Accelerating Promising Practices for Small and Rural Libraries (APP) Program

March 2023

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Executive Summary

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Evaluation Findings from the Accelerating Promising Practices for Small and Rural Libraries (APP) Program

Mentor and cohort-based capacity building is effective for small and rural libraries and archives.

Small and rural libraries are more than repositories of material – they can preserve local histories, promote digital literacy, and serve as hubs for self-directed learning. To support these institutions and to build their capacity, IMLS implemented the Accelerating Promising Practices for Small and Rural Libraries (APP) program. This two-year capacity-building program supported participating libraries to implement a project related to one of three areas of focus: Community Memory, Digital Inclusion, and Transforming School Library Practice. The program's innovation brought together two cohorts of peer libraries grouped in a community of practice (CoP) around those focus areas, each facilitated by a mentor organization to help build capacity within participating libraries. TCC Group conducted a mixed-methods evaluation, gathering data from mentor organizations and participants throughout the program. This Executive Summary provides the high-level findings from that evaluation.

APP Program — At-a-Glance

Format	Capacity support for small and rural libraries focused on peer and mentor relationships
Time span	Cohort 1: Sep 1, 2019, to Aug 31, 2021 Cohort 2: Sep 1, 2020, to Aug 31, 2022
CoPs	Each facilitated by a mentor organization • Community Memory (CM) • Digital Inclusion (DI) • Transforming School Library Practice (TSLP)
Participants	45 small and rural libraries across 2 cohorts
Primary Interventions from Mentors	1:1 meetings In-person meetings Webinars and virtual meetings Curriculum Online portal

How effective were the capacity-building interventions?

A majority of the capacity-building interventions were highly effective.

Four of the five primary capacity-building components were highly effective for APP program participants. These included in-person convenings, monthly virtual meetings, a curated set of topics specific to the CoP, and regular one-on-one check-ins with mentors. In-person and virtual meetings provided participants access to relevant resources and speakers, as well as opportunities to share with each other about their projects. One-on-one check-ins with mentors enabled participants to ask specific questions and helped them keep their projects on-track. Participants largely found the topics covered in their CoP to be useful. The fifth primary intervention, an online portal, was useful as a document repository but ineffective in fostering grantee interaction and relationship-building.

90% of participants described their mentor organizations as valuable or very valuable

APP mentors brought value to participants.

Ninety percent of participant respondents (36 individuals) described their mentor organizations as valuable or very valuable. Mentors provided participants with moral support and encouragement, facilitated strong professional

development, were communicative and responsive to participants' questions and needs, shared their own knowledge and experience, and guided participants to keep their projects on track.

APP was impeded by and adapted to COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an acute effect on the APP program itself as well as the projects implemented by participants. However, mentors leveraged opportunities to adapt the programs midstream after the onset of the pandemic midstream. When libraries' projects didn't go as planned, often because they were unable to engage with their communities in the way they had planned, mentors helped them pivot their approaches. Mentor organizations gave participants space to talk about their needs and then adjusted content, topics, and meeting schedules accordingly. IMLS made accommodations for program participants and mentor organizations, allowing mentor organizations to shift budgets and timelines. This flexibility within the program was cited by participants as critical for them to be able to complete their projects.

80%

of primary capacity- building components were highly effective for APP program participants

Ways COVID-19 Impeded APP

- Slowed project advancement and completion
- Limited ability to convene with Cohorts for in-person idea sharing

What **impacts** did the program have?

Participants' personal and library capacities improved.

Participants increased their confidence in implementing projects related to their thematic areas. They also developed technical skills within their libraries related to the thematic areas of community memory, digital inclusion, and transforming school library practice. Participants saw increases in skills such as project planning, implementation, and grants management. Their experience in the program led to increased feelings of pride, gratitude for the support, assurance, and reduced isolation. On top of those personal benefits, they increasingly perceived their libraries as facilitators of community knowledge and providers of public access to information. By the time participants completed the program, feelings of connectedness within CoP libraries had increased.

88%

of participants integrated learnings from their CoP into their IMLS-funded project

Participants' projects advanced and improved.

The cohort model allowed participants to get advice, moral support, and encouragement from their respective group as they improved their own individual projects. Participants integrated program learnings into their work, indicating the topics covered by the program were aligned with and applicable to what they do. They reported receiving innovative and implementable ideas from convening with other libraries and learning how they addressed challenges.

100%

of participants interviewed found some value in being a part of their cohort

What did we **learn** from the APP?

A cohort-mentor model capacity-building program has the potential to be an effective way to support small and rural libraries to serve their communities. Engaging with a cohort of peers, with guidance and support from an experienced, knowledgeable, and resourceful mentor organization, enabled participants to implement topic-specific projects, and supported many of them in building capacity at both the individual and organizational level that will allow them to better serve their communities moving forward.

Final Report

March 2023

Introduction

The IMLS Accelerating Promising Practices for Small and Rural Libraries (APP) program aims to support projects that strengthen the ability of small and rural libraries and archives to serve their communities within the areas of transforming school library practice, community memory, or digital inclusion.[1]

Through the APP program, 45 small and rural libraries across the United States, pertaining to two cohorts, were provided grants ranging from $10,000 to $40,000 to implement self-identified projects serving their communities within the three areas noted above.

APP also was designed to build grantee capacity through participation in a community of practice (CoP) based on their project category and led by a third-party mentor organization providing expert guidance and facilitating communication between grantees. It was expected that through the APP program, grantees would receive personalized training and technical assistance, be a part of a facilitated community of practice, and have intentional interactions with the broader library field. This component of the program is designed to promote shared knowledge, build grantee capacity in relevant areas, and grow networks in the library and archives fields.[2]

The APP program's first cohort (Cohort 1, 30 libraries) participated in the program from September 1, 2019 – August 31, 2021[3] with the second cohort (Cohort 2, 15 libraries) participating from September 1, 2020 – August 31, 2022. Table 1 shows the three communities of practice within the APP program and their assigned mentor organizations. Figure 1 shows the geographic locations of the participating libraries throughout 26 states and territories. For a full list of participating libraries, see Appendix 1.

Table 1: APP Communities of Practice and Mentor Organizations

Community of Practice (CoP)	Focus/Thematic Areas of Grantee Projects[4]	Mentor Organization	# of Libraries Participating
Community Memory (CM)	Projects that engage local communities in the collection, documentation, and preservation of their local histories, experiences, and identities	WiLS	Cohort 1: 10 Cohort 2: 7
Digital Inclusion (DI)	Projects that support the role libraries play in promoting digital literacy, providing internet access, and enabling community engagement through civic data and technology	Kansas City Public Library (KCPL)	Cohort 1: 10 Cohort 2: 3

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[1] Accelerating Promising Practices for Small Libraries FY 2019 Notice of Funding Opportunity

[2] "Calling Small Libraries: IMLS Opens Grant Program for Second Year." IMLS press release. August 30, 2019.

[3] Some participants in the program received no-cost extensions to finish out their IMLS-funded projects, however, their capacity building through the mentor organization and community of practice ended at the end of this timeframe.

[4] Accelerating Promising Practices for Small Libraries FY 2019 Notice of Funding Opportunity

Community of Practice (CoP)	Focus/Thematic Areas of Grantee Projects[4]	Mentor Organization	# of Libraries Participating
Transforming School Library Practice (TSLP)	Projects that help school libraries shift from transactional approaches toward ones in which school libraries serve as dynamic hubs for self-directed, inquiry-based learning and that position school library professionals as integral instructional partners to classroom teachers	OCLC	Cohort 1: 10 Cohort 2: 5

Figure 1: Locations of APP Participating Libraries
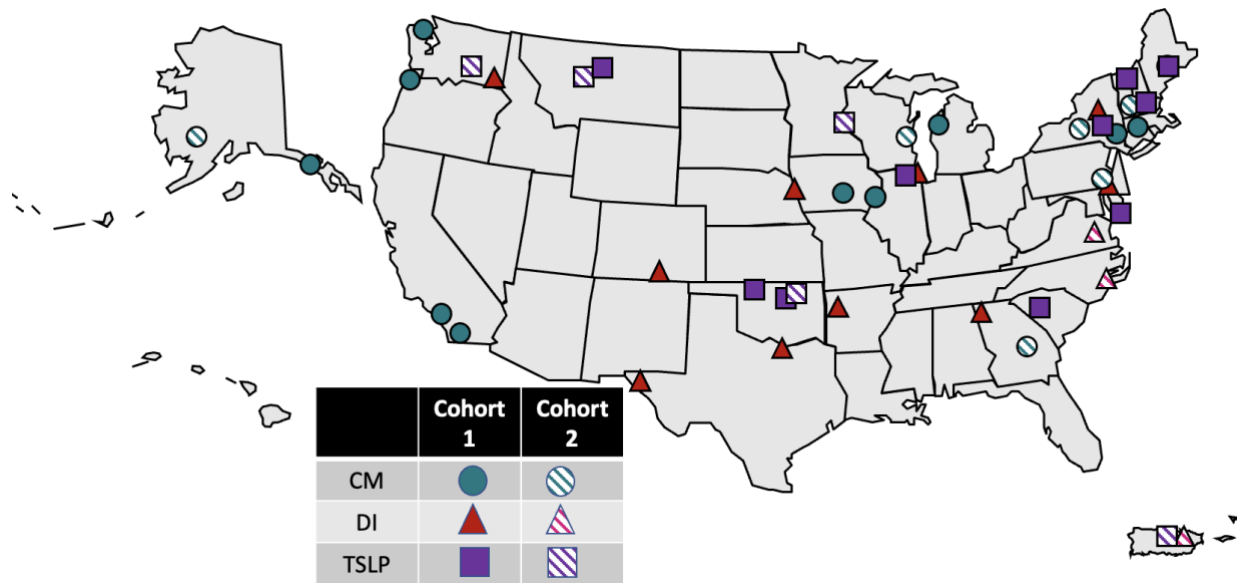
By participating in this mentor-led, cohort-based model of capacity building, it was expected that the grantees would be able to increase their skills, experience, and infrastructure to engage their communities, join a larger network of libraries to redefine their library's role as a community hub, and embrace their roles as central facilitators of community knowledge and providers of access to information, ideas, and networks. Over the long-term, these changes will help change the role of libraries in the eyes of community stakeholders to a view of libraries as stewards of community culture and history, and hubs that advance innovation, lifelong learning, and cultural and civic engagement for their communities (see Appendix 2 – APP Theory of Change).

This evaluation of the APP program seeks to understand the following primary evaluation questions:

1.	Interventions	What **capacity-building interventions** were provided for the grantees and **how effective** were they? • What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on programming?
2.	Impact on libraries and librarians	What **impact** did participation in the APP program have on the **participating libraries and librarians?**

3.	**Impact on projects**	What was the **impact of capacity building** on the libraries' IMLS-funded **projects**? • What knowledge, skills, and experience were gained? • To what extent were libraries able to connect to and be supported by a larger network of libraries? • To what extent do libraries see their role as central facilitators of community knowledge? • What was the experience like for APP participants?
4.	**Organizations and communities**	To what extent did the APP libraries' **organizations and communities support** their project ideas and efforts and what **impact** did the APP program have **on the organizations and communities?**
5.	**Cohort-mentor model**	What are the overall **takeaways on the cohort-mentor model** of capacity building for small and rural libraries?

This report provides findings on the participation of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 in the program. The report begins with an overview of the methodology used in this evaluation, includes an executive summary which summarizes the main findings of the report, and then proceeds to provide detailed findings organized by the evaluation questions above.

Methodology and Data Sources

To answer the primary evaluation questions, a mixed methods approach was used to gather data from key individuals and documents that were a part of the APP program experience. The following data collection methods were used, involving all participating libraries in both cohorts:[5]
- Participant surveys administered at baseline, program midpoint, and program endpoint
- Participant interviews conducted at the program endpoint
- Mentor organization interviews at midpoint, on a quarterly basis, and at program endpoint
- Evaluator analysis of periodic mentor organization-administered pulse check surveys
- Evaluator observations of in-person convening and virtual cohort meetings
- Evaluator observations of online portal interactions
- Document review of APP program materials developed and provided by the mentor organizations

Appendix 3 provides more details on the data sources and methods used in the evaluation.

Limitations of the Evaluation

As with all evaluations and research projects, certain decisions need to be made regarding the reliability and validity of the information derived. The content of this report speaks to the experiences and perceived outcomes of the capacity-building efforts for 45 small and rural libraries, supported by three different mentor organizations, working with three different communities of practice. As a result, while the information is a

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[5] As of January 1, 2022, TCC Group dissolved its nonprofit affiliate, Partners for Public Good, which was originally contracted for this evaluation. The remainder of the evaluation contract was then transferred to TCC Group. The evaluators working on this project and all evaluation tools remained the same.

valid representation of the capacity-building programming and derived outcomes for this project, the information from this report may not fully represent what impact similar programming might have in other contexts and with different cohorts of libraries. In addition to the challenge of having a limited number of libraries in each community of practice, representing a very small percentage of the larger community of small and rural libraries, there are other challenges that further limit the ability of the evaluation's findings to be generalized to the larger population of libraries and the potential impact of capacity-building activities.

- **Small and rural libraries are different than urban, suburban, and larger libraries.** Issues such as access to funding, staffing, and other support are major for small and rural libraries. The loss of one staff member in these libraries is more significant than for larger libraries or those situated where a larger volunteer pool can be found. As a result, capacity-building efforts for the small and rural libraries might have a different impact or, more importantly, lose impact when a trained staff member departs. Further, these entities often do not have access to other communal resources such as experienced grant writers and project managers, so their needed capacity build could look significantly different from larger or more urban libraries.

- **Cohort 2 consisted of smaller numbers of libraries, increasing the strength of individual voices in the data collection.** With a smaller number of libraries accepted into Cohort 2 than Cohort 1, a single library can have a larger effect on the overall reported viewpoints of the cohort. For example, Digital Inclusion had 10 libraries participating in Cohort 1 and three in Cohort 2. As a result, a single library in Cohort 1 comprises one-tenth of the overall viewpoint and has less of an impact on the mean score, versus a single library in Cohort 2, which comprises one-third of the overall viewpoint.

- **The COVID-19 pandemic occurred throughout the course of the grant program and at different stages during the two cohorts.** The pandemic significantly altered how libraries functioned throughout most of the capacity-building program. Further, many libraries needed to delay elements of their APP-funded work due to staff departures and re-tasking of resources and focus. For the Digital Inclusion group of libraries, the pandemic served to provide strong contextual reasons for their work, bolstering some of the capacity-building efforts (e.g., community engagement) that otherwise would have been more challenging. The impact of the pandemic directly affected all of the participating libraries' organizational capacities, as well as their perceived value in the communities they served. It also helped libraries highlight the importance of the APP work to those very same communities. The pandemic did not have similar impacts on participants in the other two communities of practice. Instead, their own programmatic efforts were solely responsible for their shift in perceived value.

Executive Summary

The IMLS Accelerating Promising Practices for Small and Rural Libraries (APP) program ran from September 1, 2019 to August 31, 2022. Throughout this period, 45 small and rural libraries (divided across two cohorts of 30 and 15, respectively) participated in a two-year capacity-building program with other peer libraries grouped together in a community of practice (CoP) that also was facilitated by a mentor organization. Three CoPs were grouped by the thematic area of the libraries' IMLS-funded project: Community Memory, Digital Inclusion, and Transforming School Library Practice.

Summary of Evaluation Findings

The mentor-cohort capacity building model proved highly effective for small and rural libraries. Mentor organizations were an especially valuable aspect of the program, providing moral support, facilitating strong professional development, and serving as a guide to keeping the projects on track. Effective mechanisms for building capacity included in-person convenings, monthly virtual meetings, a curated set of topics specific to the CoP, and regular one-on-one check-ins with the mentors. The use of an online portal was found to be useful as a document repository but ineffective in fostering relationships.

APP participants increased their skills in project planning/implementation, and grants management, as well as within their thematic area (i.e., community memory, digital inclusion, or transforming school library practice) and most applied those new skills directly to their IMLS-funded projects. Leaving the program, participants felt more connected to a network of libraries, although deep relationships between cohort members were generally not formed and likely would have had more success if the additional planned in-person meetings had been able to take place.

Participating in a cohort provided value as it allowed participants to discuss projects with peers and to directly obtain advice, moral support and encouragement from others that deal with similar issues. The cohort helped them feel less alone in the daunting task of managing a new grant, implementing a new type of project, and dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The majority of participants needed longer than the allocated two years to complete their IMLS-funded projects. This was largely due to the pandemic. By the end of the two-year period, participants reported developing stronger relationships within their organization or community, deepening relationships with community partners, and achieving project outcomes such as the transformation of a physical space, or the creation of a digital platform or set of oral histories.

Many APP participants had support from their leadership and staff while others struggled and were unsure if they had buy-in to sustain the work beyond the program. The need for technology and project materials decreased as IMLS funding supported purchases in these areas. Similarly, some libraries found success in obtaining their community's support while others struggled and raised increasing needs for more staff and volunteers. Through the program, participants increased their library's ability to create, implement, and plan for projects that prioritized their community's needs.

1. What capacity-building interventions were provided for the grantees and how effective were they?

The mentor organizations provided a broad spectrum of support to the grantees and the types of capacity building were broadly similar across the three CoPs. Four of the five primary capacity-building components were highly effective for APP program participants, with the fifth being moderately effective.

1. APP participants found one-on-one check-ins with their mentor organization to be very effective for answering specific questions about their projects and helping to keep them on track.
2. In-person meetings were a high-value component and enabled grantees to develop comfort, familiarity, and the start of deeper relationships with their other cohort members. The natural experiment (due to pandemic restrictions) of Cohort 1 meeting in-person at the start of their program and Cohort 2 meeting in-person at the end of the program showed that the use of in-person meetings early in the program is a critical element in helping to build a sense of comradery and in setting up the foundations for deeper relationships to be formed.
3. Virtual meetings provided value to participants by covering relevant topics and content, providing the opportunity for participants to hear about others' projects and share about their own, and by providing access to speakers and resources.
4. Program participants largely found the topics covered in their CoP to be useful to them.
5. Program participants found the online portals to be useful as a document repository, but it had limited use as a vehicle for facilitating grantee interaction and relationship building.

What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on programming?

The COVID-19 pandemic began during Cohort 1's first year in the APP program and before Cohort 2's program began. The pandemic impacted programming in significant ways, but the mentor organizations and IMLS demonstrated flexibility in adapting to the circumstances and to participants' changing needs. Mentor organizations gave participants space to talk about their needs and then adjusted content, topics, and meeting schedules accordingly. IMLS made accommodations to program participants and mentor organizations, including granting no-cost extensions to participants and allowing mentor organizations to shift budgets and timelines. Mentor organizations applied lessons learned from the pandemic disruptions during Cohort 1 to their work with Cohort 2; however, Cohort 2 experienced a particularly significant impact as a result of the pandemic. Cohort 2 participants were unable to meet in person at the outset of their program, which resulted in groups that were less cohesive and connected than the Cohort 1 groups had been. Despite the challenges, participants felt that their mentor organizations were effective in adapting the programming and accommodating evolving needs.

2. What impact did participation in the APP program have on the participating libraries and librarians?

What knowledge, skills, and experience were gained?

Participants from both cohorts felt they had increased their skills in project planning, project implementation, and grants management. They also increased their knowledge, skills, and experience within their thematic area (i.e., community memory, digital inclusion, or transforming school library practice). Participants from Cohort 1 reported greater increases in these skillsets but already generally rated their

baseline skills in these areas lower than Cohort 2. The TSLP Community of Practice generally rated their incoming skills and experiences lower than the other two CoPs and therefore saw larger increases in the skills by the end of the program.

In terms of thematic area skills gains, Community Memory (CM) grantees saw the biggest increases in having staff and volunteers with the right skills and experience to implement CM projects in their libraries. Digital Inclusion grantees saw the most improvement in having connections with local organizations and in having materials to help their community members improve digital literacy. Transforming School Library Practice (TSLP) grantees had the biggest gains in their confidence to manage a grant-funded project. TSLP's Cohort 1 saw large gains in having enough people with skills and experience in transforming school libraries, but Cohort 2 still saw this as a deficit at the end of their program experience.

To what extent were the libraries able to connect to and be supported by a larger network of libraries?

APP participants were more likely to report feeling part of a network of libraries when they left the program than when they started it. At the end of the programs, program participants from both cohorts found themselves to be more integrated into a broader community of libraries. They reported more interaction with other libraries working on similar projects, and reported greater participation in key associations, listservs, and relevant events. This broader community included members of their cohort as well as others within the broader library field that they were introduced to as part of the Community of Practice. Mentor organizations contributed to participants' feelings of connection to the larger library community by providing opportunities for participants to authentically share and build relationships with one another, and by facilitating connections between participants and others in the library field.

To what extent do libraries see their role as central facilitators of community knowledge?

Participants entered the program already viewing their libraries as facilitators of community knowledge and providers of public access to information, but the program helped reinforce this for them, particularly for Cohort 1. Due to these preexisting beliefs, only slight growth was seen in these measures.

What was the experience like for APP grantees?

Participants had a range of experiences and outcomes at various points in their APP program journey. Applicants came to the program with a strong sense of commitment to their respective communities. They also came seeking support in implementing visionary projects or maintaining or expanding existing projects.

At the start of their program activities, participants experienced strong and often contradictory emotions about beginning work in a new cohort. When asked to describe their feelings on beginning this work in one word or phrase, some individuals chose words conveying excitement and a readiness to get started. Others voiced feelings of anxiety or feeling overwhelmed by the expectations they had to fulfill in implementing their projects and in participating in a Community of Practice. By the programs' midpoints, they began to feel the effects of connection to other participants and had already experienced learning outcomes such as learning about community dynamics.

By the end of the program, participants felt reassured by the support and understanding offered by their cohort. They had learned a great deal about the value of sharing with and being connected to other libraries.

Throughout the experience they were kept motivated by giving or receiving support from their cohort. Many also were kept motivated by the support from their mentor organization.

3. What was the impact of capacity building on the libraries' IMLS-funded projects?

The majority of APP participants integrated learnings from their CoP into their IMLS-funded project. This integration of learnings was mentioned by 88% of respondents and was consistent across both Cohorts and their respective CoPs. APP participants also took away inspiration and ideas to apply outside of their project either immediately or in the future.

The APP program increased grantees' overall confidence in implementing their projects, increased their knowledge of resources and tools available for assisting them in future project implementations, and helped them develop clearer plans for responding to their communities' needs. This was particularly true for Cohort 1.

The majority of APP participants needed longer than the allocated two years to complete their IMLS-funded projects, although this was largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately one-third of participants had completed their project by the end of the APP program period, with two-thirds having completed some aspects of the project and making plans to finish implementing the last pieces. These delays were overwhelmingly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for those that had to cancel or delay community engagement or in-person events as a part of their workplan or were dealing with library closings and/or staff shortages during the pandemic. The Digital Inclusion CoP had the largest percentage of participants that had finished their projects at the end of the two years, which may be due to the type of projects being implemented.

APP participants saw the biggest changes achieved by their library during the two years in the program in two categories:

1. Developing stronger relationships within their organization or community by achieving a bigger presence in their school or community or deepening a relationship with a community partner.
2. Achieving project-specific outcomes such as the transformation of their physical space, the creation of a digital collection or platform, the creation of oral histories, or setting up trainings to continue the work in the future. For some, being able to complete their projects was considered an example of a successful outcome, given the complexities of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted participants' ability to advance their projects by reducing their ability to engage with their community or student body, delaying their project activities, requiring them to re-strategize about new ways to engage their students or community, dealing with supply chain issues, and managing staff reductions. Some participants also noted that the pandemic helped their project get more attention.

4. To what extent did the APP libraries' organizations and communities support their project ideas and efforts and what impact did the APP program have on the organizations and communities?

Many APP participants felt that they had organizational support from their leadership and staff, with some reporting buy-in from school principals and others being able to use library administrators and staff as sounding boards for ideas. By the end of the program, participants reported a need for more leadership support in order to sustain the work post-grant period and noted funding and staffing support as particular needs. Participants were less likely to mention technology and materials as a need as their projects progressed, likely due to the supports provided through the IMLS funding that allowed for the transformation of physical spaces and the development of digital platforms.

