgary PL ads in grocery stores)
- “A place at the table – organizations looking for public engagement come to the library”
- “Coordinated response to issues – one voice”
- “Diverse representation at library board table”
- “Partnering with government agencies – position libraries: part of health of community”
- “Grant funding with flexibility – smaller libraries not defaulting to a spending pattern of larger libraries”

Themes evident in this discussion

- Repositioned libraries through collaboration. Assets are known promoted.
- Collaboration beyond the walls – e.g., street librarianship, community networks.
- Embedded librarians and models – at the table.
- Collaborative repositories: ideas, experiences, tools.
- Accelerated learning
- Social media presence and service

- Culture shift – nimble, flexible, strategic.

What goes well now, and what does that imply for action towards future success?

Settlement worker model (shared services). Local collaboration on youth – London program.	Apply model to other issues. Get out there. Collaborate on summary documents re library as a place.
Local examples	Provincial marketing document. (FOPL) Collaborative document to strengthen staff and board understanding. Leadership. Empowered staff.
Leadership programs	Broaden base
Community development programs such as Working Together	Advocacy for role of community development to be included in all education levels – Excel, MLS, EI
KO Forum of '09 (Video of sessions)	Exploit existing videos
Community repository – e.g., bereavement resources	Provincial tool kit on “how to”. Help from existing organization outside the PL community → networking
Clear Language movement. Also JASI, KO	Engage their help and insights. Collaborative advocacy. Brand to engage public’s advocacy.
“Value calculator” tool	Enhance and deploy strategically
Priority neighbourhood model – Toronto	Publish examples, present at conferences, add to EI.
Models of shared space – e.g., Vaughan Welcome Centre	same
AskON, Bibliocommons, LNG – e.g., of White Pine	Use tools more – build out social networks in library sector, as in LNG.
Regional portals – “no wrong door”	Collaboratively develop best practice in PL community. Collaborate in relationship with vendors.
Strong institutional credibility as info providers	Partner with users and other initiatives. A priority to be there. Share info re initiatives. Collaborate with university libraries. Collaborate on positioning info literacy.
Existing advocacy and marketing	Adopt methods more widely. Identify and engage champions.

Appendix: Participants in Focus Groups

Focus Group 1: Create a library culture that supports continual innovation

Name	Library	Population	OLS
Sheila Fairley	Toronto	2,503,281	South
Elizabeth Glass	Toronto	2,503,281	South
Marie Forte	London	352,395	South
Moe Hosseini-Ara	Markham	261,573	South
Christine Fiorini	Vaughan	238,866	South
Elizabeth Rossnagel	Sault Ste. Marie	74,948	North
Holly Scott	St. Thomas	36,110	South
Gay Kozak Selby	County of Brant	34,415	South
Barbara Sweet	Prince Ed. County	25,496	South
Jill Nicholson	Lincoln	21,722	South
Margaret Sedgwick	Fort Frances	8,103	North
Bettijane O'Neill	Renfrew	7,846	South
Terri Pope	St. Mary's	6,617	South
Shann Leighton	Grand Valley	2,844	South
Gisele Belisle	Moonbeam	1,298	North

Focus group 2: Expand the public library role as a community place and public space

Gail MacFayden	Toronto	2,503,281	South
Carolyn Doyle	London	352,395	South
Debbie Walker	Markham	261,573	South
Margie Singleton	Vaughan	238,866	South
Tammy Robinson	Oshawa	141,590	South
Kimberley McMunn	Oshawa	141,590	South
Monika Seymour	Niagara Falls	82,184	South
Peter Atkinson	St. Thomas	36,110	South
Carolyn Nordheimer James	Whitchurch	24,390	South
Janine Harris Weatley	Essa	16,901	South
Erin Roussin	Kenora	15,177	North
Kelly Thompson	Petawawa	14,651	South
Jennifer La Chapelle	Clearview	14,088	South
Sabrina Saunders	Six Nations FN	12,500	South
Pierre Mercier	Leed and Thousand	9,435	South
Ed Pepler	Hanover	7,147	South
Julie Andrews-Jotham	Hastings Highlands	4,033	South
Barbara Swyers	Georgian Bay	2,340	North
Jan Heinonen	South River-Machar	1,935	North
Mary Deschatelets	Terrace Bay	1,625	North

Focus group 3: Ensure all physical and virtual libraries are high quality, visible and well used spaces

Brigitte Richter	Toronto	2,502,281	South
Lisa Manaxz Skikos	London	352,395	South
Moe Hosseini-Ara	Markham	261,573	South
Ian Ross	Whitby	111,184	South
Cindy Poon	Ajax	90,167	South
Shannon Kammerer	Huron	59,325	South
Amanda Robinson	Brockville	21,957	South
Rosellen Hickey	Smith Ennismore	17,413	South
Jonathan Lewis	Atikokan	3,293	North
Sumiye Sugawara	Nipigon	1,752	North
Irene Moore	Terrace Bay	1,625	North

Focus Group 4: Engage people and leverage community connections and resources

Magdalena Vanderkooy	Toronto	2,503,281	South
Delilah Cummings	London	352,395	South
Diane Macklin	Markham	261,573	South
Joseph Sansalone	Oshawa	141,590	South
George Saarinen	Thunder Bay	109,140	North
Angela Meady	Thunder Bay	109,140	North
Rebecca Dechert Sage	Waterloo	97,475	South
Frances Ryan	Sault Ste Marie	74,948	South
Rita Turtle	Quinte West	42,697	South
Tara Mendez	Niagara on the Lake	14,583	South
Sandy Hanshall	Burks Falls	2,828	North
Skip Hale	Greater Madawaska	2,751	South
Edna Laton	Douro Dummer	6,954	South
France Ste-Croix	Moonbeam	1,298	North

Focus Group E: Collaborative program models

Patricia Eastman	Toronto	2,503,381	South
Julie Brandt	London	352,395	South
Andrea Cecchetto	Markham	261,573	South
Jean Foster	Windsor	216,473	South
Tiffany Balducci	Oshawa	141,590	South
Meighan Work	Huron	59,325	South
Judith Heinzen	Timmins	42,997	North
Sam Coghlan	Stratford	30,461	South
Barbara Sweet	Prince Edward	25,496	South
Sabrina Saunders	Six Nations	12,500	South
Debera Flynn	Hanover	7,147	South

Daphne Johnston

Ninda-Kikaendjigae

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South