By the end of the grant period, approximately two-thirds of APP participants felt they had organizational support to continue their work in their thematic area (CM/DI/TSLP) with one-third feeling little to no support to continue their work. The main contributors to having organizational support were having more stable leadership and/or an engaged Board, clearer organizations goals, and funding that had been planned for or already allocated to continue the work. Cohort 2 members were more likely to feel uncertain about their future work; however, several planned to engage their leadership during their no-cost extension period to work to get buy-in to continue the work.

Libraries felt that they had community involvement and support throughout the APP program, but also noted that they always need more, especially from staff and volunteers. COVID-19 was a challenge that emerged part-way through the program for Cohort 1, and from the onset for Cohort 2, where libraries reported that they struggled with engaging their communities virtually. By the end of the grant period, 42% of APP participants felt they had the community support to sustain their work in their thematic area (CM/DI/TSLP), and 58% felt they had little to no community support at that time, although most were working to obtain that support.

Libraries that participated in the APP program increased their ability to create and implement projects that prioritized their communities' needs. By the end of the program, libraries across cohorts and CoPs felt they had increased their ability to create programs reflecting their communities' needs, had a plan for continually implementing community-focused projects, and had projects that incorporate their community's priorities and perspectives.

5. What are the overall takeaways on the cohort-mentor model of capacity building for small and rural libraries?

Mentor organizations were a highly valuable aspect of the program for APP participants. Mentor organizations added value by providing moral support/encouragement, facilitating strong professional development, being communicative and responsive to questions and needs, bringing knowledge and experience, and by serving as a guide to help keep the projects on track.

Participating in a cohort also was valuable to APP participants, although slightly less so than working with a mentor organization. The cohort experience provided value by allowing opportunities for participants to generate ideas from discussing their projects together and seeing how librarians in small libraries around the country were grappling with their projects as well as overall library issues. Participants were able to obtain advice directly from others in the group as well as receive moral support and encouragement. Several noted their appreciation for being able to connect with others from small and rural libraries that deal with similar issues. They also talked about feeling less alone in engaging in the daunting task of managing a new grant, implementing a new type of project, and in dealing with the pandemic.

When taking part in a cohort was not rated as highly by participants, it was because participants didn't feel they were able to connect with those in their group due to the small size of their cohort or the differences in the types of projects or libraries represented in the cohort. Lack of involvement by other members or staff turnover at participating libraries also presented challenges in forming relationships within cohorts. Twenty-five percent of libraries reported a decrease in full-time staff available to work on their IMLS projects during the time of the program.

Recommendations

The following set of recommendations is offered based on the evaluation team's synthesis of all the data from this evaluation. Several of the recommendations or considerations also were raised explicitly throughout the course of the evaluation interviews.

Design

1. Engage the mentor organizations earlier in the process to assist with participant selection and guide participants in their project design. Advantages include:
   - Helping select good candidates for capacity building and project implementation.
   - Helping avoid the omission of key project design aspects (e.g., software selection, budgeting decisions, staffing time needed, community integration).
   - Having access to program applications would help better identify areas of support and the design of appropriate capacity-building activities.

2. Set clearer expectations for the Communities of Practice and Mentor roles to:
   - Set realistic expectations for those involved.
   - Help plan for the time commitments needed to participate.
   - Help better customize the capacity-building program.

3. Carefully consider the level of library and project diversity within the cohorts.
   - Consider the tradeoffs found through this evaluation on the diversity of each cohort. Some participants valued diversity and saw it as a learning experience while others found it harder to connect to participants or topics that weren't immediately relevant.

4. Consider a minimum number of participants within each cohort.
   - Digital Inclusion's Cohort 2 (N=3) struggled most in realizing cohort benefits. This appears to have been tied to group size, diversity of topics and library types, some staff turnover at the mentor organization, and unclear expectations for the cohort experience.

Recruitment

5. **Increase visibility of grant opportunities for small and rural libraries through the American Library Association (ALA), regional and state library associations, and schools with library science degrees.** Many APP libraries found out about the APP program through state library associations.

6. **Make the grant application process more accessible and less intimidating.** Providing application workshops through state library associations and IMLS, and leveraging "Alumni Ambassadors" that have gone through the program can help with this.

Implementation

7. **Continue providing structured time and activities for cohort members to develop strong, collegial relationships.** In-person meetings early on can help accelerate trust building and foster a willingness to ask questions and share with the group.

8. **Continue to provide flexibility to mentor organizations and participants on grant uses and capacity-building activities.** The flexibility of both IMLS and mentor organizations was raised repeatedly as a strength of the APP program experience.

Evaluation

9. **Engage evaluators in the design phase to help clarify strategies, outcomes, and goals and ensure relevance of data collection tools.** The design and submission of the data collection tools before immersion into the program restricted adaptability of the evaluation framework once more was learned about the program.

Research Questions: Detailed Findings

1. What capacity-building interventions were provided for the participating library grantees and how effective were they?

Each of the three mentor organizations used a similar set of capacity-building methods with their community of practice. There were five primary capacity-building components used: one-on-one consultations with the mentor organizations; an in-person convening; monthly virtual meetings; a focus on specific topics for their CoP; and an online portal. Additionally, two secondary components were used: attendance at other conferences in the field (used by CM and DI) and the use of thought partners at their school (TSLP).

The most effective capacity-building components were one-on-one consultations, the in-person convening, monthly virtual meetings, and the focus on CoP-specific topics (Table 2). The pandemic impacted APP programming in significant ways, but participants felt that the mentor organizations and IMLS adapted well to the circumstances to meet their changing needs.

Table 2: Capacity Building Methods in the program design for each CoP

	Effectiveness	Capacity Building Method	Whether or not used by each CoP		
			CM	DI	TSLP
Primary	○	Virtual One-On-One Meetings	Yes	Yes	Yes
Primary	○	In-person Meetings	Yes C1: Kick-off C2: Final Convening	Yes C1: Kick-off C2: Final Convening[6]	Yes C1: Kick-off C2: Final Convening
Primary	○	Monthly Virtual Cohort Meetings	Yes	Yes	Yes
Primary	○	Planned Curriculum/ Topics Covered	Yes	Yes	Yes
Primary	●	Online Portal	Yes	Yes	Yes
Secondary	●	Attendance at other library/field conferences	Yes	Yes, C1 only	Yes, C2 only
Secondary	●	Pairing of grantees with school partners	No	No	Yes

Key: ○ = Highly effective   ● = Moderately effective

Four of the five primary capacity-building components were highly effective for APP program Participants, with the fifth being moderately effective. Chart 1 shows that the one-on-one meetings with mentor organizations, the in-person meetings, the monthly virtual meetings, and the topics or curriculum

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[6] Digital Inclusion Cohort 2 intended to have a final in-person convening, but no participants were able to attend.

chosen were largely rated as effective or very effective. Ratings indicate the portal was moderately effective. Each component and the assessment of its value will be described in more detail later in this section.

Chart 1: How APP Program Participants Described the Effectiveness of the Primary Capacity-Building Methods or Components[7]

Very Effective or Effective ■ Somewhat Effective ▦ Not Effective ▨

- 1-on-1s: 34, 3, 3
- In-person meetings: 33
- Monthly virtual meetings: 32, 6, 2
- Curriculum: 27, 12, 1
- Portal: 18, 13, 7
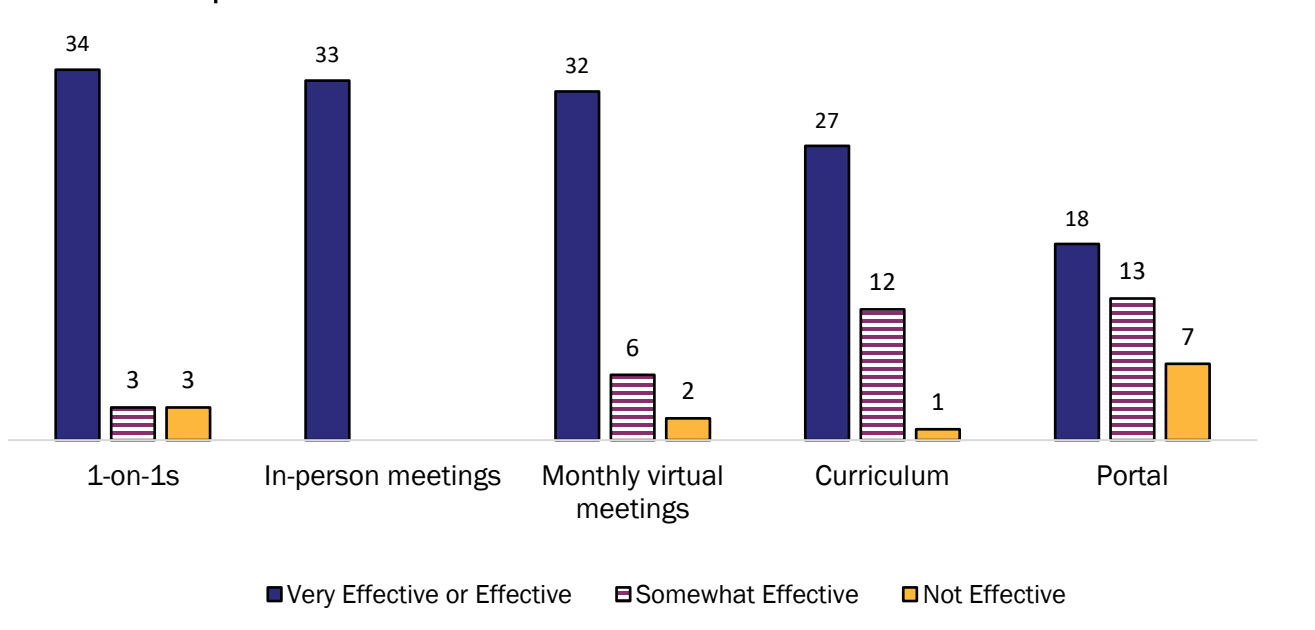
One-on-One Sessions

Mentor organizations and grantees found that there were times when the grantees needed more individualized, direct support for their libraries' needs beyond what was provided in the virtual cohort meetings. To address those needs, virtual one-on-one sessions were held for both Cohorts 1 and 2 by each of the mentor organizations. Depending on the identified needs and style of the mentor organizations, those sessions varied from informal communication to regular, scheduled meetings.

Mentors met one-on-one with the participants throughout the course of the program. The patterns established with Cohort 1 continued in Cohort 2, and all of the mentor organizations touched base with their participants, with variations in timing and purpose. The DI mentors met with members of both Cohorts 1 and 2 on an ad hoc basis, touching base at least once a month, through phone, zoom, or email. TSLP mentors also checked in one-on-one with grantees at least monthly and their "happy hours" were duplicated in part by KCPL late in the Cohort 2 program. CM mentors held quarterly individual check-ins and were available as needed for both cohorts.

APP participants found one-on-one check-ins with their mentor organization to be very effective for answering specific questions about their projects and for helping to keep them on track. The majority of participants (85%) found the check-ins to be effective or very effective. Perspectives were slightly more

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[7] Numbers shown indicate the number of interviewees across both cohorts that described each component as fitting into the category noted.

mixed in Cohort 2, with some finding the check-ins effective and others not. The one-on-one check-ins allowed grantees to feel they could ask questions that were very specific to their project without monopolizing the whole group's time. For those who had more unique projects, they used this time to dig into areas that weren't necessarily being covered in the larger group. Program participants also used this time to help keep their projects on track, strategize pivots where needed, and get moral support from their mentors. Participants also appreciated the mentor organizations' approachability and availability for any questions that came up outside of their one-on-ones.

One-on-One Mentoring Sessions

"I really looked forward to those check-ins. It **was great to let them know where I am at and to have them say, 'Good Job' because you need that too**. *To let me know that I am on task and not just blowing in the wind."*
- Cohort 1 Participant

"I really thought that [the one-on-one meeting] was valuable because it was an opportunity to touch base on how things were going, and you didn't feel like you were monopolizing time with the other members... **The opportunity to solicit their support or expertise on things I was doing. I really value that**. *It helps to keep you task oriented because you have that check-in time."*
- Cohort 1 Participant

"It was an **opportunity to ask practical questions,** *talk about where the project was going,* **where I saw roadblocks or slowdowns**...*You have this project plan, but it wasn't matching reality. Sometimes you have to change the method. That was hugely helpful..."*
– Cohort 2 Participant

In-person Meetings

In-person meetings took on a different frequency than originally planned, and Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 had very different experiences with in-person meetings as a part of their program. All three mentor organizations had originally planned for each cohort to meet in-person approximately three times during their two-year program. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, each cohort was only able to have one in-person meeting. While both cohorts had one in-person meeting during their program duration, those meetings occurred during very different parts of the program for each group.

- All three CoPs from Cohort 1 met in-person for a kick-off style meeting toward the beginning of their program, then due to COVID-19, they were unable to meet in-person again during their program duration.
- Due to COVID-19, Cohort 2 was unable to meet in-person until the very end of their program.

Kick-off meetings were more effective in an in-person format. Participants from Cohort 1 were more likely to describe their kick-off meeting as effective or very effective (100%) while those in Cohort 2 were more likely to have mixed opinions about their kick-off meeting. In Cohort 2, 60% of respondents described it as effective or very effective, 30% described it as somewhat effective, and 10% found it ineffective. Some

Cohort 2 grantees (who met virtually) also had trouble distinguishing the kick-off meeting from their other monthly virtual meetings, signifying it was less of a unique or special event for them.

In-person meetings were a key element of APP participants developing comfort, familiarity, and the start of deeper relationships with their other cohort grantees. Sixty-five percent of APP participants that gave an endpoint interview (n=26) raised the value of an in-person meeting over virtual meetings. They noted that in-person meetings helped them to build rapport and bond with their cohort members and provided time away from their other responsibilities where they could focus specifically on their projects.

Participants talked about the value-add of the in-person meetings in three different ways: (1) being able to develop more personal connections during unstructured time such as dinners; (2) being able to get away from their day job so they could focus on the APP program; and (3) being able to better hold their attention and not contribute to ongoing "Zoom fatigue." The value of in-person meetings was raised by participants from both cohorts and all three CoPs, although participants in CM and TSLP were more likely to mention it than DI participants. Mentors shared participants' assessment that the in-person kick-off was more effective.

Kick-off meetings provided value for participants that met in-person as well as those that met virtually, although in slightly different ways. Participants from Cohort 1 were more likely to speak of the value of getting to know other participants from their cohort, the content of the kick-off meetings, and the comfort in finding others in the same situation (See Table 3). Participants from both cohorts spoke of the value of getting to know the expectations of the program and getting to know their mentor organization. Some participants from Cohort 1 also noted that meeting IMLS staff at their in-person meeting was a value-add for them. Mentors did share that the virtual kick-off did not allow for the development of trusting relationships among participants from Cohort 2 that the in-person version had for Cohort 1.

In-Person Meetings

*"It **helped to be away from work and could focus on this**. We **had some dinners – got to know each other** on a personal level, build relationships."*
- Cohort 1 Participant

*"It felt very impactful in the sense that the **rapport or bonding** that happens then **informed how you interact virtually later**."*
- Cohort 1 Participant

*"**After we finally got together, we could see what we'd been missing** and how nice it would have been [to meet earlier]. The first cohort met with us, and they seemed like a tighter group than we were – maybe just because they had opportunity to meet in person in the beginning."*
– Cohort 2 Participant

*"When we finally went to [in-person meeting], that was phenomenal and **helped us bond, but that was late**."*
– Cohort 2 Participant

Table 3: Where APP Participants Found Value in their Kick-off Meetings

	Overall	Cohort 1 (In-Person Kick-Off)			Cohort 2 (Virtual Kick-Off)		
		CM	DI	TSLP	CM	DI	TSLP
Getting to know other cohort members	65% N=26	89% N=8	38% N=3	100% N=9	50% N=3	67% N=2	20% N=1
Getting to know the expectations of the program	38% N=15	22% N=2	100% N=8	0%	33% N=2	0%	60% N=3
Content covered/experts brought in	38% N=15	44% N=4	100% N=8	22% N=2	0%	0%	20% N=1
Felt like others were in the same boat as me	35% N=14	56% N=5	38% N=3	56% N=5	0%	33% N=1	0%
Getting to know mentor organization	28% N=11	33% N=3	38% N=3	11% N=1	17% N=1	33% N=1	40% N=2
Got to meet IMLS	5% N=2	11% N=1	0%	11% N=1	0%	0%	0%

Note: *APP participants responded to this question in their exit interview, "How effective do you think kick off meeting was? What worked well, what didn't, and what, if anything, would you suggest be changed about this component next time?" Green shaded cells in the table represent areas where at least 3 respondents OR >50% of respondents from the group mentioned this as a value-add of their kick-off meeting.*

Monthly Virtual Cohort Meetings

Virtual cohort meetings were found to be highly valuable for APP grantees. The majority of APP grantees described these meetings as effective or highly effective, with Cohort 1 expressing this more enthusiastically. Eighty-five percent of Cohort 1 found the meetings to be effective or very effective, with the remaining 15% finding them somewhat effective. Cohort 2 participants were more likely to have mixed opinions about the meetings, with 71% of respondents describing them as effective or very effective, 14% describing them as somewhat effective, and 14% finding them ineffective. The participants finding the meetings ineffective were from DI's small cohort, which struggled to gel as a group, likely because of the size and expectations from those participants.

Virtual meetings provided value to grantees by covering relevant topics and content, providing the opportunity for cohort members to hear and share about their projects, and by providing access to speakers and resources. Participants were asked what, if any, value they found in the online cohort meetings. The top five categories where they saw value are shown below in Table 4. Participants across the different cohorts and CoPs found value in the meetings, although DI's Cohort 2 (n=3) was the least likely to talk about various forms of value from these meetings.

Participants from Cohort 1 were more likely to speak of the value of the content being covered. The value-add of hearing about other cohort members' projects was especially important for Community Memory grantees. The virtual meetings also served as a mechanism for helping the grantees to determine how to prioritize elements of work on their projects and keep them on track for moving that work forward. For Cohort 2, the opportunity to meet members of Cohort 1 when they were invited to join one of their monthly meetings (for CM and TSLP) was a value-add as they could see the progress made by those that had walked in similar footsteps.

Table 4: Where APP Participants Found Value in their Monthly Virtual Cohort Meetings

	Overall	Cohort 1			Cohort 2		
		CM	DI	TSLP	CM	DI	TSLP
Good content covered	53% N=21	44% N=4	63% N=5	78% N=7	50% N=3	0%	40% N=2
Connecting to other cohort grantees to hear about their projects	48% N=19	89% N=8	25% N=2	0%	83% N=5	67% N=2	40% N=2
Great speakers / resources	38% N=15	44% N=4	38% N=3	11% N=1	67% N=4	0%	60% N=3
Kept us on track/ Helpful for prioritizing work	18% N=7	11% N=1	25% N=2	11% N=1	17% N=1	0%	40% N=2
Getting to meet Cohort 1	13% N=5	N/A	N/A	N/A	33% N=2	0%	60% N=3

Note: APP participants responded to this question in their exit interview, "How effective do you think the online cohort meetings were? What worked well, what didn't, and what, if anything, would you suggest be changed about this component next time?" Green shaded cells in the table represent areas where 3 or more or >50% of respondents from the group mentioned this as a value-add of the monthly online cohort meetings.

When asked about what could be improved in the virtual meetings, there was no consensus across participants, but a few ideas were offered. Some participants mentioned that it was hard to find topics that fit all of the participants' interests when the group had a more diverse set of projects (15% of respondents). Others mentioned that it was hard to find time to attend the monthly meetings (13%) or that they experienced Zoom fatigue (10%). Some wanted to devote more time to hearing from other cohort participants about their projects (8%) and some wanted to spend more time on a particular topic that was of interest to them (5%).

Monthly Meetings

*"I did appreciate when we talked about our projects…None of us could have anticipated doing these during COVID, trying to adapt the projects. It was **helpful to hear what people were able to do or not able to do**."* - Cohort 1 Participant

*"Having the opportunity to go through the meetings where we have outside presenters **enhances the project because it gives you ideas, other tools, and resources**."* - Cohort 1 Participant

*"All of the experts were super helpful. I have gone back and taken inspiration on what they talked about. **They got a good sense of what we needed and found experts**."* – Cohort 2 Participant

*"I did **enjoy learning about the different projects**. They were all different but that was cool. Everyone approached it in their own way."*
– Cohort 2 Participant

Curriculum/Professional Development Topics for the Communities of Practice

Mentor organizations for all three Communities of Practice in both cohorts offered curricula on topics that were specific to their thematic areas as well as topics that were broadly relevant to project and grant management. Each mentor organization chose the topics and content relevant to their respective Community of Practice. Most but not all topics were covered by all three, as noted below.

Topics that were covered by all three CoPs included:
- Program planning
- Program sustainability
- Community engagement and partnerships
- Midpoint evaluation results sharing by TCC Group
- Midpoint program highlights
- End of program presentations

Other topics that at least two of the mentor organizations addressed with program participants included:
- Joint session with Cohort 1 and 2
- Evaluation and measurement
- Grants management

APP program participants largely found the topics covered in their CoP to be useful to them. When asked in their endpoint interview about the usefulness of the topics covered, 98% of grantees noted that they found something within the topics that was useful to them, and most could recall a specific topic or two that stood out to them as being especially helpful. Several participants also raised that when topics such as completing IMLS reports were covered, they found the guidance especially valuable. Participants also appreciated the flexibility of the mentor organizations and that they approached the topics based on what the group wanted to know.

For a complete list of the specific topics covered within each CoP, please see Appendix 4: Virtual Cohort Meeting Topics.

Professional Development Topics

*"I think it was **a blend of some useful, some not so much**. But that was because of our project. Most of the members of the cohort were doing more similar projects."* - Cohort 1 Participant

*"They **all had some kind of value** regardless of whether it applied to your project or not, it applied to the profession you're in. There's always something to take away."*- Cohort 1 Participant

*"I saw it from two perspectives: (1) from my perspective as a librarian, and (2) as a teacher. As a teacher, **I could use them in my meetings with other teachers. The themes were very good, very useful**."*
– Cohort 2 Participant

*"If there was a particular topic we wanted, they were always open to that...They **took great care to structure around us**, it was a **very collaborative process**."*
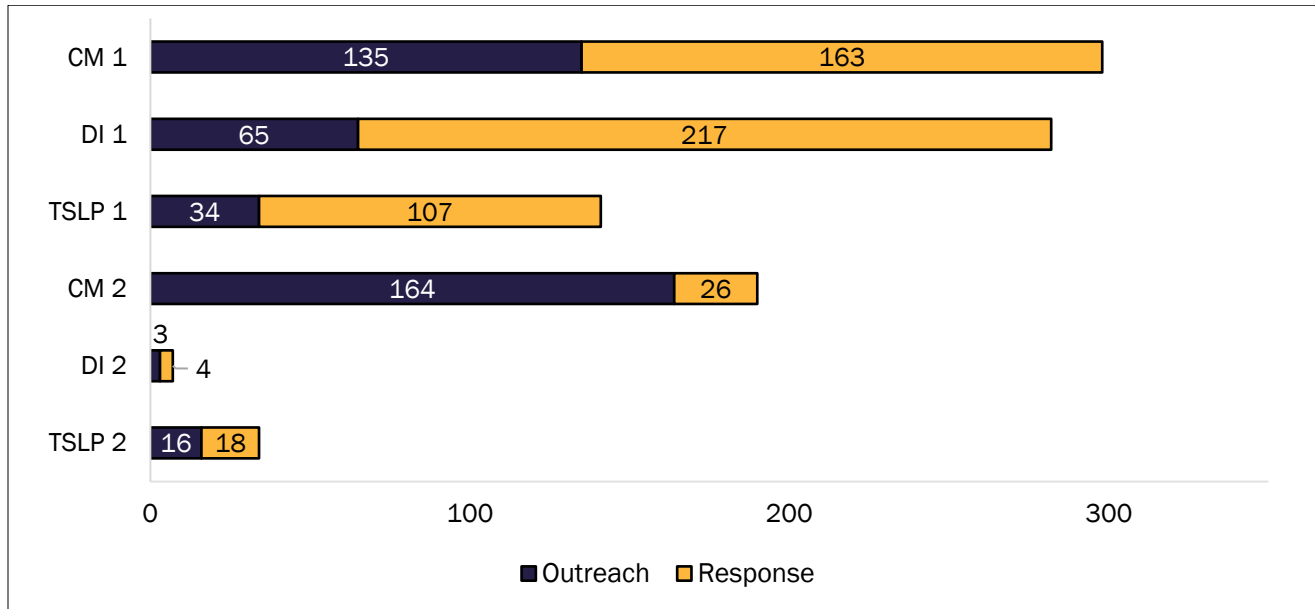– Cohort 2 Participant

Online Portal

Both cohorts for each of the Communities of Practice had access to an online portal consisting of a website that served as a repository for resources identified and developed by the mentor organization and program participants. Each cohort for each Community of Practice also had their own listserv via the portal, providing cohort grantees an opportunity to collectively share concerns, issues, challenges, and ideas and enable them to solicit answers to questions, provide encouragement to each other, and share answers to questions asked of the group.

APP program participants found the online portals to be useful as document repositories, but found they had limited use as vehicles for facilitating grantee interaction and relationship building. When asked in their endpoint interviews about the usefulness of the online portal, grantees' responses were mixed, with the majority (75%, n=30) finding it helpful primarily as a place to access documents, resources, and meeting recordings that were shared by the mentor organizations. Approximately 28% (n=11) mentioned using it at some point to connect with or ask questions of other participants, but most (55%, n=22) admitted that they did not use it regularly to interact with their CoP, either because they felt it was cumbersome to log into another platform, they did not have time to engage with it, or it was "not their thing." These sentiments were similar across the three Communities of Practice and both cohorts.

Participants' use of the portal declined from Cohort 1 to Cohort 2. This decline can be seen from a variety of viewpoints (See Chart 2).
1. **Reduction in total number of posts on the portal:** Where all Communities of Practice saw a reduction in the use of the portal for communication from Cohort 1 to Cohort 2, both DI and TSLP saw much more significant declines relative to CM. In total, Cohort 2's use of the portal for communication was approximately one-third of the use by Cohort 1 across all three Communities of Practice.

2. **More original "Outreach Posts" from participants and the mentors were needed in order to get a response from the other cohort members:** Where Cohort 1 tended to average two responses per outreach, Cohort 2 required nearly four outreach communications before a response was generated.

Chart 2: Communities of Practice Use of the Portals for Intra-Cohort Communication

The focus of portal communication shifted between Cohorts 1 and 2. Where Cohort 1's communication was often in response to mentor questions or the program participants getting to know one another, Cohort 2's content was primarily focused on the distribution of resources and questions posed by the mentors, with little additional communication by the participants.

Attendance at other conferences in the field

Although not in the original design of the capacity-building plan for every CoP, four of the six cohorts were given the opportunity to attend a relevant conference hosted by another organization within their field. Conference attendance was structured in the following ways:

- When the Community Memory Cohort 1 midpoint convening couldn't be held, WiLS worked with IMLS to redirect the funds to allow grantees to attend a professional development conference of their choosing.
- KCPL planned to have their second in-person meeting for Cohort 1 coincide with the Net Inclusion 2021 conference. Due to complications stemming from the pandemic, the conference was transitioned to an online venue. Digital Inclusion CoP participants participated in the virtual conference, and KCPL held a follow-up debrief with the participants to discuss their experiences.
- TSLP held their final meeting for Cohort 2 in conjunction with the Play Make Learn Conference in Madison, WI in August 2022, with the two-day convening immediately following one day of the conference. Members of both TSLP cohorts were invited to this convening. Six Cohort 1 participants and six Cohort 2 participants (representing four libraries) attended.
- CM Cohort 2 held their final convening in conjunction with the 2022 ALA conference, with the conference beginning the day after the convening ended. Approximately half of the Cohort 2 participants attended the convening, and one participant from Cohort 1 attended.

Participants benefitted from attending conferences, depending on how and when it was integrated into their program experience.

- DI Cohort 1 participants all attended the same conference, which took place partway through their APP grant period. The DI mentor held a follow-up debrief with DI participants to discuss their conference experiences, which may have supported them in incorporating what they learned at the conference into their APP projects.

- CM Cohort 1 participants, on the other hand, were granted funds to attend a virtual conference of their choosing for professional development. While not all CM participants were able to take advantage of this, as some felt too overwhelmed with the pandemic to attend a conference, those who did so appreciated the opportunity. They commented that this is not something their own libraries would have been able to support financially, and they appreciated the ability to choose a conference that would be particularly relevant to their work. One CM Cohort 1 participant shared that they "found that valuable because I was able to select learning that was specific to my project and organizational needs."

- TSLP and CM Cohort 2 participants had the opportunity to attend a conference in-person at the end of their two-year APP period. As these conferences took place at the end of the APP program and, therefore, toward the end of our evaluation period, we cannot say whether participants were able to apply their conference learnings to their projects and their work. However, TSLP Cohort 2 participants did share that they valued this experience. One TSLP Cohort 2 member commented that she wanted to apply the model of attending a conference in conjunction with a team meeting to her own school; she was hoping to structure a department retreat around a relevant conference.

Pairing of Grantees with School Partners (TSLP only)

The design of the TSLP program included pairing each participant with a thought partner from their school or district who would work with the participant to move their project forward. Participants selected their thought partners and could invite them to attend TSLP convenings and meetings with them. The thought partners engaged with participants and projects to varying degrees.

TSLP participants who had active thought partners found value in the relationship. TSLP program participants who had thought partners that were consistently engaged spoke of them as people they could bounce ideas off of, or who brought a different and complementary perspective or expertise. For example, one participant said of her multiple thought partners, "The technology person helped me with the purchasing. The director helped me with monthly workshops for students. We divided the work so for us it functioned well."

Not all TSLP participants had thought partners, and the success of grantee-thought partner pairings varied based on the capacity of schools and individuals. Both TSLP grantees and mentors described the pairing of program participants with thought partners as a good idea. However, three Cohort 1 participants had thought partners that were too busy to participate in a meaningful way, and one Cohort 1 and three Cohort 2 and participants did not have thought partners. In cases where the thought partner was in a role that kept them too busy to engage, the pairing did not add value to the project or the APP participant's experience. For Cohort 2, more than half of the participants did not have thought partners. Mentors acknowledged that finding a thought partner with the capacity to truly engage is challenging for grantees who are in schools that are understaffed and may not have other libraries in their district. One mentor suggested that providing

grantees with guidelines on what to look for in a thought partner could help them to identify quality partners. Similarly, participants suggested that having clear expectations or requirements for thought partners from the outset would be helpful to increase their engagement.

What was the impact of the pandemic on Community of Practice programming?
Shifts in Capacity Building Approaches Due to COVID-19

Mentor organizations described their approach for adapting to the pandemic as one of giving grantees space to talk about their needs and then adjusting content, topics, and meeting schedules accordingly. When the pandemic hit during Cohort 1, mentors adopted both formal and informal ways (such as one-on-one meetings, virtual happy hours, and topical conversations) for APP program participants to talk about their experiences and challenges implementing the project during the national emergency. Mentors also consulted participants about the scheduling for monthly meetings and canceled some when most grantees were overloaded during the pandemic. Understanding participants' struggles allowed mentors to adapt and more readily identify relevant content, topics, and speakers for the remainder of the program.

Mentor organizations applied lessons learned from the pandemic disruptions during Cohort 1 to their work with Cohort 2. By the time Cohort 2 started, the mentor organizations had experience working with participants in pandemic conditions. Mentors did not describe as many adaptations to their programming with Cohort 2 as they did with Cohort 1, although they continued some of the changes they had made for the first cohort. The CM mentors, for example, described taking a more flexible approach with Cohort 2 and allowing the curriculum to be more driven by program participants and their needs. DI mentors continued to support participants in making adjustments to their projects that were necessitated by the pandemic. TSLP mentors described taking a similar approach with Cohort 2 as with Cohort 1.

The majority of APP participants interviewed (90%) felt that their mentor organization had been effective in adapting the cohort programming to the needs of the cohort during the pandemic. Participants across the two cohorts and the three Communities of Practice felt that the content and format of the project activities and curricula used by their mentor organizations were adapted as their needs changed. Although there were slight variations in how each mentor organization approached the changes, each was seen as successful.

According to mentors, not being able to start the program with an in-person meeting had a significant impact on Cohort 2 grantee CoPs. Each mentor organization had originally planned to have three in-person convenings or meetings for each of their cohorts – a kick-off convening, a midpoint convening, and an end of program convening. Due to the pandemic, two of the in-person convenings had to be changed to virtual for each of the cohorts. For Cohort 1, this impacted the midpoint and final convenings, while for Cohort 2 it affected the initial and midpoint convenings. Cohort 2 mentors felt that the inability for cohort grantees to meet in-person at the beginning of the program had lasting impacts. Mentors felt that Cohort 2 participants in any given CoP were unable to build trusting relationships with one another that coming together in person at the outset of the program would have fostered. The mentors indicated that Cohort 2 was not as cohesive and connected as Cohort 1, and they attributed this partly to the absence of an in-person kick-off meeting, although they acknowledged that there were other likely contributing factors, such as smaller group size and differences in personalities. Participants' endpoint interviews confirmed the importance of having an in-person meeting at the start of the program – with Cohort 1 participants thankful that they had that opportunity and Cohort 2 participants lamenting that they had not.

Mentors indicated they appreciated that IMLS made accommodations to program participants and mentor organizations in the face of the pandemic. The pandemic resulted in many participants being unable to execute their projects as planned. Mentors shared that IMLS was willing to work with each program participant individually to adapt their project plans according to their specific situations, and granted no-cost extensions so grantees could continue working on their projects beyond the original end date. IMLS also offered flexibility to mentor organizations, allowing them to shift budgets and timelines.

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2. What impact did participation in the Accelerating Promising Practices (APP) program have on the participating library grantees and librarians?

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APP participants' engagement in their Communities of Practice and individual work with their mentor organizations was expected to increase the capacities of the libraries. This would be evidenced by an increase in the knowledge and skills of the staff, connections built by the participants to a larger network of libraries, and librarians embracing their own/their library's roles as facilitators of community knowledge and access.

The evaluation found that by the end of the APP program:
- Grantees had increased their skills in project planning, implementation, grants management, and their thematic area (i.e., community memory, digital inclusion, or transforming school library practice), although Cohort 1 saw greater improvements than Cohort 2.
- APP participants were more likely to feel part of a network of libraries, although connections to other members of their cohort weren't especially deep. This is likely due to the reduction in the number of in-person meetings originally planned.
- The program helped reinforce the participants' self-perception that their libraries are facilitators of community knowledge, particularly for Cohort 1.
- Participants moved from feeling excitement, nervousness, and uncertainty to feeling encouraged and supported by the others in their group, grateful for the opportunity to participate, and proud of what they had been able to accomplish.

What knowledge, skills, and experience were gained?

Receiving an IMLS grant was a new experience for many of the small and rural libraries participating in the APP program. It was expected that participating in the APP program would help libraries increase their capacity to plan and implement projects and to administer grants. It was also expected that APP program participants would build skills within their thematic/project areas. This section shares findings related to any gains in knowledge and skills experienced by APP participants.

Skills in project planning, implementation, and grants management

Program participants from both cohorts felt they increased their skills in project planning, implementation, and grants management during the programs, but Cohort 1 noticed greater improvement than Cohort 2. In the survey, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed that they had skills in project

planning, project implementation, and managing a grant. The majority of the participants showed an increase in their perception of having these skills from the time they began the program (noted by the blue circles in Chart 3) and the time they exited the program (noted by the red squares in Chart 3).

There were some differences among the groups. CM members from Cohort 2 showed a very slight regression in their scores (shown by blue exclamation points in Chart 3), but already felt they had strong skills at the baseline.

Chart 3: Library Knowledge and Skill Growth by Cohort

Chart notes:
- Program participants were asked on a 4-point Likert scale at beginning and endpoint surveys to rate the extent to which they agreed that they had library skills and experience.
- ! – Blue exclamation marks notate when an endpoint score is less than its baseline.

Community of Practice/Thematic Area Knowledge and Skills

APP participants showed an increase in knowledge and skills related to the thematic area of their Community of Practice (i.e., community memory, digital inclusion, or transforming school library practice).. APP program participants were asked about their skills and knowledge within the thematic areas as well as their library's experience with implementing projects in these areas (See Chart 4). Both of TSLP's Cohorts saw a vast change in their belief that their libraries implement projects focused on TSLP, going from disagreement at the baseline to strong agreement at the endpoint. All other groups also saw increases, although not as dramatic.

Chart 4: Grantee Capacity and Experience Implementing their Projects

			Baseline	Endpoint
Library has skills and knowledge needed to implement cohort-specific project	CM	Cohort 1	2.3	3.4
		Cohort 2	2.7	3.0
	DI	Cohort 1	3.1	3.7
		Cohort 2	3.0	3.7
	TSLP	Cohort 1	2.4	3.4
		Cohort 2	2.8	3.5
Our library has implemented projects focused on CM/DI/TSLP	CM	Cohort 1	2.9	3.5
		Cohort 2	2.5	3.5
	DI	Cohort 1	2.9	4.0
		Cohort 2	3.3	3.7
	TSLP	Cohort 1	1.9	3.7
		Cohort 2	2.4	3.5

Scale: 1 Strongly Disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Agree, 4 Strongly Agree
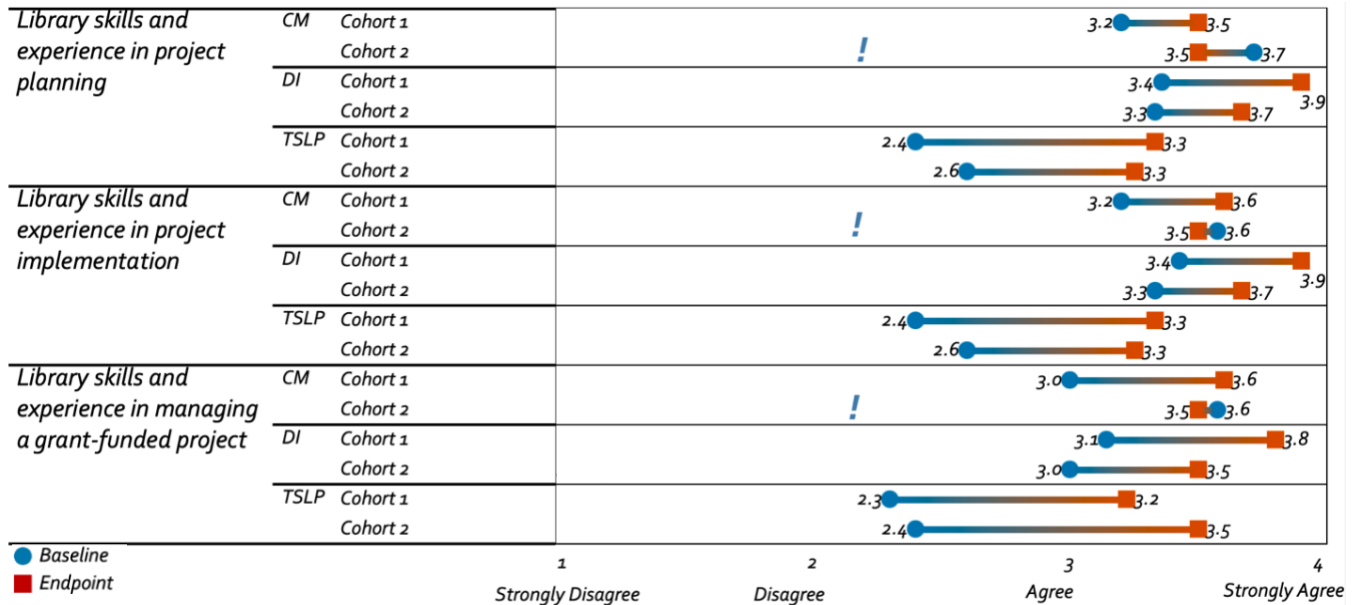
● Baseline   ■ Endpoint

Chart notes:
- Program participants were asked on a 4-point Likert scale at beginning and endpoint surveys to rate the extent to which they agreed that they had capacity and experience implementing their projects.

In terms of specific thematic area skills gains:
- Community Memory participants saw the biggest increases in having people with the right skills and experience to implement CM projects in their libraries.
- Digital Inclusion grantees saw the most improvement in having connections with local organizations and in having materials to help their community members improve digital literacy.
- Transforming School Library Practice grantees had the biggest gains in their confidence to manage a grant-funded project. Additionally, TSLP's Cohort 1 saw large gains in having enough people with skills and experience in transforming school libraries, but Cohort 2 still saw this as a deficit at the end of their program experience.

For more details on the types of thematic-area skills and knowledge that were developed, please see Appendix 5 – Community of Practice – Specific Skills and Knowledge Gains.

To what extent were the libraries able to connect to and be supported by a larger network of libraries?

Another aim of using Communities of Practice within the APP program was to help participants to connect to and feel like a part of a broader library community. This section shares findings on the extent to which participants felt connected to other libraries, saw the broader field as a resource to support their own library needs (and their library a resource for the broader field), and the extent to which they felt connected to other members of their cohort.

APP participants were more likely to report feeling part of a network of libraries when they left the program than when they started it (See Chart 5). The majority of groups entered the APP program not feeling like part of a larger network. However, by the time they completed the program, this had changed. This was true for every group except DI's Cohort 2, which already reported feeling like a part of a network when they entered the program.

The APP program fostered interaction between libraries working on similar thematic areas where previously they had little to no interaction with other libraries doing this work (See Chart 5). At the start of the program, the majority of APP participants reported having little to no regular interaction with other libraries working within their thematic area (CM, DI, or TSLP). By the end of the program, however, all groups reported increases in those interactions, and all reported being more actively engaged in other resources for their field such as associations, listservs and other events. These findings were similar across both cohorts despite having navigated distinct challenges due to different types of starts (in-person vs. virtual) to their respective programs.

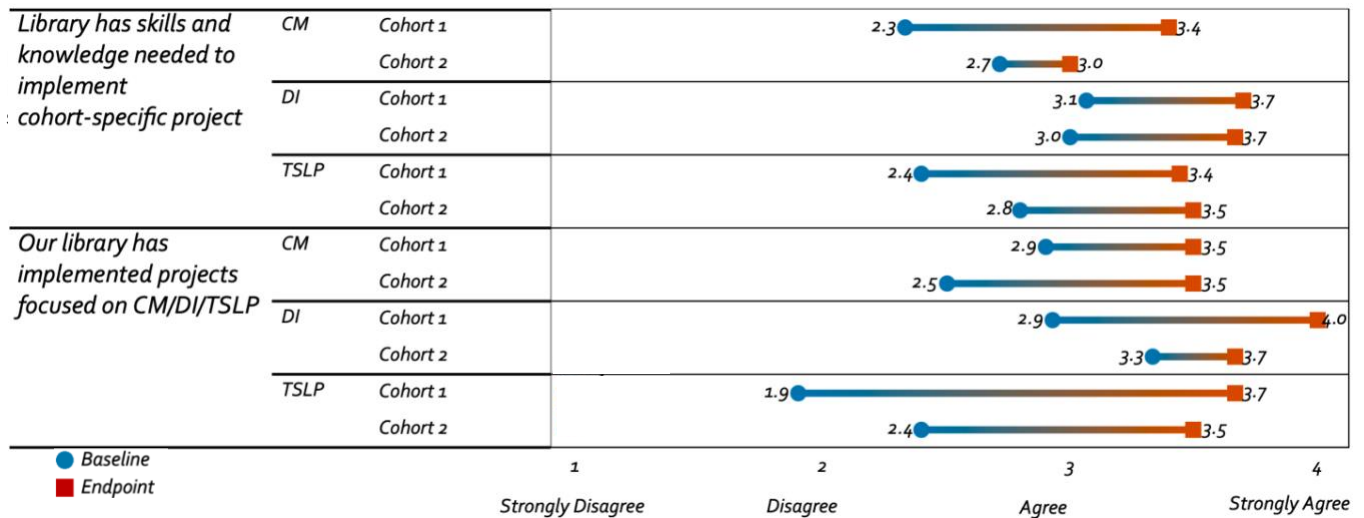## Chart 5: APP Program Participant Engagement with the Broader Library Field
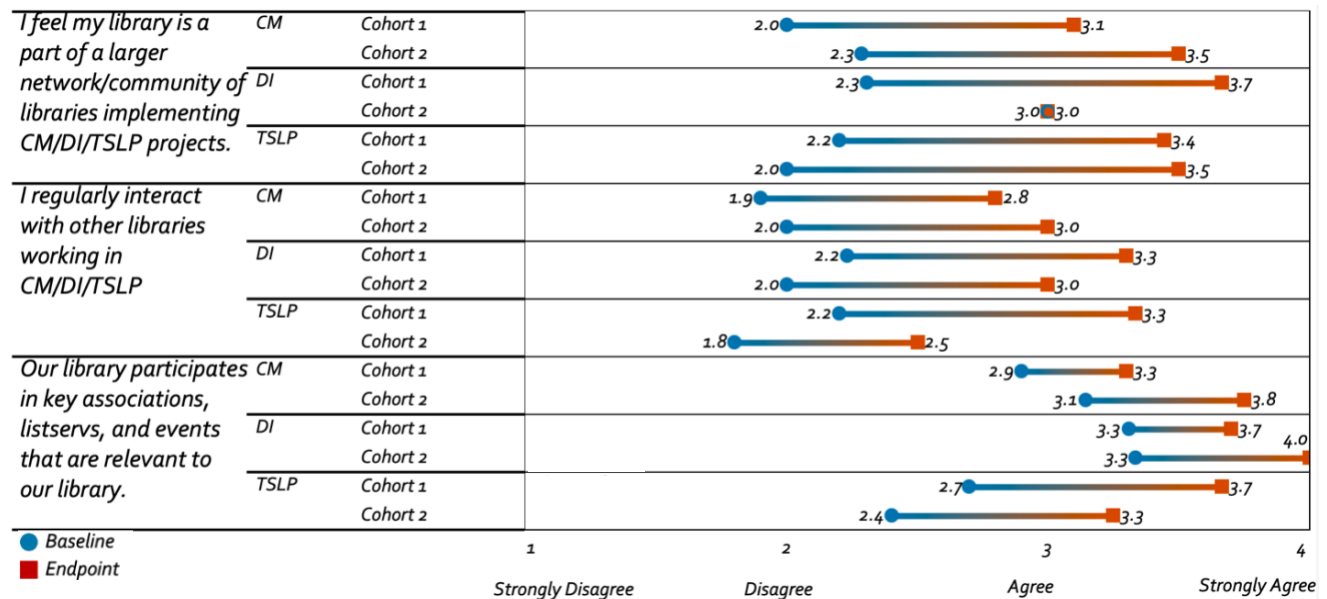
Chart notes:
- Program participants were asked on a 4-point Likert scale at beginning and endpoint surveys to rate the extent to which they about their participation in the broader library field.

APP participants felt some connection to other members of their cohort, but it wasn't especially strong. Approximately 60% of participants interviewed described their connection to others in their cohort as feeling some connection. Approximately 9% felt very connected and approximately 25% of the participants felt no real connection at all. Reasons given for not forming more of a connection with their fellow cohort members included not having enough in-person opportunities or not feeling connected to those with different project types or library structures. Conversely, approximately 25% of the participants felt they had gained more connection to other libraries, although not libraries in their cohort. These connections were strengthened when the APP participants reached out to other libraries in their communities, region, or state while working on their IMLS-funded project. Mentors also mentioned connections that participants made with others in the library community outside of their APP Cohort. Those connections were largely facilitated by the mentor organizations.

Although the cohort connections were not necessarily deep, there were examples of how participants saw themselves as part of a larger library community. Approximately half of the participants interviewed felt the APP program had helped them to see their library's work in a larger context of library work across the country. Approximately one-third mentioned being able to leverage ideas and information from other libraries. The mentor organizations worked to foster this sense of community among participants. They did so through their regular cohort meetings, which provided opportunities for participants to share ideas and to work through problems together, and through extra team-building activities outside of those meetings, such as virtual happy hours and online games.

To what extent do the libraries see their role as central facilitators of community knowledge?

An important part of the APP Program's Theory of Change (See Appendix 2) is to help libraries and librarians see their role as central facilitators of community knowledge so that this helps lead to the communities themselves seeing the libraries as central hubs.

Participants entered the program already viewing their libraries as facilitators of community knowledge and providers of public access to information, but the program helped reinforce this for them, particularly for Cohort 1 (See Chart 6). The high baseline scores on these items meant not much growth was noted in these areas, although most groups saw an increase in their scores, moving them on the scale from agreement to strong agreement. Exceptions were CM and DI Cohort 2, which reported slightly less agreement at the end of the program that their role as a librarian was to be a facilitator of community knowledge.

Chart 6: Grantee Perceptions of Library Role

Statement	Group	Cohort	Baseline	Endpoint
I believe an integral part of my role as a librarian is to be a facilitator of community knowledge.	CM	Cohort 1	3.3	3.6
	CM	Cohort 2	3.0	3.1 !
	DI	Cohort 1	3.5	3.9
	DI	Cohort 2	3.0	3.5 !
	TSLP	Cohort 1	3.2	3.8
	TSLP	Cohort 2	3.6	3.8
I believe part of the role of my library is to be a facilitator of community knowledge.	CM	Cohort 1	3.4	3.6
	CM	Cohort 2	3.3	3.5
	DI	Cohort 1	3.4	3.9
	DI	Cohort 2	3.3	3.3
	TSLP	Cohort 1	3.2	3.8
	TSLP	Cohort 2	3.5	3.8
I believe part of the role of my library is to be a provider of public access to information, ideas, and networks.	CM	Cohort 1	3.4	3.7
	CM	Cohort 2	3.6	3.8
	DI	Cohort 1	3.6	3.9
	DI	Cohort 2	3.7	4.0
	TSLP	Cohort 1	3.3	3.9
	TSLP	Cohort 2	3.5	4.0

● Baseline ■ Endpoint

Scale: 1 Strongly Disagree — 2 Disagree — 3 Agree — 4 Strongly Agree

Chart notes:
- Program participants were asked on a 4-point Likert scale at beginning and endpoint surveys to rate the extent to which they agree about their perceptions on library role.
- ! – Blue exclamation marks notate when an endpoint score is less than its baseline.

What was the experience like for grantees?

Participants in both cohorts were asked to reflect on their feelings about their experience being a part of APP and in implementing their IMLS-funded programs. Figure 2 below depicts the key changes that occurred over the course of their award period and capacity-building journeys.

Participants began their APP journey through their application to the program where they were motivated by giving back to their communities and the need for funding to support new or maintain existing projects. As they began the program there were feelings of excitement as well as nervousness and a sense of being overwhelmed. Midway through the program participants noted feeling much more at ease with the work of their projects as they felt encouraged and supported by the others in their group. By the end of the program, participants felt reassured by the support, grateful for the opportunity, and proud of what they had been able to accomplish. Participants highlighted learning the value of sharing with other libraries, the importance of community and stakeholder engagement, and that their staff are their most valuable resource for implementing their ideas.

Applying   ### Stage 1: Prior to entering the program

- **APP program applicants felt a sense of commitment to their communities.** Fifty-five percent of the 47 respondents (or 26 individuals) indicated that they applied because they wanted to give something

back to their communities. The percentage of Cohort 2 respondents with this answer (67%) was somewhat higher than the percentage of Cohort 1 respondents (50%). Respondents often used their open-ended descriptions of commitment to community to make the connection between the program type and how it relates to community members. For example, one CM respondent wrote they wanted to be a part of the program to "collect information on the history of our area before we lose the key players to age and time."

- **Applicants needed funding such as that made available in the APP Program to implement new, visionary projects.** Many of the applicants had good ideas or may have already worked on valuable projects but lacked the funding to implement them. For example, one applicant wrote that "large-scale projects would be impossible with current staff." Ten individuals (nine of whom were in Cohort 1) indicated they had applied because they needed funding to support their new project ideas.

- **APP applicants saw opportunities to maintain or expand their projects.** Nine individuals (eight of whom were in Cohort 1) indicated they applied to strengthen existing projects. One individual described the program as a capacity-building opportunity for their project, writing, "I wanted a stronger project and to ensure the success of our work."

Starting the program   Stage 2: Starting the program

- **Most participants felt excitement and positive feelings of anticipation at the start of the program.** When asked to describe their feelings about the beginning of the program in a word or phrase, 65% of all respondents (or 30 individuals) used words that connote positivity or excitement. This trend was consistent across both cohorts. One individual wrote that they were "looking forward to new opportunities."

- **Participants began the program feeling nervous and often unprepared for the experience.** In addition to positive feelings of excitement, participants also had more challenging feelings. Thirty-nine percent (or 18 individuals) described feelings of nervousness. These trends were consistent across the two cohorts. Examples of such responses included "TERRIFIED," and "overwhelmed."

Program midpoint   Stage 3: Program midpoint

- **At the program midpoint, participants were feeling the effects of connection.** When asked to describe their feelings at the midpoint of their work, 45% (or 20 individuals) expressed feelings such as "encouraged" and "supported," indicating the others in the program were supporting them. A majority (63%) indicated that they were kept motivated by giving and receiving support from their cohort.

- **At the program midpoint, participants had learned a variety of lessons from cohort participation.** When asked what they had learned about their improving library capacities, 27% (or 12 individuals) indicated they had learned more about community dynamics. Twenty-three percent (or 10 individuals) learned

about the value of connection to other libraries. These results point to the value of the program in teaching participants about their interconnectedness.
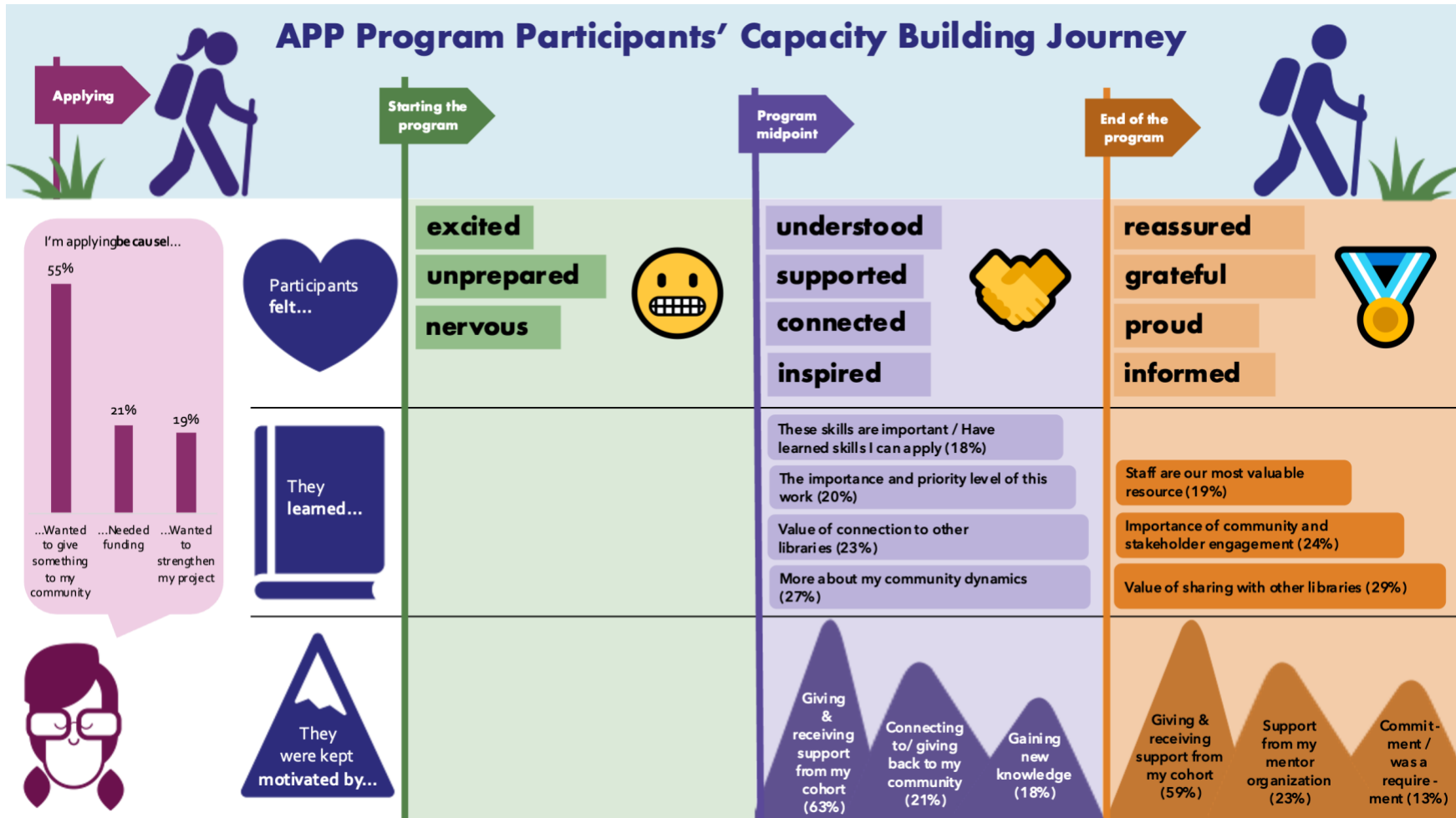
- **Cohort 2 participants were kept motivated at the midpoint by feelings of commitment and accountability.** When Cohort 1 was asked about their source of motivation, commitment and accountability did not come up. However, four of the respondents in Cohort 2 (or 31% of that cohort) mentioned those things. Two of those four saw the commitment itself as something meaningful. For example, one said, "I committed to do it, and I honor my commitments." However, the other two indicated the participation in the APP cohort had little value to them beyond being a requirement of the grant. One said, "It is required. I wish there was a deeper connection. The group is very small, and the projects are vastly different. Cohort 2 participants mentioned similar motivating factors at the midpoint of the project. This was only true for Cohort 2 participants – none of the participants from Cohort 1 mentioned commitment or accountability as a motivating factor.

End of the program → **Stage 4: Program end**

- **By program endpoint, participants felt reassured by the support, grateful for the opportunity, and proud of what they had been able to accomplish.** At the program's endpoint, participants were asked to describe how they felt about working in the cohort, using one word or phrase. Nearly one-third of respondents indicated that they felt understood or supported. When describing the sources of their motivation, 59 percent (or 23 individuals) reported that they were kept motivated by giving or receiving support from their cohort. Many also were kept motivated by the support from their mentor organization.

- **Participants learned about the importance of stakeholder and community engagement in the work they do.** When asked at midpoint what they learned about building capacities for their libraries, 10 individuals (or 24%) indicated they learned about the importance of stakeholder or community engagement. Those responses often related to the importance of community buy-in and feedback in order to effectively implement programs. For example, one individual said that they learned the librarian needs a supportive network because "buy-in from teachers, students, and administrators is essential. Transforming school library practice cannot consist of sole projects done by the librarian."

- **Cohort 2 participants were kept motivated through to the endpoint by feelings of commitment and accountability.** When asked at the endpoint, Cohort 1 did not mention commitment or accountability as a motivator. However, five of the respondents in Cohort 2 (or 42% of that cohort) mentioned it. One individual referred to this motivation as a "personal desire to see something I've started get completed." Those findings were similar to those at midpoint.

Figure 2: APP Grantees' Capacity-Building Journey

APP Program Participants' Capacity Building Journey

Applying | **Starting the program** | **Program midpoint** | **End of the program**

I'm applying because I...

- 55% ...Wanted to give something to my community
- 21% ...Needed funding
- 19% ...Wanted to strengthen my project

Participants felt...

Starting the program	Program midpoint	End of the program
excited	understood	reassured
unprepared	supported	grateful
nervous	connected	proud
	inspired	informed

They learned...

	Program midpoint	End of the program
	These skills are important / Have learned skills I can apply (18%)	Staff are our most valuable resource (19%)
	The importance and priority level of this work (20%)	Importance of community and stakeholder engagement (24%)
	Value of connection to other libraries (23%)	Value of sharing with other libraries (29%)
	More about my community dynamics (27%)	

They were kept motivated by...

	Program midpoint	End of the program
	Giving & receiving support from my cohort (63%)	Giving & receiving support from my cohort (59%)
	Connecting to/ giving back to my community (21%)	Support from my mentor organization (23%)
	Gaining new knowledge (18%)	Commitment / was a requirement (13%)

3. What was the impact of capacity building on the libraries' IMLS-funded projects?

It was hoped that participating in cohort-based, mentor organization-provided capacity-building activities would help small and rural libraries to better implement their IMLS-funded projects. Equally important to the skills-building element was the expectation that grantees would also build their confidence to do more of this type of project and grant application work in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a challenge that no one predicted. This section also shares how the pandemic affected the grantees' ability to implement their projects.

By the end of the APP program:
- Participants directly applied learnings from their CoP to their IMLS-funded project and many took away inspiration to apply to other work outside of their project.
- Participants increased their confidence in implementing projects and in responding to their communities' needs.
- Most participants needed longer than the two years to complete their projects, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic reducing their ability to engage in-person with their community or student body and delaying their project activities.
- Participants developed stronger relationships within their organization or community; transformed physical library spaces; created digital collections, platforms, or oral histories; and set up trainings to continue their work in the future.

Project Alignment and Applicability of Capacity-Building Topics

The majority of APP participants integrated learnings from others within their CoP into their IMLS-funded project. This integration of learnings was mentioned by 88% of respondents and was consistent across Cohorts and CoPs. Fifty-eight percent felt there were a lot of ideas they could apply to their project, while 30% felt it was more of a mix of some ideas that were applicable and others that were not. Only 13% (n=5) felt there was little to nothing they could apply to their IMLS-funded project.

APP participants took away inspiration and ideas to apply outside of their project either immediately or in the future. Forty-five percent of respondents gave examples of being exposed to different tools, resources, and types of projects that they might not have been using for their IMLS-funded project, but that they wanted to consider using in other ways in their libraries. Some also talked about learning exercises and tools that they could use with others in their organization or school. This broader applicability was more likely to be mentioned by Cohort 1 participants from any of the three CoPs and Cohort 2 participants from Community Memory. TSLP mentors also emphasized that TSLP participants strengthened their ability to present the value of their projects and their libraries to others.

Ability to Integrate Topics into Projects

"Some things I learned I don't know when I'm going to apply it, but I wouldn't have had time and space to learn about it otherwise...I see the stuff that wasn't immediately applicable as a kind of acculturation or socialization into this domain. Now, I have a sense of who to go to when this [work] is more urgent."
- Cohort 1 Participant

*"There were **definitely things we were able to apply** – digital storage and metadata. We had already done some of this, but I added to our processes – things I hadn't thought about."*
- Cohort 1 Participant

*"We **learned some things through this program that I didn't even know about** when the grant was written (e.g., maker spaces). I **was able to get with teachers and the library assistants** – we had this meeting **and talked about this stuff [I learned]**."*
– Cohort 2 Participant

Connection of the APP Program to Participants' Confidence

The APP program increased participants' overall confidence in implementing their projects and increased their knowledge of resources and tools available for assisting them in future project implementations (See Chart 7). Across the different CoPs and the two cohorts, participants generally entered the program with low levels of confidence in implementing these types of projects and in knowing about available tools and resources to help advance their work. By the end of the program, however, most had improved in these areas.

The APP program helped participants develop clearer plans for responding to their communities' needs (See Chart 7). Most participants didn't have clear plans to develop projects around their communities' needs when they entered the program. By the end of the program, however, more participants reporting having those plans in place.

Cohort 1 generally saw greater increases in their confidence, and subsequently their knowledge of resources and plan clarity, than their counterparts in Cohort 2.

Participant interview data supported this finding, with approximately 72% of participants expressing confidence in their ability to carry forward work in their thematic area outside of the program. All APP program participants felt they were now better prepared to conceptualize and implement future projects of this kind. There were no major differences in this response across cohorts or CoPs. Where participants had lower levels of confidence, it was because they were seeking more funding, staff, or organizational support to ensure more sustainability of their work.

Chart 7: Participants' Confidence and Ability to Implement CM/DI/TSLP Projects

Statement	Type	Cohort	Baseline	Endpoint
I feel confident in implementing projects about CM/DI/TSLP	CM	Cohort 1	2.4	3.4
		Cohort 2	2.9	3.3
	DI	Cohort 1	2.9	3.9
		Cohort 2	3.0	3.0
	TSLP	Cohort 1	2.3	3.4
		Cohort 2	2.6	3.3
I know about available resources and tools for implementing CM/DI/TSLP projects	CM	Cohort 1	2.5	3.1
		Cohort 2	2.0	3.3
	DI	Cohort 1	2.4	3.5
		Cohort 2	2.5	3.0
	TSLP	Cohort 1	2.4	3.7
		Cohort 2	2.4	3.3
Our library had a clear plan for how we could continually implement projects that met the community's needs	CM	Cohort 1	2.2	3.1
		Cohort 2	2.4	2.8
	DI	Cohort 1	2.9	3.3
		Cohort 2	2.3	2.3
	TSLP	Cohort 1	2.1	3.3
		Cohort 2	2.0	3.0

● Baseline
■ Endpoint

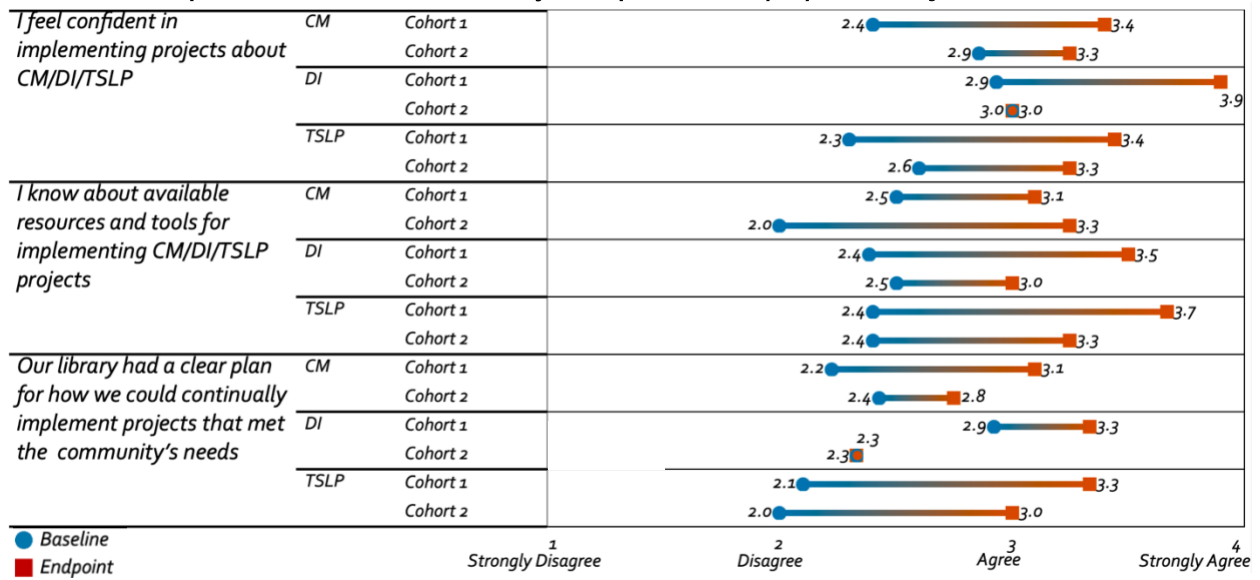Scale: 1 Strongly Disagree — 2 Disagree — 3 Agree — 4 Strongly Agree

Chart notes:
- Program participants were asked on a 4-point Likert scale at beginning and endpoint surveys to rate the extent to which they are confident in their ability to implement their projects.

Mentor organizations identified confidence development as one of the biggest changes among participants. All three mentor organizations mentioned increased confidence among participants in Cohort 1, and TSLP mentors also talked about confidence growth for Cohort 2 participants. Mentors discussed participants' confidence generally and, specifically, their confidence to manage grants and large projects and to advocate for their work. Mentors attributed confidence growth to participants having been awarded an IMLS grant, successfully moving their projects forward, and building their skills to communicate the value of their work.

Participant Confidence in Project Implementation

*"I feel very capable of it [project design and implementation] now. I think this has been such an amazing challenge and that **there is so much we can do moving forward I feel less fearful, less intimidated. I feel confident.**"* - Cohort 1 Participant

*"I'm **pretty confident that we'll be able to continue doing community member projects**. With small libraries like us, funding is already an issue. We are pretty good at grant writing so **hopefully we'll be able to find funders.**"*- Cohort 1 Participant

*"I would say **we're at like 70% [confidence in project design & implementation]**. We got everything in place, but the **most important part of the whole thing is community awareness and use, and that hasn't happened yet.**"* – Cohort 2 Participant

*"I **feel prepared, equipped to do more**...My perspective is different...**I have ideas of different things I can do.**"* – Cohort 2 Participant

*"We now have 10 libraries that are **way more confident in managing a grant** and this is really cool."* – Cohort 1 Mentor

*"**They gained confidence – that's the big thing.** Gaining the ability to advocate for the importance of what you're doing, and then the license to go do it. **Increasing their ability to have confidence in their ideas and promote their ideas to people who can make it happen.**"* – Cohort 2 Mentor

Ability to Make Progress on Their Projects

The majority of APP participants needed longer than the allocated two years to complete their IMLS-funded projects. This was largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately one-third of participants completed their project by the end of the APP program period, with two-thirds completing some aspects of the project and making plans to finish implementing the last pieces. Delays were overwhelmingly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for those who had community engagement or in-person events as a part of their initial workplans or were dealing with library closings and/or staff shortages during the pandemic. The Digital Inclusion CoP had the largest percentage of participants who finished their projects at the end of the two years, which may be due to the type of projects being implemented. Table 5 below shows the number of no-cost extensions requested and granted across the three Communities of Practice.

Table 5: No-Cost Extensions Granted by CoP and Cohort

Community of Practice	Cohort 1 Extensions	Cohort 2 Extensions
Community Memory	7 of 10 libraries 70%	6 of 7 libraries 86%
Digital Inclusion	4 of 10 libraries 40%	0 of 3 libraries 0%
Transforming School Library Practice	9 of 10 libraries 90%	5 of 5 libraries 100%

When asked about the biggest changes achieved by their library during the two years in the program, nearly half of participants reported developing stronger relationships within their organization and/or community (See Chart 8 - blue bars). This change aligned with project objectives related to evolving the role of the library in their community through the implementation of their projects.

- Forty-three percent of respondents (n=17) reported that their library now has a bigger presence in their school or community. This was reported by both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 grantees and across all three CoPs, although TSLP was slightly more likely to report this outcome.
- Ten percent of respondents (n=4) reported deepening a relationship with a community partner or with other schools in their district. All were from Cohort 1.

APP participants also reported a range of project-specific outcomes (Chart 8 - orange bars) such as:
- Twenty-five percent (n=10) reported the transformation of their physical space as their major achievement. These examples were almost all from the TSLP CoP.
- Twenty-five percent (n=10) reported being able to complete their project in the originally projected timeframe as their major achievement. This was mostly reported by DI participants, with some reports from CM CoP members.
- Twenty percent (n=8) reported the creation of a digital collection or platform that did not exist before. These were reported by DI and CM members.
- Ten percent (n=4) reported creating oral histories.
- Ten percent (n=4) reported setting up trainings or processes to continue the work of their project in their library. These were largely reported by CM members.

It should again be noted that a large number of APP participants extended their project timeframes (see section on No-Cost Extensions granted) and were expecting to see project outcomes occur after their APP exiting interview.

Chart 8: Types of Changes APP All Participants Achieved During the APP Program

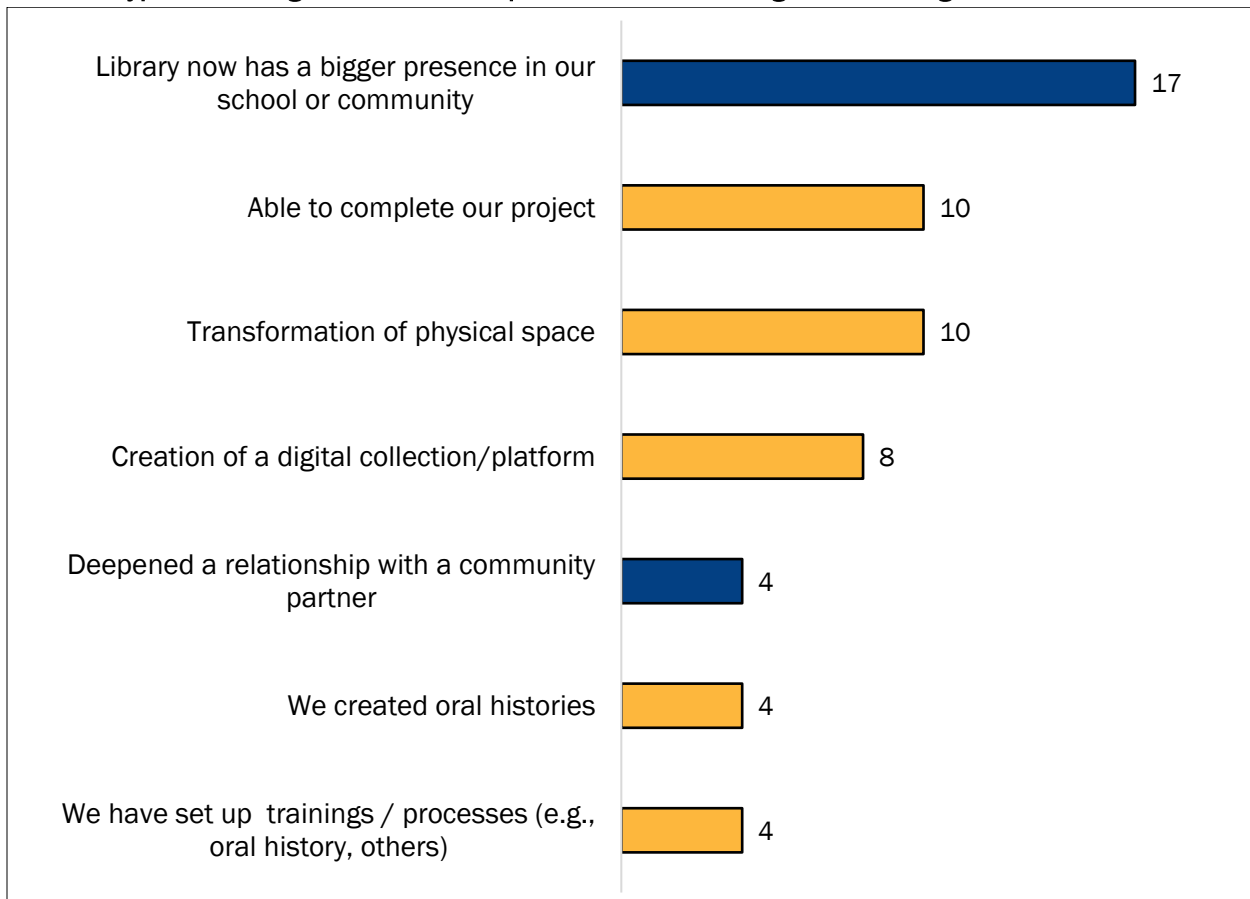| Category	Count
Library now has a bigger presence in our school or community	17
Able to complete our project	10
Transformation of physical space	10
Creation of a digital collection/platform	8
Deepened a relationship with a community partner	4
We created oral histories	4
We have set up trainings / processes (e.g., oral history, others)	4

Chart notes:
- Counts represent the number of participants that mentioned this type of change. Participant responses were often coded into multiple categories.
- Blue bars are associated with changes in relationships to their community while orange bars are associated with project-specific outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted participants' ability to make progress or achieve anticipated outcomes on their projects. Specifically, it reduced their ability to engage with their community or student body, requiring them to re-strategize about new ways to engage and delaying project activities. It also meant participants had to deal with supply chain issues and staff reductions. Some participants also noted that it helped their project get more attention.
- Fifty-nine percent of respondents (n=23) mentioned their reduced ability to engage with their community or student body. This finding was consistent across Cohorts and CoPs.
- Fifty-four percent of respondents (n=21) mentioned delays in their project activities affecting their outcomes. This finding was consistent across Cohorts and CoPs.
- Thirty-six percent of respondents (n=14) gave examples of needing to re-strategize about new ways to engage their students or community. This finding was consistent across Cohorts and CoPs.
- Ten percent of respondents (n=4) dealt with supply chain issues that impacted their projects. This finding was specific to Cohort 2 and was mentioned by TSLP and DI participants.

- Ten percent of respondents (n=4) dealt with staff reductions that impacted their projects' outcomes. This finding was mentioned by CM and DI participants in both cohorts.
- Thirteen percent of respondents (n=5) noted that the pandemic helped their project to get more attention. This finding was specific to Cohort 1 and was mentioned by participants from all three CoPs. Some examples included having greater success in reaching people that were at home through online platforms such as YouTube or social media; creating hotspots to help people that didn't have Internet access at home; and school librarians showing their adaptability by helping teachers transform to online teaching. One school librarian said, "We were able to transition to … provide [teachers] with resources that [they] can use with [their] students virtually…allowed our teachers and our community to see that we have the adaptability, flexibility and the knowledge to transform into whatever needs to be at that moment. I think it gave the teachers more confidence in what our abilities were."

Chart 9: Impacts of COVID-19 on Participants' Ability to Achieve Desired Outcomes*

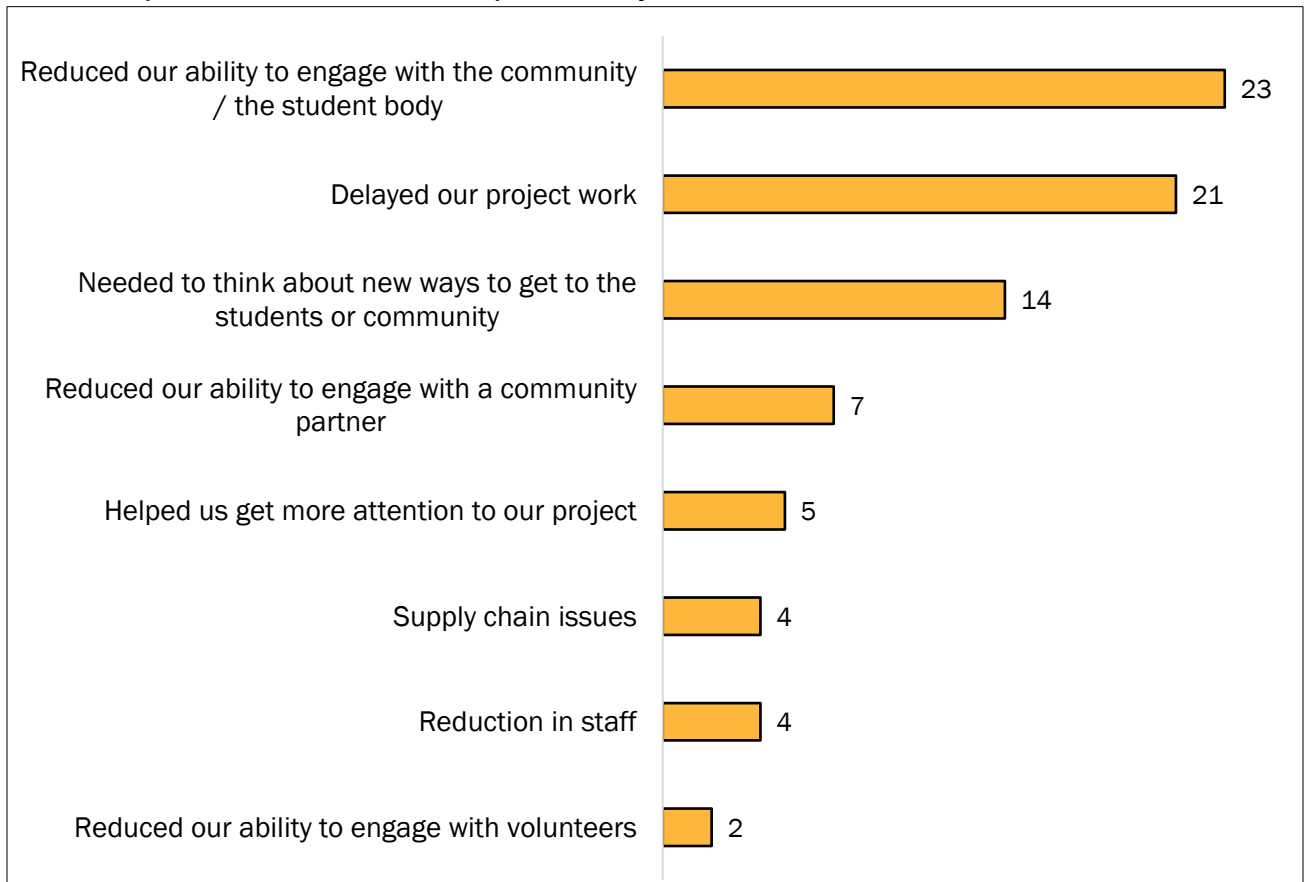| Category	Count
Reduced our ability to engage with the community / the student body	23
Delayed our project work	21
Needed to think about new ways to get to the students or community	14
Reduced our ability to engage with a community partner	7
Helped us get more attention to our project	5
Supply chain issues	4
Reduction in staff	4
Reduced our ability to engage with volunteers	2

Chart notes:
- Counts represent the number of participants that mentioned this type of change. Participant responses were often coded into multiple categories.

4. To what extent did the libraries' organizations and communities support their project ideas and efforts? And what impact did the Accelerating Promising Practices (APP) program have on the organizations and communities?

The APP program has a focus on helping libraries to become central hubs to their communities and school networks. This section shares findings on the extent to which APP participants have had, and still need, support for their CM/DI/TSLP work from their libraries and communities, and how well they were able to engage their libraries and communities throughout the APP program.

The evaluation found that by the end of the APP program:
- Many participants found leadership support during the implementation of their projects but approximately one-third were concerned about that support continuing in a way that would sustain the work after they exited the program.
- Many of the libraries' needs for technology and materials to support the project design and implementation appear to have been met through the IMLS grants.
- While some participants felt they had successfully engaged their communities during their projects, others struggled to engage them due to the pandemic restrictions, leaving 58% feeling like they had very little community support. Most participants, even those with some support, were working on building further support during their project extension periods.
- Libraries increased their ability to respond to their communities' needs by developing plans for community engagement as part of project development and implementation.

Organizational Support – During the Program

When asked about the extent to which they had organizational support for implementing their projects, 75% of the support areas mentioned by APP participants pertained to leadership or staff support. [8] Some participants talked about having very engaged administrators and/or Boards. For others, they felt like they had been able to raise awareness of the importance of their work with their library's leadership. Participants also gave examples of how staff had been engaged, taking on different parts of the project in addition to their "day jobs." These types of support were consistently noted throughout the program. This was consistent across all cohorts and CoPs.

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[8] Survey respondents were asked, "To what extent do you have the organizational support needed for implementing CM/DI/TSLP projects?" and responses were coded by TCC Group.

Most libraries across the CoPs did not experience a loss of full-time staff between the start and end of the program, although CM libraries were the most likely to see decreases in staff (See Chart 10). Generally, libraries across the CoPs retained the same number of full-time staff across the program span (shown in medium blue on the chart). Approximately one-third of TSLP libraries experienced staff increases by the end of the program (shown in dark blue on the chart). CM libraries were the most likely to experience a loss of staff, with approximately one-third of these libraries decreasing the number of full-time staff by the end of the program (shown in orange in the chart). Some libraries mentioned that budget cuts during the project period led to a decrease in staff. Libraries that saw increases in staff during the project period commended their strong Boards and leaders who saw value in library services and advocated for a greater library budget.

Chart 10: Full time Staff Changes from Baseline to Endpoint
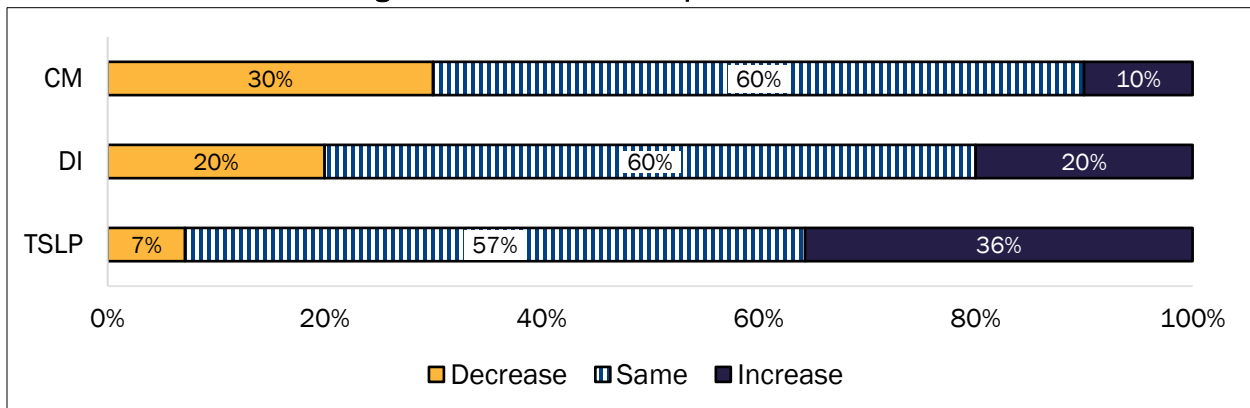
DI and TSLP libraries were often able to increase their libraries' funding for their thematic areas, while CM libraries generally kept their funding about the same (See Chart 11). APP participants were asked about any additional funds that their library was putting towards their CM/DI/TSLP- specific work.[9] By the end of the grant period, more than half of DI and TSLP libraries increased their libraries' designated funds for the work during the project. More than half of the CM libraries

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[9] Participants were asked on each survey, *"In addition to the funds provided in this grant, approximately, how much money is earmarked for your [CM/DI/TSLP] projects this year?"*

maintained their level of designated funds. Approximately one-third of all libraries across the three CoPs saw their designated funding decrease. Similarly to the libraries that increased their staff during the project period, libraries who increased their budgets had strong, supportive Boards. Libraries that experienced additional funding decreases had Boards that struggled to raise funds or were moving budget to focus on managing COVID-19-related issues.

Chart 11: Project Funding Changes from Baseline to Endpoint
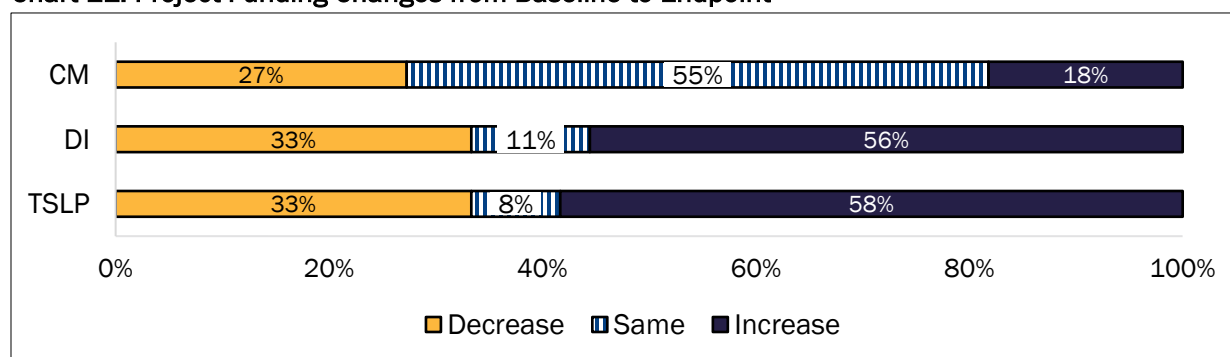
Organizational Support – Beyond the Program

By the end of the grant period, approximately two-thirds of APP participants felt they had organizational support to continue their work in their thematic area. Participants who felt they had organizational support tended to have more stable leadership and/or an engaged Board. Funding either had already been allocated to continue their work or leadership was involved in fundraising efforts to do so. The one-third of participants who did not feel as supported to continue the work were dealing with leadership transitions and/or were uncertain if work in their thematic area would continue to be prioritized for their library. Approximately half of Cohort 2 felt uncertain about their future support, as opposed to 25% of Cohort 1. However, several Cohort 2 members noted that they planned to engage their leadership during their no-cost extension period to work to get buy-in to continue the work.

APP participants also described several areas where they need continued organizational support. Some participants noted that their libraries may be shifting their strategic priorities and they weren't sure if their CM/DI/TSLP area would be included in future plans. Some participants were dealing with leadership changes, and they weren't sure about the sustainability of the work they had been doing. Others weren't sure of the perspective of their Board or District – either because they had stopped participating in the project or because they liked to move on to "the next shiny thing." By the end of the program, participants also were more likely to mention funding and staffing support as areas where they needed more organizational support.

The need for technology and materials for their work was talked about much less at the end of the program, likely due to the support provided through the IMLS funding. Technology and materials accounted for 20% of organizational support needs at the onset of the program, but only 5% of needs at the midpoint, and were not mentioned at the endpoint. Libraries were able to secure these items to complete their projects as a result of the grant. As shown in Section 3, Chart 8 above, many participants reported some of their biggest project achievements being the transformation of a

physical space or the creation of a digital platform, thus reducing their need for specific technologies and materials by the end of the program.

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Examples of Where Organizational Support is Needed for CM/DI/TSLP Projects

"In terms of staff time, that is a big question that I have [about this project's sustainability]. My organization is at somewhat of a turning point or point of reflection in terms of what our goals are going to be." - Cohort 1 Participant

"The district is into shiny things. They want to highlight this shiny grant, and then they're on to the next shiny thing." - Cohort 2 Participant

"They are open to doing whatever I ask them do, but I'm concerned that if I leave, they won't keep it going." – Cohort 2 Participant

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Community Support – During the Program

When asked about the extent to which they had community support for projects within their thematic areas (CM/DI/TSLP), APP participants were most likely to talk about having general community involvement and support, with some talking about organizational partnerships. Participants were able to generate community support using fliers and banners as well as by engaging library patrons in conversations about projects when they visited the library for other reasons. Some were able to engage the media or a local historical society, which helped further engage other community members. Being able to engage the broader community was largely talked about by members of the CM and DI CoPs. TSLP participants found challenges with community engagement as their school libraries were closed or were allocated for classroom use during the pandemic and they were not able to engage their communities through planned in-person meetings. Organizational partnerships mentioned were generally with historical societies, local governments, or other community-based organizations.[10]

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[10] Survey respondents were asked, "To what extent do you have the community support needed for implementing CM/DI/TSLP projects?" and responses were coded by TCC Group.

Examples of Community Support for CM/DI/TSLP Projects

*"Our **partnership with the Historical Society has really grown**. It can feel competitive when going for the same funding. But now being able to offer them something has **opened a door that we didn't have before."***
- Cohort 1 Participant

*"Having a CM project was based on what our community had identified as important and **being able to reach out to them, get their input, and sharing back with them what we got**. It **served to increase our role in the community.**"*- Cohort 1 Participant

*"We **had listening sessions with the community** – the community had to trust us."* – Cohort 2 Participant

Community Support – Beyond the Program

By the end of the grant period, 42% of APP participants felt they had the community support to sustain their work in their thematic area. Fifty-eight percent felt they had little to no community support at that time, although most were working to obtain that support (across CM/DI/TSLP). Areas where APP participants needed more community support included broad community engagement, staffing and volunteers, and help related to COVID-19 challenges. The need for specific ways to engage the community during the COVID-19 pandemic presented a growing challenge as programs progressed. TSLP participants noted that they were still trying to get parents and communities involved in their projects, but it had been difficult because visiting the school was not possible due to pandemic restrictions or because people were "busy and overwhelmed." Participants who felt they did have community support were often in circumstances where the participating library already had partnerships with other organizations in the community, online engagement with their content was high, they already had good community engagement with their library, or had built their APP project directly based on community-identified needs.

Examples of Where Community Support is Needed for CM/DI/TSLP Projects

*"**Covid-19 has prevented many of our parent programs.** Even our regular curriculum night was very poorly attended."* - Cohort 1 Participant

*"We're still trying to figure out how to connect with families and community members...**no one had the capacity these last couple years.**"*- Cohort 2 Participant

*"The **biggest challenge is getting people to connect with the oral histories**...I'm working on creating more of an audience and drawing people there."* – Cohort 2 Participant

Impact of APP Program on Aligning Library Projects with Community Needs

Libraries that participated in the APP program increased their ability to create and implement projects that prioritized their communities' needs (See Chart 12). By the end of the program, libraries across cohorts and CoPs felt they had increased their ability to create programs reflecting their

communities' needs, had a plan for continually implementing community-focused projects, and had projects that incorporate their community's priorities and perspectives. TSLP participants in particular saw gains in those areas, as most entered the program feeling that they did not have those components in place at their libraries.

Chart 12: Libraries' Reported Understanding of Their Communities

			Baseline	Endpoint
Our library creates programs and services to reflect the new and emerging needs of our community.	CM	Cohort 1	3.2	3.5
		Cohort 2	3.1	3.8
	DI	Cohort 1	3.3	3.7
		Cohort 2	3.0	3.0
	TSLP	Cohort 1	2.2	3.7
		Cohort 2	2.2	3.5
Our library had a clear plan for how we could continually implement projects that met the community's needs	CM	Cohort 1	2.2	3.1
		Cohort 2	2.4	2.8
	DI	Cohort 1	2.9	3.3
		Cohort 2	2.3	2.3
	TSLP	Cohort 1	2.1	3.3
		Cohort 2	2.0	3.0
Our library has project(s) that incorporate the community's priorities and perspectives	CM	Cohort 1	2.6	3.4
		Cohort 2	2.3	3.5
	DI	Cohort 1	2.5	3.7
		Cohort 2	2.7	4.0
	TSLP	Cohort 1	2.1	3.4
		Cohort 2	2.0	3.3

● Baseline
■ Endpoint

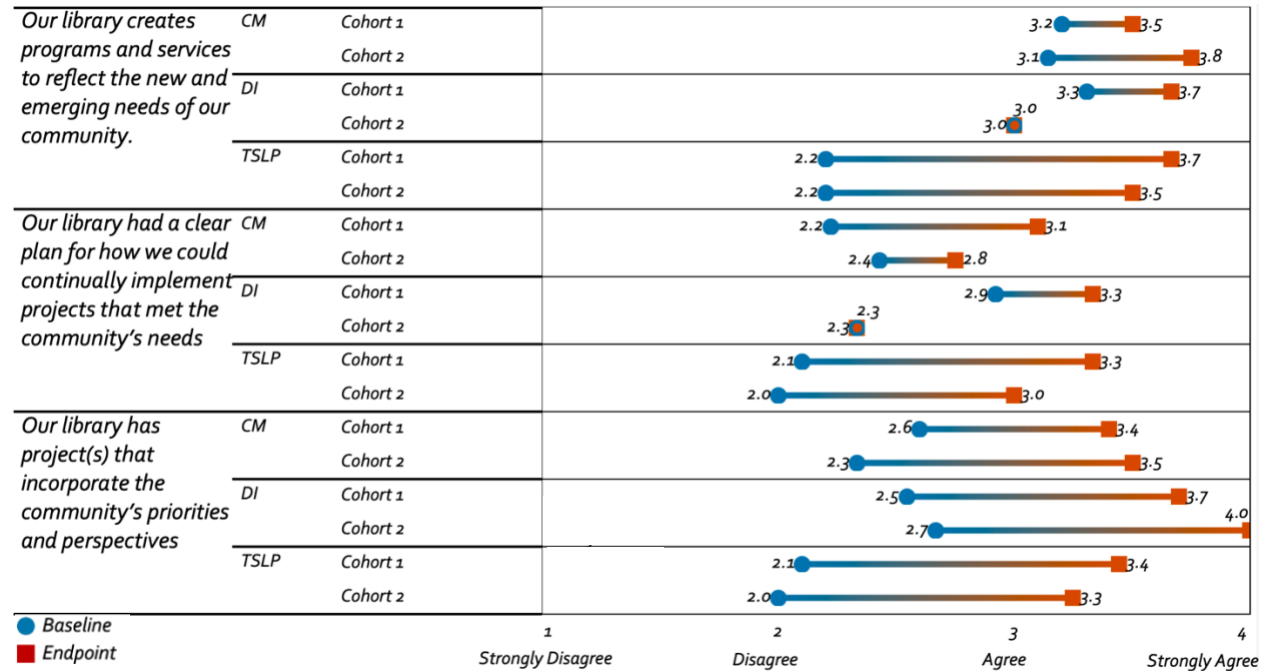1 Strongly Disagree — 2 Disagree — 3 Agree — 4 Strongly Agree

Chart notes:

- Program participants were asked on a 4-point Likert scale at beginning and endpoint surveys to rate the extent to which they understand their communities.

For a closer view of how key findings that were specific to each Community of Practice, see Appendix 6: Case Studies by Community of Practice.

5. What are the overall takeaways on the cohort-mentor model of capacity building for small and rural libraries?

The capacity-building component of the grant was designed to promote shared knowledge, build grantee capacity in relevant areas, and grow networks in the library and archives fields. This section talks about the ways in which this model of delivering capacity provided value and how well it met the intended aims of the capacity-building component.

The evaluation found the cohort-mentor model of capacity building to be successful with small and rural libraries with cohorts and mentors each providing unique and complementary supports to the participants.

- Mentor organizations were highly valuable as they provided moral support, facilitated strong professional development, were communicative and responsive to questions and needs, brought knowledge and experience, and served as a guide to keep projects on track.
- Cohort participation also provided value for participants through the opportunity to share ideas, provide moral support, and obtain advice from those in similar roles.
- There were mixed views about whether diversity of a cohort (library types, project types) was valuable or not. Some participants found differences hindered their ability to connect while others saw this as a welcome opportunity for learning.

Mentor Organizations

Mentor organizations were a very valuable aspect of the program for APP participants (See Chart 13.
Ninety percent of APP participant respondents (n=36) described their mentor organizations as valuable or very valuable, although this perspective was much more frequently expressed in Cohort 1.

Chart 13 APP Participants' Impressions of Mentor Organizational Value by Cohort and CoP
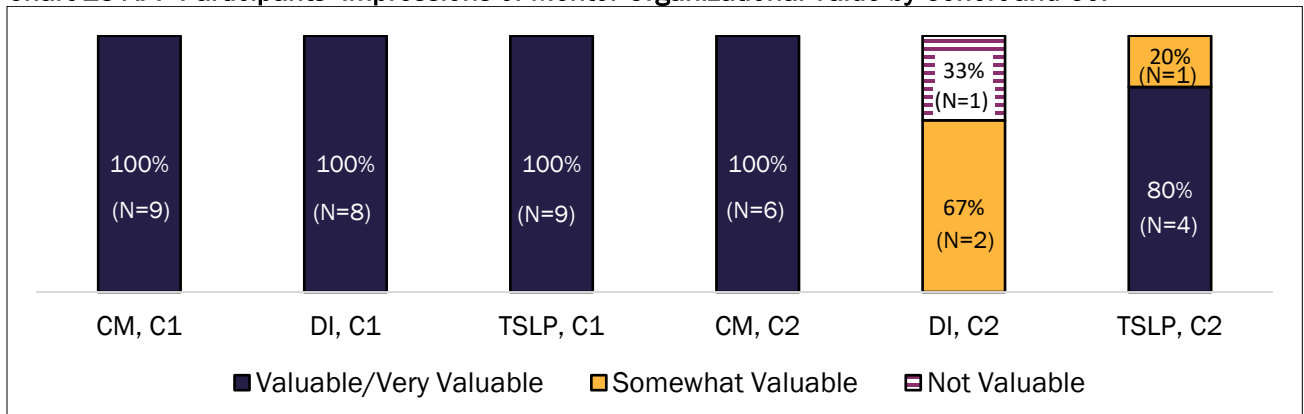
Specifically, APP participants found their mentor organizations added value by providing moral support/encouragement, facilitating strong professional development, being communicative and responsive to questions and needs, bringing knowledge and experience, and by serving as a guide to help keep the projects on track. Several program participants commented that this type of support

was hard to get for their day-to-day activities. For many of the grantees that were first-time IMLS grant recipients, or it was their first-time to manage a grant this large, these were crucial supports that helped the grantees have confidence to work toward the goals of their projects and to adapt activities as needed.

Community Memory grantees were more likely to mention the value of mentor organizations helping them understand IMLS processes or expectations. For all other categories of feedback about mentor organizations, responses were evenly spread across both cohorts and all three CoPs. Participants noted that mentor organizations:

- **Provided moral support/encouragement.** APP participants found that their mentor organizations helped them to have confidence to be able to deliver on their proposed project plan. The mentors were described as being supportive, encouraging "cheerleaders" who were very "tuned in" to the participants' work.

- **Provided strong professional development.** Participants expressed excitement about the mentor-selected presenters and topics and the fact that the mentors were adaptable to focusing on topics that the cohort prioritized. Participants also reported an appreciation for mentors sharing their professional experiences with similar work within a professional development framework.

- **Were communicative and responsive to questions.** Participants talked about the fast response times from the mentor organizations and the general feeling that "they were there if you needed to ask something."

- **Brought knowledge and experience.** Participants appreciated the mentor organizations' knowledge and willingness to share connections to other resources.

- **Helped keep participants on track**. Participants talked about the mentor organizations helping to keep them on track in making progress on their projects and not get stuck on issues they encountered along the way.

Value of Mentor Organizations- Cohort 1

"The glue...[our mentor organization] was **the support that guided us through the process...mentorship, moral support, a sounding board** *to discuss ideas, comparing and contrasting the situation with others. It gave us a perspective as to where we were and weren't isolated."*
 - Cohort 1 Participant

"I really valued the extra support and their experiences. They **served as the decoder ring for IMLS [grant requirements]**...*And* **keeping you on task** *– not as a demand, but as a how can we help you with the project. Being that extra support and resource base to help things go along smoother."*
- Cohort 1 Participant

"It was **easy to feel disillusioned or frustrated**, *what are we going to be able to accomplish. A mentor* **organizational perspective was really helpful**. *Also, as a professional,* **we don't have that many chances in our field** *for formal mentorship."*
– Cohort 1 Participant

"I would not have survived without the mentor organization...*There is no doubt in my mind. I maybe would have muddled my way through, but I wouldn't have enjoyed it...There were so many pieces, it was great to have someone who understood all of the pieces."* – Cohort 1 Participant

Value of Mentor Organizations – Cohort 2

"It was great to have the mentors to **answer questions about requirements for the grant** *and they worked hard to* **create opportunities for the group to talk about what was going on**. *I really valued that."*
- Cohort 2 Participant

"It was **essential to be the translators for IMLS**. *They were our people to go to ask when we didn't understand what was going on."*- Cohort 2 Participant

"The mentor organization could **help make connections for us, so we didn't have to tread water too long**. *We could find people. It was* **like a networking hub**." – Cohort 2 Participant

"It was an **opportunity for PD [professional development] that was fairly non-existent for librarians in my state**, *much less district. Those opportunities were* **really eye-opening**." – Cohort 2 Participant

Chart 14: How Mentor Organizations Provided Value to APP Participants

Category	Percentage
Provided moral support/encouragement	65%
Provided strong professional development	58%
Was communicative and responsive to questions	55%
Brought knowledge and experience	53%
Helped keep me on track through project implementation	50%
Was organized	35%
Was approachable	33%
Helped understand IMLS processes/expectations	30%
Helped provide an overarching field perspective	23%
Was flexible to my needs	15%
Helped facilitate learning from the rest of the cohort	8%

Cohort Participation

Participating in a cohort also was valuable to APP participants, although slightly less so than working with a mentor organization, with the exception of Cohort 2 of the Digital Inclusion CoP (See Chart 15. Ninety percent of APP participant respondents (n=36) described participating in the cohort as valuable or very valuable and survey respondents felt by the end of their program that their cohort had become a professional peer learning network they could draw on for support. These ratings were similar to the ratings for the mentor organizations, although mentor organizations were more likely than cohorts to be described as "highly valuable" as opposed to "valuable." Members of Digital Inclusion, Cohort 2 rated their cohort a bit lower than the other groups. Queried as to why, members of Cohort 2 indicated that they were challenged to find commonalities with the other members of the cohort, each feeling that the purpose of their library and the community they served was unique relative to the other two libraries in the cohort.

Chart 15: APP Participants' Perspectives on Cohort Value by Cohort and CoP

CM, C1	11% (N=1) Somewhat Valuable; 89% (N=8) Valuable/Very Valuable
DI, C1	100% (N=8) Valuable/Very Valuable
TSLP, C1	11% (N=1) Somewhat Valuable; 89% (N=8) Valuable/Very Valuable
CM, C2	100% (N=6) Valuable/Very Valuable
DI, C2	66% (N=2) Somewhat Valuable; 33% (N=1) Valuable/Very Valuable
TSLP, C2	100% (N=5) Valuable/Very Valuable

■ Valuable/Very Valuable   ▦ Somewhat Valuable   ■ Not Valuable
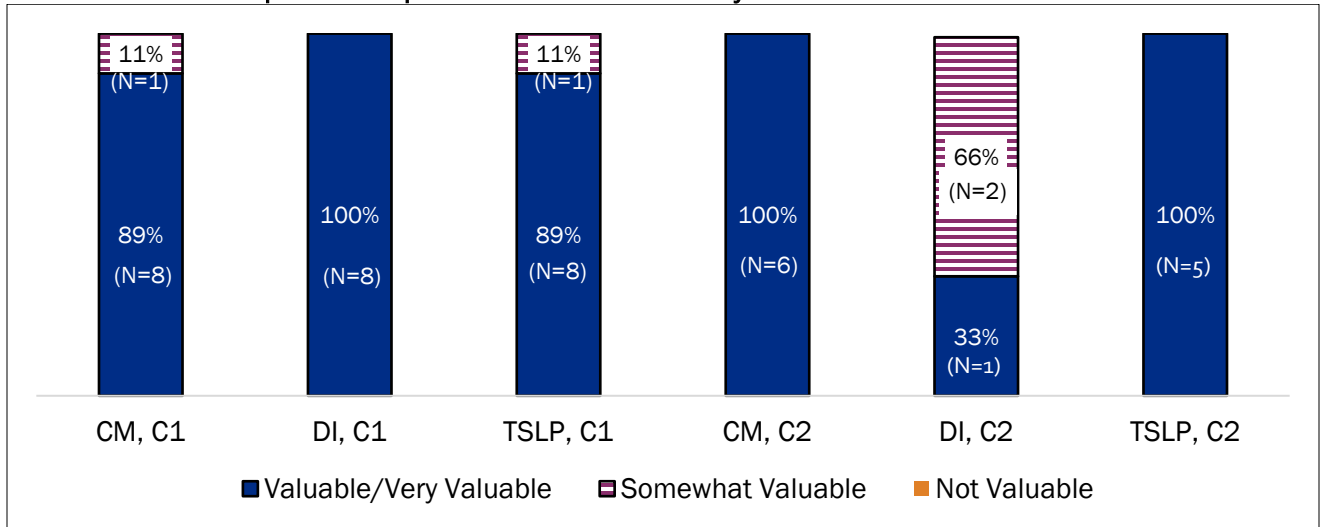
All participants interviewed found some value in being a part of their cohort and most had an overall positive experience with it (See Chart 16). When asked about the value provided by the cohort, most participants spoke about getting ideas from discussing their projects together and seeing how librarians in small libraries around the country were grappling with their projects as well as overall library issues (as summarized in Table 6).

- **Value from ideas from other projects/seeing what others are doing.** Participants talked about getting value from hearing about the projects of other participants in their cohort, how they were approaching work with their communities, and how they addressed challenges that arose.

- **Value from advice from the cohort.** Participants appreciated having more people as a "sounding board" and hearing ideas and suggestions from those in similar roles.

- **Value from moral support/encouragement.** Participants valued feeling like they were in this together and receiving encouragement from their cohort when they encountered obstacles and challenges with implementing their projects.

Value of Cohort Participation - Cohort 1

*"…we are all small organizations, and it **provides an opportunity to connect with similar organizations working at a similar level.** It's different from just meeting someone at a conference, you can really learn what others are doing. …It **helps with learning, carrying out your projects, and affirmation of the work you are doing.**"*
- Cohort 1 Participant

*"**Without the cohort, I would have felt extremely alone in trying to implement everything** with nobody to talk to. To be able to hear how other grantees were doing was a huge help."*
- Cohort 1 Participant

*"That idea of the **social accountability** because it wasn't just these people that were above us that we were presenting to. It was also these colleagues that we liked.**…that made the PD [professional development] more robust, we got different perspectives from around the country.**"*
– Cohort 1 Participant

*"It was a source of support – a place to come with questions…**we celebrated some successes. It was a very good support group**…a **great feeder of ideas.**"*
– Cohort 1 Participant

Value of Cohort Participation - Cohort 2

*"It did add value. We were able to throw ideas off of each other**. If we had questions – one cohort member could have an idea of how to do something**." -* Cohort 2 Participant

*"There was **a feeling that we're not just an individual person who's fulfilling grant needs** and moving on. It felt like **we were building a program togethe**r. If I was frustrated, they probably felt the same way. Especially with COVID-19 – all our plans went up in the air, things took a lot longer. Hearing others shared my frustration was beneficial. **I don't know if I would have gotten as far as I did without their support**."-* Cohort 2 Participant

*"They [my CoP] were **helpful to me in offering ideas and in complimenting me and reassuring me** on what I was doing."*
– Cohort 2 Participant

*"The group meetings matter because **things were brought up that I didn't know were problems, and I could think about them**."* – Cohort 2 Participant

Chart 16 How Being Part of a Cohort Provided Value to APP Participants

Value from ideas from other projects/ seeing what others are doing	90%
Value from advice from the cohort	43%
Value from moral support/ encouragment	30%
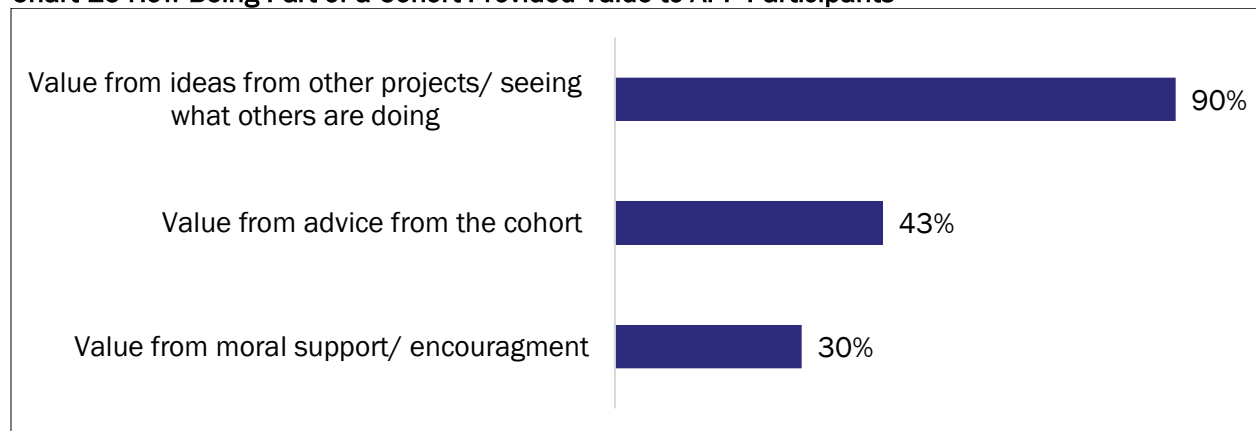
When participating in a cohort was not rated as highly, it was because participants didn't feel they were able to connect with others in their group. Several reasons for this were given, including that participants felt the small size of their cohort and/or the differences in their projects didn't provide them with a large enough pool of people with whom they could connect. Reasons also included that they felt the differences in library types meant that their experiences were too different to compare; and that lack of participation by other members or staff turnover in participants made it hard to connect with others in their cohort. This aligns with the findings previously reported in Section 2 where APP participants felt some connection to other members of their cohort, but it wasn't especially strong. Table 6 shows both the challenges and the benefits of diverse cohorts.

Table 6: Benefits and Challenges of Diverse Cohorts

Diverse Cohorts Presented Benefits and Challenges
Within each of the APP cohorts and across the three CoPs, there was diversity among the types of grant-funded projects participants were undertaking, participants' roles within their libraries or organizations, the types of libraries represented, and other contextual differences. This diversity presented some challenges for mentor organizations and participants, but it also provided benefits.

BENEFITS	CHALLENGES
• Participants brought a range of perspectives, based on their roles and their library context.	• Mentor organizations found it difficult to come up with topics that would resonate with all participants of their cohorts, because participant projects were broad-ranging.
• Hearing about cohort grantees' wide-ranging projects sparked ideas for future work. As one participant shared, it *"opened up the circle of what we talked about. ...We wouldn't have thought about other project ideas, but now we are interested in it."*	• Participants struggled to connect with some learning topics presented, while those same topics were highly relevant to others in their cohort.
• Participants faced different hurdles based on varying contexts and project types, and benefitted from hearing what worked and didn't for addressing those challenges.	• Participants struggled to connect more deeply with those they felt were working in different contexts.
• Participants credited their mentor organizations with being able to connect ideas across project types and contexts.	

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Throughout the APP program, mentor organizations facilitated capacity building through components that were found to be highly effective with small and rural libraries, such as in-person convenings, monthly virtual meetings, a curated set of topics specific to their CoP, and regular one-on-one check-ins with the mentors. The use of an online portal also was explored and was found to be useful as a document repository but ineffective in fostering relationships between cohort members.

Participants in both cohorts increased their skills in project planning/implementation, and grants management, as well as within their thematic area (community memory, digital inclusion, or transforming school library practice) and most applied those new skills directly to their IMLS-funded projects. By the time they completed the program, participants felt more connected to a network of libraries, although deep relationships between cohort members were generally not formed and likely would have had more success if the additional planned in-person meetings had been able to take place.

The majority of APP participants needed longer than the allocated two years to complete their IMLS-funded projects. This was largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of the two-years, participants reported developing stronger relationships within their libraries or community despite the challenges that came with social distancing measures brought about by the pandemic. Examples included deepening relationships with community partners, and achieving project outcomes such as the transformation of a physical space, or the creation of a digital platform or set of oral histories.

Many APP participants had support from their leadership and staff, while others struggled and were unsure if they had buy-in to sustain their work beyond the program. Similarly, some libraries found success in obtaining their community's support while others struggled and highlighted increasing needs for more staff and volunteers. The need for technology and project materials decreased as IMLS funding supported purchases in those areas. Through the program, participants increased their library's ability to create, implement, and plan for projects that prioritized their community's needs.

The mentor-cohort capacity building proved highly effective for small and rural libraries. Mentor organizations were an especially valuable aspect of the program, providing moral support, facilitating strong professional development, and serving as a guide to keeping the projects on track. Participating in a cohort also was valuable, although slightly less so than working with a mentor. The cohort allowed participants to discuss projects with peers and to directly obtain advice, moral support, and encouragement. Small and rural libraries appreciated being with others that deal with similar issues and the cohort helped them feel less alone in the daunting task of managing a new grant, implementing a new type of project, and dealing with the pandemic.

Recommendations

The following set of recommendations is offered based on the evaluation team's synthesis of all the data from this evaluation. Several of the recommendations or considerations also were raised explicitly throughout the course of the evaluation interviews.

Design

1. **Engage the mentor organizations earlier in the process to assist with participant selection and guide participants in their project design.** Advantages include:
   - Helping select good candidates for capacity building and project implementation.
   - Helping avoid the omission of key project design aspects (e.g., software selection, budgeting decisions, staffing time needed, community integration)
   - Helping better identify areas of support and the design of appropriate capacity-building activities via having access to program applications.

2. **Set clearer expectations for the Communities of Practice and Mentor roles to:**
   - Set realistic expectations for those involved.
   - Help plan for the time commitments needed to participate.
   - Help better customize the capacity-building program.

3. **Carefully consider the level of library and project diversity within the cohorts.**
   - Consider the tradeoffs found through this evaluation on the diversity of each cohort. Some participants valued diversity and saw it as a learning experience while others found it harder to connect to participants or topics that weren't immediately relevant.

4. **Consider a minimum number of participants within each cohort.**
   - Digital Inclusion's Cohort 2 (N=3) struggled most in realizing cohort benefits. This appears to have been tied to group size, diversity of topics and library types, some staff turnover at the mentor organization, and unclear expectations for the cohort experience.

Recruitment

5. **Increase visibility of grant opportunities for small and rural libraries through the American Library Association (ALA), regional and state library associations, and schools with library science degrees.** Many APP libraries found out about the program through state library associations.

6. **Make the grant application process more accessible and less intimidating.** Providing application workshops through state library associations, IMLS, and by leveraging "Alumni Ambassadors" that have gone through the program can all help with this.

Implementation

7. **Continue providing structured time and activities for cohort members to develop strong, collegial relationships.** In-person meetings early on can help accelerate trust building and foster a willingness to ask questions and share with the group.

8. **Continue to provide flexibility to mentor organizations and participants on grant uses and capacity-building activities.** The flexibility of both IMLS and mentor organizations was raised repeatedly as a strength of the APP program experience.

Evaluation

9. **Engage evaluators in the design phase to help clarify strategies, outcomes, and goals, and ensure relevance of data collection tools.** The design and submission of the data collection tools before immersion into the program restricted adaptability of the evaluation framework once more was learned about the program.

Appendices

March 2023

Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Participating Libraries

Table 1.1: Participating Libraries for each APP Cohort

Community of Practice (COP)	Cohort 1	Library	Cohort 2	Library
Community Memory (CM)	Cohort 1 (n=10)	Huna Heritage Foundation, Juneau, Alaska	Cohort 2 (n=7)	McLean Library and Archives, Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
		Benzonia Public Library, Benzonia, Michigan		Belfast Free Library, Belfast, Maine
		Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe, Sequim, Washington		Moore Free Library, Newfane, Vermont
		Pella Library, Pella, Iowa		Lakeview Community Library, Random Lake, Wisconsin
		Scott County Library, Eldridge, Iowa		Twin Lakes Library System, Milledgeville, Georgia
		Hudson Area Library, Hudson, New York		Edith B. Ford Memorial Library, Ovid, New York
		Forbes Library, Northamptom, Massachusetts		City of Aniak, Aniak, Alaska
		Astoria Library, Astoria, Oregon		
		Southern California Library, Los Angeles, California		
		Jaquith Library, Marshfield, Vermont		
Digital Inclusion (DI)	Cohort 1 (n=10)	Skaneateles Library, Skaneateles, New York	Cohort 2 (n=3)	Reynolds Community College, Richmond, Virginia
		Philadelphia Fight, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania		Neuse Regional Libraries, Kingston, North Carolina
		Pottsboro Library, Pottsboro, Texas		Briar Cliff University, Sioux City, Iowa
		El Paso Community College, El Paso, Texas		
		The North Riverside Public Library, North Riverside, Illinois		

Community of Practice (COP)	Cohort 1	Library	Cohort 2	Library
		Biblioteca Centro para Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico		
		Cherokee Regional Library, Lafayette, Georgia		
		Asotin County Library, Clarkston, Washington		
		Elkins Public Library, Elkins, Arkansas		
		La Veta Public Library, La Veta, Colorado		
Transforming School Library Practice (TSLP)	Cohort 1 (n=10)	Orleans Central Supervisory Union, Barton, Vermont	Cohort 2 (n=5)	Wahluke School District, Mattawa, Washington
		Osage County Interlocal Co-Op, Bartlesville, Oklahoma		Brooklyn Center Community Schools, Brooklyn Center, Minnesota
		Aurora Public School East Side District #131, Aurora, Illinois		Great Falls Public Schools, Great Falls, Montana
		Worcester County Public Schools, Newark, Maryland		Hominy Public Schools, Hominy, Oklahoma
		Hillsboro-Deering School District, Hillsboro, New Hampshire		Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico
		Laurens County School District 55, Laurens, South Carolina		
		Regional School Unit 63, Eddington and Holden, Maine		
		Milford Central School District, Milford, New York		
		Freedom Public School, Freedom, Oklahoma		
		Fort Benton Schools, Fort Benton, Montana		

Appendix 2: APP Theory of Change

INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

Accelerating Promising Practices for Small and Rural Libraries (APP Program)

Through...

Personalized training and technical assistance

and the

Facilitation of a community of practice

and

Intentional interaction with the libraries field

Small and rural libraries

- Increase the skills, experience, and infrastructure needed to engage their communities and design and implement projects that benefit the communities as they evolve

- Join a larger network of libraries redefining their roles as community hubs and learning from each other

- Embrace the roles of librarian and library as central facilitators of community knowledge and a provider of public access to information, ideas, and networks

Which changes the role of libraries in the eyes of community stakeholders...

Libraries are seen as stewards of community culture and history by advancing innovation, lifelong learning, and cultural and civic engagement.

Appendix 3: Evaluation Methodology Details

The table below provides details about the data collection methods used within the Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 evaluation. Data collection methods are listed for each data source and a brief description, timeframe, and response rate, if applicable, are provided.

Table 3.1: Methodology and Data Sources Used in the APP Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 Evaluation

Data Source	Data Method	Description	Timeframe	Response Rate
Cohort/COP Members (All participants in both APP Cohorts across the three Communities of Practice: Community Memory, Digital Inclusion, and Transforming School Libraries)	Baseline survey (22 questions)	This online survey captures both quantitative and qualitative data related to the areas of (1) Personalized Training & Technical Assistance, (2) Community of Practice, and (3) Interaction with the Libraries field. The survey contains core questions that are common across the three cohorts as well as cohort-specific sections.	Cohort 1: January 21, 2020 – February 11,2021 Cohort 2: October 5, 2020 – November 16, 2020	# of libraries C1/C2 (response rate): CM: 10/7 (100%) DI: 10/3 (100%) TSLP: 10/5 (100%) Total: 30/15 (100%)
	Midpoint survey (30 questions)	This online survey seeks to understand the extent to which the planned grantee project implementation and capacity-building programming changed from what was originally planned due to COVID-19. It also checks in on participant capacity changes.	Cohort 1: October 5, 2020 – November 20, 2020 Cohort 2: August 24, 2021 – October 19, 2021	# of libraries C1/C2: CM: 10/6 (94%) DI: 9/3 (92%) TSLP: 10/5 (100%) Total: 29/14 (96%)
	Endpoint survey (21 questions)	Same as baseline survey	Cohort 1: August 5, 2021 – October 8, 2021 Cohort 2: August 22, 2022 – October 24, 2022	# of libraries C1/C2: CM: 10/5 (88%) DI: 8/3 (85%) TSLP: 10/5 (100%) Total: 28/13 (91%)
	Endpoint interviews	These hour-long exit video interviews gathered reflections individually by each grantee on what was learned over the 2-year period.	Cohort 1: August 16, 2021 – October 29, 2021 Cohort 2: August 12, 2022 – October 17, 2022	# of libraries C1/C2: CM: 9/6 (88%) DM: 8/3 (85%)

Data Source	Data Method	Description	Timeframe	Response Rate
				TSLP: 9/5[11] (93%) **Total: 26/14 (89%)**
Mentor Organizations (For each of the three Communities of Practice: Community Memory, Digital Inclusion, and Transforming School Libraries)	Midpoint interviews	These hour-long midpoint interviews were conducted by phone to gather reflections from each mentor organizations on what was learned at the end of the Cohort 1's first year and what, if any, adaptations to programming are being made for Cohort 2.	**Cohort 1:** August 24, 2020 – October 1, 2020 **Cohort 2:** July 21, 2021 – October 22, 2021	All 3 mentor organizations
	Ad hoc interviews (n=3)	These short, 30-minute interviews provided an opportunity to understand any changes to the capacity building intervention due to COVID-19 repercussions.	As needed basis	All 3 mentor organizations
	Endpoint interviews	These hour-long exit video interviews gathered reflections individually by each mentor organization on what was learned over the 2-year period.	**Cohort 1:** September 9, 2021 – September 20, 2021 **Cohort 2:** August 25, 2022 – October 25, 2022	All 3 mentor organizations
Cohort 1 and 2 Observations	In-person convening(n=3)	Evaluators attended the initial in-person convenings of each of the Cohort 1 COPs to understand who comprised the cohorts, what content was covered, what interventions would be offered, and observe cohort interactions.	**Cohort 1:** November-December 2019 **Cohort 2:** none	N/A
	Online portal interactions	Evaluators reviewed online portal interactions on a quarterly basis and coded trends in how the portals were being used for analysis.	Throughout the 2-year period	N/A
	Sample of virtual cohort	Evaluators observed (either live or recorded versions) two virtual cohort meetings per	Throughout the 2-year period	N/A

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[11] One post-program survey respondents' data was excluded from the analysis due to it being the same response for each survey question, the mean score falling three standard deviations below the mean scores of the other respondent scores, and their interview data not aligning with the survey responses.

Data Source	Data Method	Description	Timeframe	Response Rate
	meetings (n=24)	COP per year: a total of four observations for each COP.		
Document Review	APP program materials	Evaluators reviewed any other documents provided by IMLS or mentor organizations that described the intent of the APP program and/or the content being covered.	Throughout the 2-year period	N/A
	Pulse check surveys administered by mentor organizations	Mentor organizations administered short 2-3 question real-time surveys after virtual cohort meetings and other activities to participants. TCC analyzed these responses.	Throughout the 2-year period	Administered by CM and TSLP COPs

Appendix 4: Virtual Cohort Meeting Topics

Cohort 1 - Table 4.1: Virtual Meeting Topics for Cohort 1

Month	Community Memory	Digital Inclusion	Transforming School Library Practice
Oct-19	Virtual Kick-off Meeting	-	-
Nov-19	In-Person Convening	Cohort Format & Members	In-Person Convening
Dec-19	-	In-Person Kick-off Meeting	-
Jan-20	Grant Reporting to IMLS	Define Your Mission	Reconnect & Moving Forward
Feb-20	Cohort Logic Model	Digital Inclusion & You	Learning in the 21st Century Library
Mar-20	Attracting, Selecting, Onboarding, & Engaging Volunteers	Define Your Success	Inquire & Explore - Transformational Teaching & Learning
ONSET OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC			
Apr-20	-	Building Your Toolbox w/ P2PU	Stakeholder Buy-In
May-20	Rapid Response Collecting	Re-Building Your Response w/ KCPL	Leading from the Library
Jun-20	Outcome Measures Made Easy	Building Momentum for Your Big Ideas	Personal Learning Networks
Jul-20	Digital Preservation	Building Better Program Materials w/ P2PU	Virtual Learning
Aug-20	Community Partnerships	Expanding Digital Inclusion in Your Community	New School Year, New Strategies
Sep-20	-	Building Your Program Sustainability	School Libraries Through an Equity Lens: Project READY
Oct-20	-	Sustainability & Capacity/ Grantee Reflections	Virtual Midpoint Convening
Nov-20	Meet Cohort 2	Grantee Reflections	-
Dec-20	-	Grantee Reflections	-
Jan-21	Developing Online Programs	When Small Libraries think BIG	Quality Matters
Feb-21	Midpoint Data Review	Strategies for Working w/ Stakeholders	Virtual Student Engagement: Strategies & Technologies
Mar-21	Exploring Audience & Engagement	-	Maker Learning; Making it Happen
Apr-21	Exploring Audience	Reflection!	Public Libraries as Partners in Learning
May-21	Projects Showcase	Working w/ Copyright	Sustainability & Stories: Looking Beyond the Grant Period
Jun-21	Projects Showcase	-	Sail Into Summer: Professional Development, Share Outs, Celebrations!

Month	Community Memory	Digital Inclusion	Transforming School Library Practice
Jul-21	Projects Showcase	Technology & Community	-
Aug-21	Closing Meeting	Sustainability Discussion & Wrap Up!	-
Sep-21	-	-	-
Oct-21	-	-	Virtual Final Convening
Total:	18	20	18

Cohort 2 - Table 4.2: Virtual Meeting Topics for Cohort 2

Month	Community Memory	Digital Inclusion	Transforming School Library Practice
Dec-20			Virtual Kick-Off Convening
Jan-21			-
Feb-21	Exploring Your Audience		The 21st Century Library – Shifting Perceptions
Mar-21	Staffing and Working with Staff		Student-Centered Virtual Engagement
Apr-21	Joint Cohort 1 & 2 Meeting Engagement with Community		Inquiry-Based Learning
May-21	Building Awareness of Your Project		Culturally Responsive Teaching
Jun-21	Evaluation Techniques	Web Junction 101	Professional Learning Opportunities
Jul-21	Project Updates	Define Your Mission Digital Inclusion & Equity	-
Aug-21	-	Metrics, Goals, & Evaluation	-
Sep-21	Project Showcase	Digital Inclusion with Northstar	-
Oct-21	Self-Directed Learning Experiences and Evaluation Update	Digital Inclusion Funding & Check In	Virtual Mid-Point Convening
Nov-21	Strategies for Engaging the Community	Tech, Community, & Evaluation	-
Dec-21	-	Social Hour	Peer Mentorship
Jan-22	Documentation of Workflow and Projects	Goal Setting & Omicron Impact	Makerspaces in the School Library
Feb-22	Digital Preservation	NTEN Conference (in person)	Creating a Culture of Reading
Mar-22	Measuring Success	-	Student Centered Programming
Apr-22	-	-	Crafting Your Story Part 1: Data and Evidence

Month	Community Memory	Digital Inclusion	Transforming School Library Practice
May-22	Getting Eyes on Your Project	-	Crafting Your Story Part 2: Connecting Evidence to the BIG IDEA
Jun-22	ALA Conference Preparation and Housekeeping; ALA Presentation: Accelerating Promising Practices: Innovative Ways to Meet Community Needs	Libraries & Grant Partnership Funding	Crafting Your Story Part 3 – Presenting Your Story
Jul-22	Project Spotlights	Grantee Presentations	-
Aug-22	Closing Session		Final Convening (in-person, Madison, WI)
Total Sessions	16	11	15

Appendix 5: Community of Practice - Specific Skills and Knowledge Gains

Community Memory participants in both cohorts increased all their community-memory skills (Chart 5.1). Cohort 1 had its biggest gain in having people with the right skills and experience in CM projects, a 0.7 Likert scale agreement score increase. This increase can also be explained in terms of percent change of libraries who *"Strongly Disagreed"* or *"Disagreed"* with the statement, to the percentage of libraries who *"Agreed"* or *"Strongly Agreed"*. 40% of libraries agreed at the start of the program, while 90% did at the end of the program, a 50% swing. Cohort 1 saw the smallest change (0.1) on the scale for the statement that they had enough people who could do community needs assessments or who had community engagement skills. This statement also had no change in the percentage who agreed.

Cohort 2 saw its greatest growth in having enough people with CM skills and experience, with 29% agreeing at the onset and 75% agreeing by the end, a 0.7 score increase. Cohort 2's smallest scale change was seen in having people with the right skills and experience in CM projects, with 71% of libraries agreeing at the onset and 80% agreeing by the end.

Chart 5.1: Community Memory - Specific Skills and Knowledge Gains

Statement	Cohort	Baseline	Endpoint
Our library has people with skills and experience in conducting community needs assessments.	Cohort 1	2.6	2.7
	Cohort 2	2.7	3.3
Our library has people with the right digital skills and experience to implement our desired CM projects.	Cohort 1	2.7	3.2
	Cohort 2	2.9	3.3
Our library has enough people with CM skills and experience to implement our desired CM projects.	Cohort 1	1.8	2.3
	Cohort 2	2.1	2.8
Our library has people with digital preservation plan and legacy plan development skills.	Cohort 1	2.1	2.8
	Cohort 2	2.4	3.0
Our library has people with skills and experience in community engagement.	Cohort 1	3.2	3.3
	Cohort 2	3.0	3.5
Our library has people with the right skills and experience in CM projects to implement our desired CM projects.	Cohort 1	2.4	3.1
	Cohort 2	2.7	3.0

Survey
● Baseline
■ Endpoint

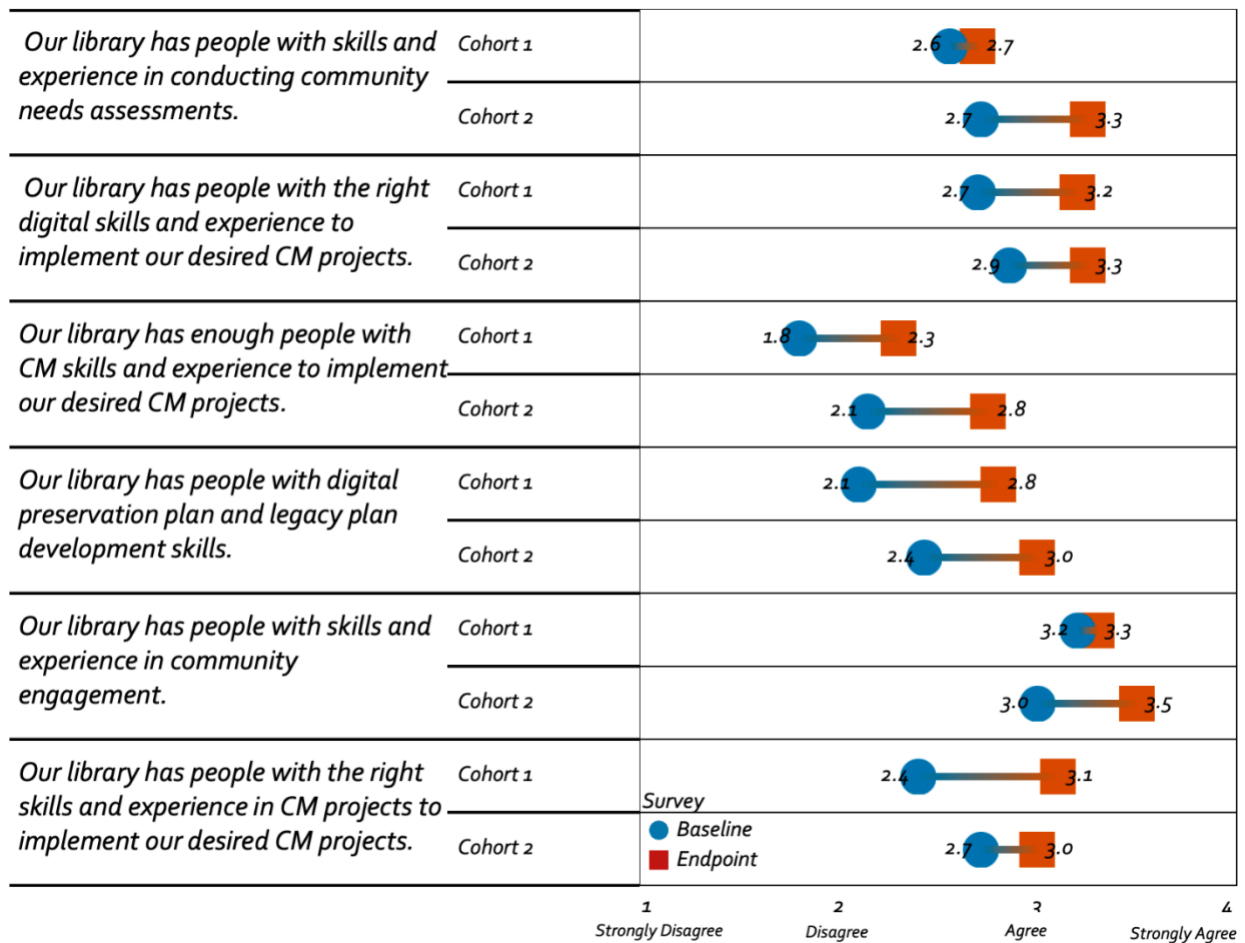1 Strongly Disagree — 2 Disagree — 3 Agree — 4 Strongly Agree

Chart notes:
- Program participants were asked on a 4-point Likert scale at beginning and endpoint surveys to rate the extent to which they agreed that they had project specific skills.

Cohort 1 Digital Inclusion participants increased all their digital inclusion skills, while Cohort 2 participants increased in all but one skills area (Chart 5.2). Both Cohorts saw the largest skill and knowledge increases in their libraries having connections with local organizations (an average of 1.0 points on the Likert scale across both Cohorts), from 55% of libraries agreeing at the beginning, to 80% of libraries agreeing by the end.

Both Cohorts also saw the smallest increase in agreement with the statement that they had physical infrastructure necessary to meet the community's internet access needs (an average of 0.4 points on the Likert scale across both Cohorts), with 62% agreeing at the onset to 75% by the end of the program.

Chart 5.2: Digital Inclusion - Specific Skills and Knowledge Gains

Our library has connections with local organizations and businesses that provide ongoing support for the digital needs of our community.	Cohort 1	2.5 — 3.3
	Cohort 2	1.5 — 3.0
Our library has enough people with digital skills and experience our desired DI projects.	Cohort 1	2.2 — 2.8
	Cohort 2	2.3 — 3.0
Our library has people with skills and experience needed to help community members access and appropriately use digital content.	Cohort 1	3.2 — 3.7
	Cohort 2	2.5 — 3.7
Our library has people with the right digital skills and experience to implement our desired DI projects.	Cohort 1	2.7 — 3.6
	Cohort 2	3.3 — 4.0
Our library has people with the skills and experience needed to help community members create digital content.	Cohort 1	2.7 — 3.3
	Cohort 2	2.5 — 3.3
Our library has the materials necessary to help community members develop appropriate levels of digital literacy.	Cohort 1	2.7 — 3.4
	Cohort 2	2.0 — 3.3
Our library has the physical infrastructure necessary to meet the community's internet access needs.	Cohort 1	2.8 — 3.3
	Cohort 2	3.0 3.0

Survey
● Baseline
■ Endpoint

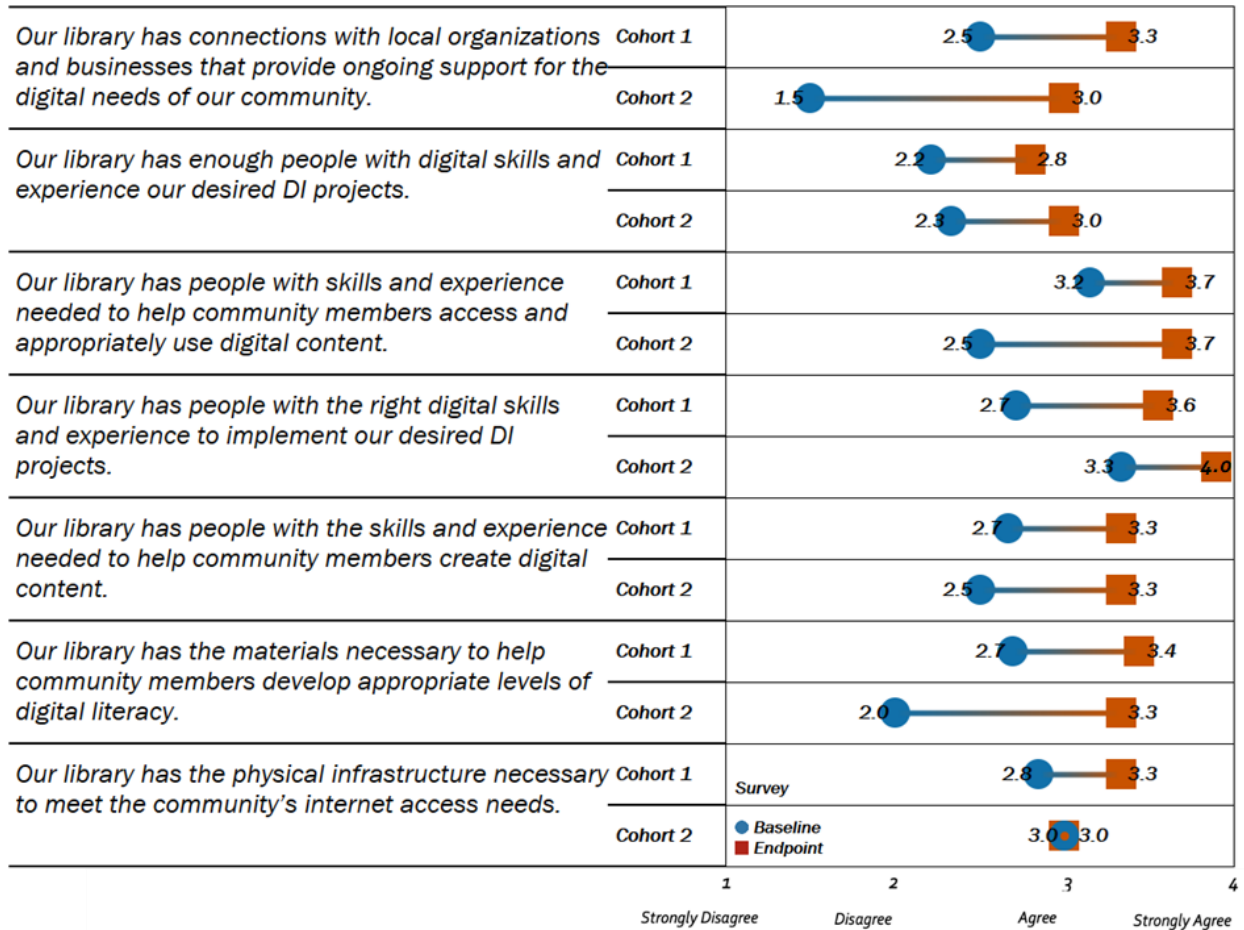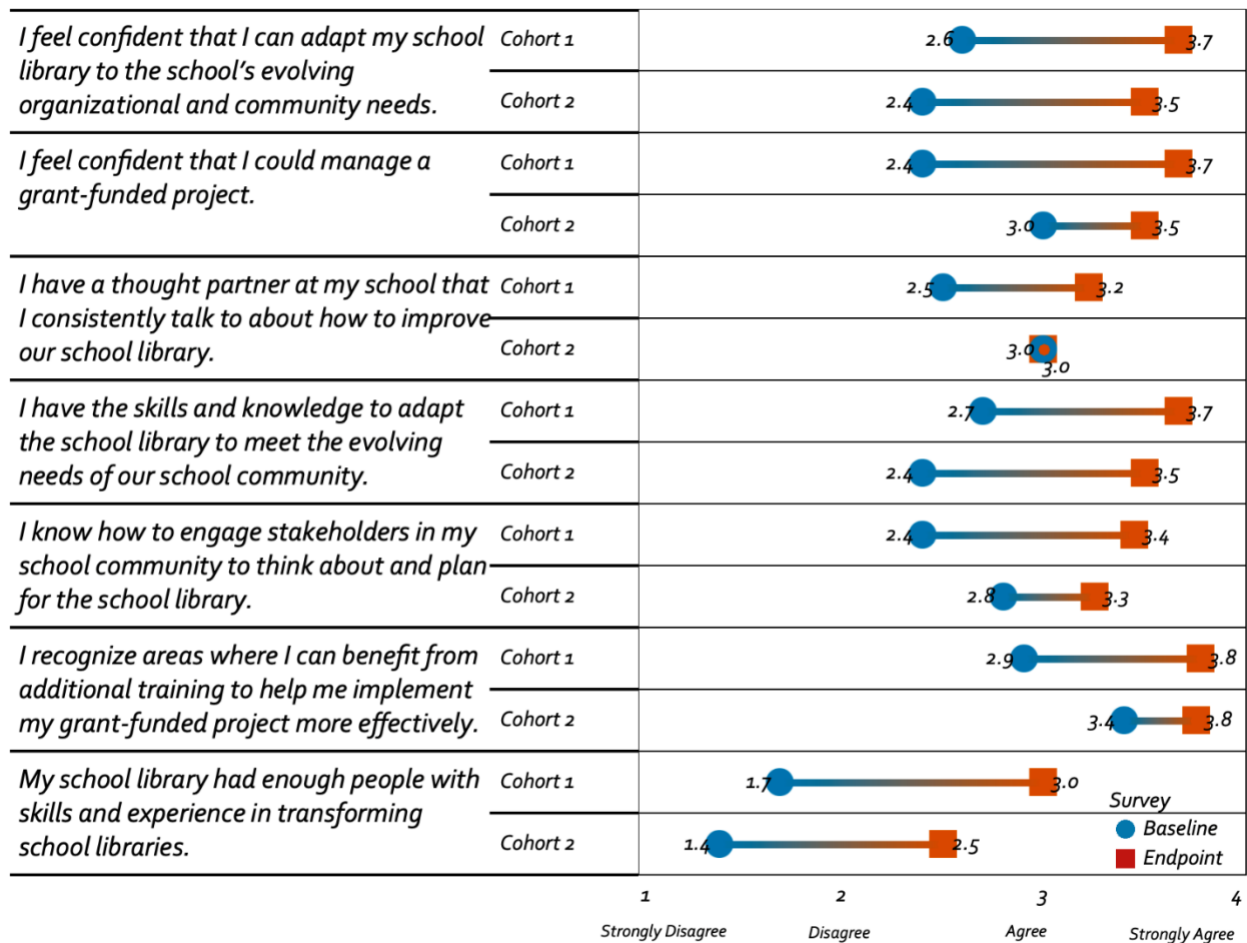1 — Strongly Disagree   2 — Disagree   3 — Agree   4 — Strongly Agree

Chart notes:
- Program participants were asked on a 4-point Likert scale at beginning and endpoint surveys to rate the extent to which they agreed that they had project specific skills.
- DI Cohort 1 had 10 participants, while Cohort 2 had 3. Individual scores from Cohort 2 participants had much greater effect on the Cohort 2 average scores.

Cohort 1 TSLP participants increased all their TSLP skills with the biggest gain seen in their confidence to manage a grant funded project, a 1.3 increase on the agreement scale. This was a 59% percent change, with 30% of libraries agreeing or strongly agreeing they had this confidence at the beginning of the program, to 89% at the end. Cohort 1 saw its smallest scale change in having a thought partner, 0.7 increase on the scale, with 50% agreeing at the onset to 56% at the end (Chart 5.3).

Cohort 2 saw increases in six of the seven skill areas. The largest increase was seen in having enough people with skills and experience in transforming school libraries, a 1.1 increase on the scale, with no programs feeling this way at the onset to 75% by the end. Cohort 2 saw no change on the scale in their agreement that they had a thought partner, 80% agreed at the onset, and 75% agreed at the end.

Chart 5.3: Transforming School Library Practice - Specific Skills and Knowledge Gains

Statement	Cohort	Baseline	Endpoint
I feel confident that I can adapt my school library to the school's evolving organizational and community needs.	Cohort 1	2.6	3.7
	Cohort 2	2.4	3.5
I feel confident that I could manage a grant-funded project.	Cohort 1	2.4	3.7
	Cohort 2	3.0	3.5
I have a thought partner at my school that I consistently talk to about how to improve our school library.	Cohort 1	2.5	3.2
	Cohort 2	3.0	3.0
I have the skills and knowledge to adapt the school library to meet the evolving needs of our school community.	Cohort 1	2.7	3.7
	Cohort 2	2.4	3.5
I know how to engage stakeholders in my school community to think about and plan for the school library.	Cohort 1	2.4	3.4
	Cohort 2	2.8	3.3
I recognize areas where I can benefit from additional training to help me implement my grant-funded project more effectively.	Cohort 1	2.9	3.8
	Cohort 2	3.4	3.8
My school library had enough people with skills and experience in transforming school libraries.	Cohort 1	1.7	3.0
	Cohort 2	1.4	2.5

Survey: Baseline (circle), Endpoint (square)

Scale: 1 Strongly Disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Agree, 4 Strongly Agree

Chart notes:

- Program participants were asked on a 4-point Likert scale at beginning and endpoint surveys to rate the extent to which they agreed that they had project specific skills.

Appendix 6: Case Studies by Community of Practice

The following case studies highlight findings specific to each Community of Practice.

APP Evaluation Case Study: Community Memory (CM)

At-a-Glance

Number of Libraries Participating	17 (10 in Cohort 1 and 7 in Cohort 2)
Capacity Building Interventions	In-person meetings, monthly virtual cohort meetings, planned curriculum/topics covered, 1:1 meetings, online portal, attendance at other library/field conferences
Mentor Organization	WiLS (formerly Wisconsin Library Services)
Participant Library Locations	

CM	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
CM	○	●
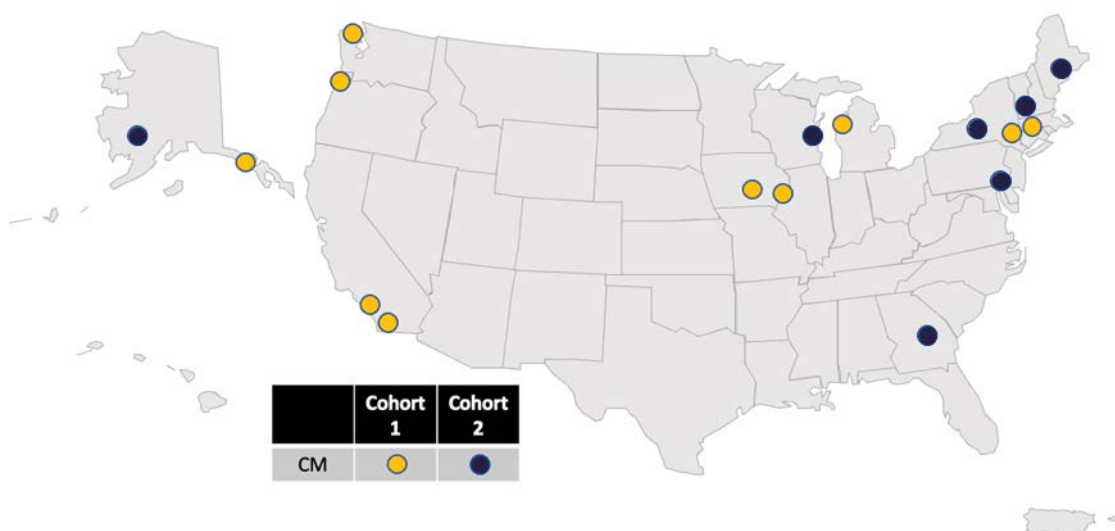
Description

The overarching aim of the Community Memory (CM) Community of Practice is to support the role libraries play as trusted stewards of their communities' knowledge, as well as build their ability to serve as spaces for community engagement and dialogue. Projects engage local communities in the collection, documentation, and preservation of their local histories, experiences, and identities. Libraries implemented projects that involved community members in digitization of historical documents and photos and in the collection of oral histories. These projects supported community cohesion by documenting and discussing important local issues. Participants were located in communities from Aniak, Alaska to Belfast, Maine. The mentor organization offered libraries assistance in activities tied to building community memory skills and organized cohort gatherings for grantees to share ideas and reflect on progress. Over the course of the two cohorts, there is evidence the program increased libraries' skills in preserving community memory while creating connections across libraries doing similar work.

Successes in Implementing the CM COP

- **Community Memory participants increased their confidence and skills in multiple areas related to designing and implementing community memory projects.** Participants reported gaining skills in community needs assessments, digital skills, digital preservation and legacy plan development, and community engagement. They also increased confidence to implement CM projects as their project planning and grant implementation skills grew alongside their technical skills.

- **Community Memory participants found value from working with their mentor organization for the encouragement, professional development, and project management support that they offered.** CM members appreciated the moral support that their mentor organizations provided as they implemented their projects as well as the fact that they helped them keep their projects on track. They were also the COP most likely to mention their appreciation for their mentors helping them to understand IMLS processes. Finally, they felt that they received high value professional development and were appreciative of their mentors' responsiveness to any questions and concerns they had.

- **Community Memory participants increased their connections with other libraries and found value from hearing from the other members of their cohort.** CM members talked about receiving value from their cohort members by hearing about their colleagues' own successes and challenges with their projects, getting moral support, and by getting advice including when Cohort 2 had the opportunity to interact with Cohort 1. As one member described, the cohort experience was valuable because it helped, "*see my own problem in a different way*." By the end of the program, both Cohorts were more likely to feel like they had other libraries to consult with, were part of a larger community of libraries, and were interacting more with other libraries working in Community Memory. One participant summed it up with "*It was nice to be connected with libraries across the country working on different projects. I followed all their libraries on social media… I always think – would something like this work for my community?*"

- **Community Memory participants also increased their ability to develop a plan to meet their communities' needs and to incorporate community perspectives and priorities.** A key element of the content discussed within the CM Community of Practice was community engagement (Appendix 4). Outside speakers were brought in on this topic and cohort members discussed successes and challenges of engaging their communities in their projects. While the COVID-19 pandemic greatly hindered some of the in-person plans that libraries had made for gathering community members, they were able to pivot their activities with the help of their mentor organizations. By the end of the program, CM participants felt that they had increased their skills in conducting community needs assessments and in engaging their communities. This was particularly true for CM's Cohort 2 (Chart 5.1).

Challenges in Implementing the CM COP

- **Community Memory participants were the least likely to have clear organizational support for sustaining their CM work beyond the project period.** When interviewed, many CM participants weren't sure if community memory work would be prioritized by their library's leadership in the future and even if the initial idea of it was encouraged. CM was the COP that was least likely to have secured or increased their libraries' funding for CM work by the end of the grant period. Over half of the libraries had been able to maintain their current level of funding with about a third seeing a decrease in funding for CM work.

- **Community Memory libraries were the most likely to experience a loss of full-time staff at their library between their entry into the program and the program's end.** About a third of CM libraries experienced a decrease in the number of full-time staff for their library.

- **COVID-19 affected Community Memory's ability to meet in-person and create inter-library connections.** The impact of the pandemic was felt differently among the Cohorts. Cohort 1 was able to meet in-person before the onset of the pandemic but required greater program flexibility and program reorganization to retool their program for a more virtual setting. Cohort 2 did not meet in-person for their kickoff and had their entire program virtually until a final, in-person convening. CM's mentor organization noted that the in-person kickoff meeting for Cohort 1 made a big difference in connecting that group. In their interviews, those in Cohort 1 mentioned feeling connected to other libraries more often than Cohort 2, as well as stronger feelings of connection. Members of Cohort 2 lamented the fact that they were not able to meet until the end of the program.

- **Community Memory Cohorts saw increases in different skillsets.** Cohort 1 increased their skills and experience more than Cohort 2 in project planning, as well as their skills and knowledge needed to implement their cohort-specific project. Cohort 2 built slightly more in engagement with the broader library field. An explanation for these differences is that the stronger cohort unity in Cohort 1 allowed for more sharing of information and support, leading to greater skill and experience increase in project planning and implementation. Cohort 2 built slightly more skills in engagement with the broader library field, but in interviews mentioned that they branched out through their own library systems, not through the cohort.

Learnings from the CM COP

- **The mentor and cohort model of the APP program both add value for small or rural librarians working in community memory.** CM participants from both cohorts attributed successes with their projects to working with their mentor organization and to being part of a cohort of grantees who were undertaking similar projects and going through similar experiences. As librarians in small or rural areas, CM participants often lack opportunities to collaborate with other librarians that face the same challenges as them or to engage in professional development opportunities such as those afforded to them in the IMLS grant and provided by their mentor organization and the conferences they attended.

- **Community memory is an area that may need more advocacy training and/or support to obtain continued local library and community support**. While CM participants generally felt like they had leadership support throughout their IMLS-funded project period, they were unsure if there would be continued funding or staffing to continue the work after the project ended. Additionally, many participants were trying to figure out how to engage their communities more in the products (digital collection or oral histories) that they had created through their projects. It appears more advocacy of the importance of community memory may be needed with local libraries and communities in order for it to continue to be prioritized. This may be an area to be built into future programs or with additional types of support for small and rural libraries working to preserve their local histories, experiences, and identities.

APP Evaluation Case Study: Digital Inclusion (DI)

At-a-Glance

Number of Libraries Participating	13 (10 in Cohort 1 and 3 in Cohort 2)
Capacity Building Interventions	In-person meetings, monthly virtual cohort meetings, planned curriculum/topics covered, 1:1 meetings, online portal, attendance at other library/field conferences
Mentor Organization	Kansas City Public Library (KCPL)
Participant Library Locations	

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
DI	▲	△
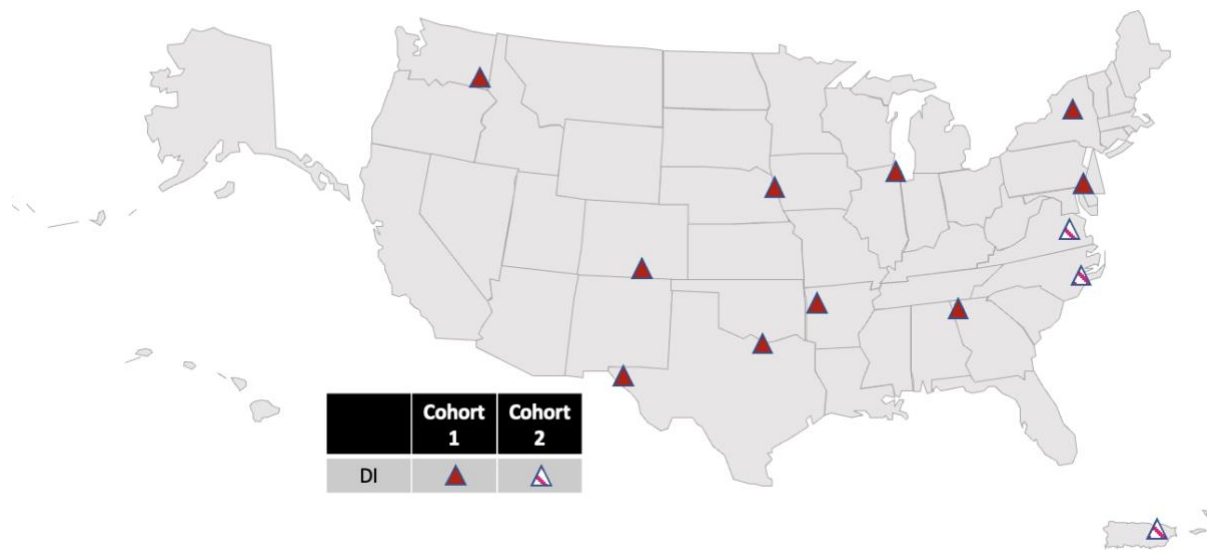
Description

IMLS defines Digital Inclusion as the ability of individuals and groups to access and use information and communications technologies. This Community of Practice was created to provide support to small and rural libraries that in turn were providing programming to their communities to address gaps in access to and understanding of the digital environment. In addition to funding support for projects implemented by individual libraries, IMLS funded a capacity-building, mentoring model, provided by the Kansas City Public Library (KCPL). This support was provided to two cohorts, the first consisting of ten libraries and the second comprising three, and was made up of a kick-off meeting, a series of virtual cohort meetings, sharing of resources via a digital portal, intra-cohort communication on the same portal, and provision of one-on-one coaching by KCPL. Across the two cohorts, there is evidence that grantees experienced improved capacity to both support DI programming and developed stronger connections with the larger library community. However, the experience of the grantees between the two cohorts was significantly different.

Successes in Implementing the DI COP

- **The majority of the DI participants in both cohorts increased their capacity to support digital inclusion work.** While Cohort 1 saw more wide-spread and larger gains across most of the measures of capacity, most of the grantees from both cohorts reported meaningful increases in their capacity across measures such as:
  - Knowledge of project planning, implementation, and management
  - Skills to implement their programming (e.g., digital skills)
  - Confidence and ability in implementing a DI project
  - Ability to incorporate the community's needs and views in creating, planning, and implementing projects, such as how to best help community members to access, use, and create digital content; and helping community members develop digital literacy skills

- **DI participants reported increasing their participation in the broader library field, their connections with local organizations and businesses, and gained materials to help them improve digital literacy in their communities.**

- **DI participants found value from working with their mentor organization for the knowledge and experience, moral support, and professional development that they offered.** DI members appreciated the knowledge and experience that their mentor organization brought which was shared through best practices, connections to other libraries doing similar work, and by helping keep the DI projects on track. DI members also saw them as good sources of moral support and as good professional development providers. These perspectives were much more prevalent in Cohort 1.

- **DI participants found value from being part of a cohort by hearing from the other members of their cohort.** DI members talked about receiving value from their cohort members by hearing about their colleagues' own successes and challenges with their projects, getting moral support, and by getting advice from the group. This interaction was described as valuable because the sharing, "*helped me think things through*" and "*gave me ideas on how to move forward.*"

- **DI participants were often able to increase their libraries' funding for DI work.** By the end of the grant period, over half of DI libraries were able to increase their libraries' DI designated funds for continuing the project after the grant ended.

- **DI was the COP least likely to need no-cost extensions for their grants.** Only four of the 13 libraries across the two cohorts needed additional time to finish their projects. Some DI members felt that, while challenging, the pandemic had helped them gain support for their DI work. They reported increases in understanding and getting access to the internet in their communities due to the in-person limitations created by local government responses to the pandemic. Some participants saw an increase in the number of community members coming to their libraries to receive training to improve their ability to use the internet.

Challenges in Implementing the DI COP

- **Digital Inclusion's Cohort 2 struggled most of all the cohorts in realizing benefits from the mentor-cohort capacity-building model.** DI Cohort 2 participants were less likely to find value in working with a mentor organization or being a part of a cohort. This appears to have been tied to group size, diversity of project topics and library types, some staff turnover at the mentor organization, incoming capacity levels, and unclear expectations for the cohort experience. DI's Cohort 1 consisted of ten libraries while Cohort 2 had three and these three libraries came in from the outset of the grant feeling more confident in their DI project experience. When asked about their experience, all Cohort 2 libraries spoke to challenges in finding commonalities with the other libraries in their cohort, exacerbated by the libraries not being similar in type – a mix of academic and public libraries. It was also difficult for the mentor organization to provide virtual cohort meetings that met all their needs, given the broad disparities in the types of libraries, their communities, and programs they were working to implement.

- **Cohort kick-offs were less valuable when held virtually versus in-person.** Cohort 1 had the opportunity to meet in-person prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cohort 2 was not afforded that opportunity given travel and meeting restrictions. When asked about their relative experiences, Cohort 2 participants indicated that they did not feel like they got to know their peers very well and rated the experience lower than Cohort 1. Conversely, Cohort 1 specifically spoke about the opportunity to get to know each other as being highly valuable and indicated that this had longer-term impacts on their comfort with sharing questions and thoughts with the rest of their peers.

- **Digital Inclusion's Cohort 2 did not see increases in their ability to have a clear plan to meet community needs or to create programs and services to meet emerging community needs.** While the Cohort members indicated that they felt they already had programs and services that reflected the emerging needs of their communities (rating as a 3 out of 4 – or agree they are meeting the needs), they also shared that they didn't have a plan for how they could continually implement projects that meet the communities' needs (rating as 2.3 out of 4 – or disagree that they have a plan).

- **DI participants weren't clear as to what their participation in their capacity building work would entail.** While all the participants applied for and received funding to support their programmatic work and as such had a good sense of what their efforts to support the programming would entail, they were not clear as to how much effort they would need to put into their own capacity building. Most of the grantees shared that they wished they had more clarity around what was expected of them at the beginning, with Cohort 2 being more heavily challenged by the lack of expectations than Cohort 1.

Learnings from the DI COP

- **The mentor and cohort model of the APP program both add value for small and rural librarians working to address gaps in their communities' access to and understanding of the digital environment.** The structure and content of the program allowed participating libraries to build their confidence and skills

in DI work, to engage with others doing this work, and to represent the work in ways that allowed them to build relationships with other businesses and organizations within their community. Much of this was due to the need to form these relationships to complete their project work, but most of Cohort 1 also indicated that the success of their project efforts also resulted in increased ties to the community.

- **Differences in the structure and make-up of the two DI cohorts suggest elements to pay attention to when designing future mentor and cohort model programs.** While participants in both DI cohorts achieved positive outcomes, the experiences were drastically different between Cohort 1 and Cohort 2. Variability across the cohorts, in terms of cohort size, library types, mentor organization points of contact, and level of incoming DI experience may have contributed to these differences. Cohort 1 was larger than Cohort 2, was able to meet in-person at the outset of the program and may have been comprised of members that were more eager to engage in capacity-building. Knowing these variables potentially contributed to differential experiences and outcomes can inform the design or implementation of future grant programs.

- **Local response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of and increased community members' interest in increasing their access to the internet.** Libraries in both cohorts shared that they saw a significant increase in understanding and getting access to the internet in their communities due to the in-person limitations created by local government responses to the pandemic. Many grantees indicated that there was an increase in the number of community members coming to their libraries to receive training to improve their ability to use the internet. This ranged from training in basic computer skills, to learning how to complete forms and run applications on the internet. Those libraries who had created access points to the internet in the form of wireless routers saw significant increases in community use of their access points.

APP Evaluation Case Study:

Transforming School Library Practice (TSLP)
At-a-Glance

Number of Libraries Participating	15 (10 in Cohort 1 and 5 in Cohort 2)
Capacity Building Interventions	In-person meetings, monthly virtual cohort meetings, planned curriculum/topics covered, 1:1 meetings, online portal, pairing of grantees with school thought partners[12]
Mentor Organization	OCLC
Participant Library Locations	

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
TSLP	■	⧄
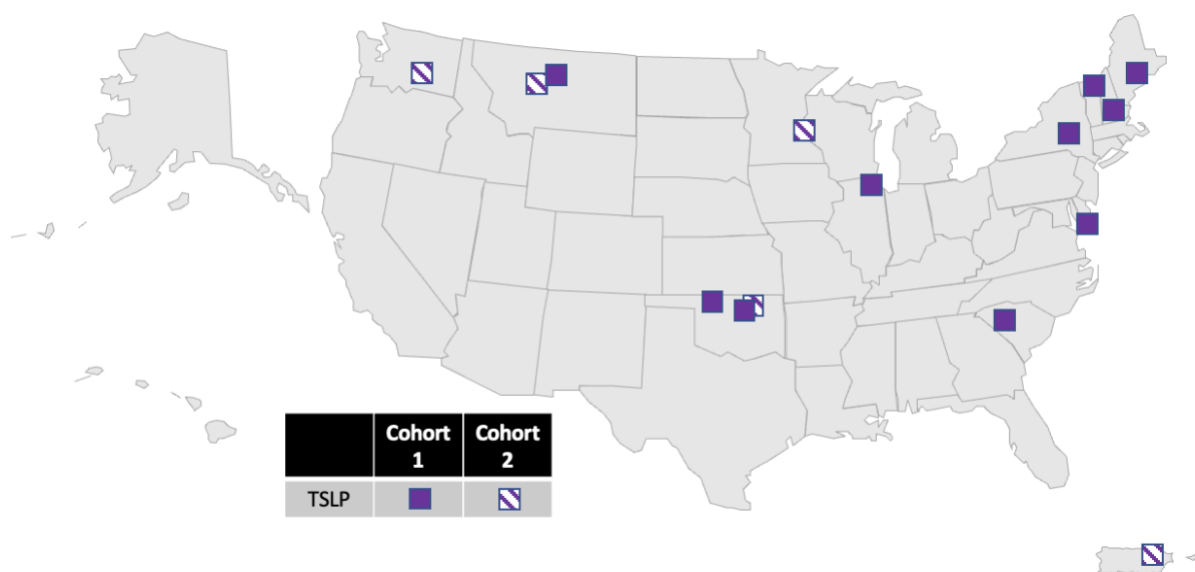
Description

The Transforming School Library Practice (TSLP) Community of Practice supported grantees in implementing projects intended to help school libraries shift from transactional approaches toward ones where school libraries serve as dynamic hubs for self-directed, inquiry-based learning, and to position school library professionals as integral instructional partners to classroom teachers. Each cohort was brought together as a community of practice and was led by mentor organization, OCLC.

There is evidence that participants had positive experiences in the TSLP COP, made significant progress on their IMLS-funded projects, and achieved positive outcomes in terms of growth in knowledge, skills, and confidence, as well as connections within the larger library community. Participants in Cohort 1, however, outpaced Cohort 2 counterparts in some outcome areas, which

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[12] Not all participating libraries had thought partners.

may have been influenced by differences in cohort size or by the timing of program elements in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Successes in Implementing the TSLP COP

- **TSLP participants increased their confidence and skills in multiple areas related to designing and implementing projects to transform school libraries.** Participants reported gaining knowledge, confidence and skills in being able to adapt to their schools' emerging needs, managing a grant-funded project, and engaging with other school stakeholders and thought partners.

- **Participants found great benefit from working with a mentor organization.** TSLP participants described their mentors as knowledgeable, supportive, responsive, and resourceful. They appreciated the accountability that came with regularly meeting with and providing updates to the mentors and their cohort as well as the professional development opportunities and connections these meetings provided. They also found the mentors' guidance on their projects and on managing a federal grant to be helpful, helping to keep them "on track" with their project objectives.

- **Participants felt that being part of a cohort was a valuable element of their APP grant experience.** Many participants described feeling isolated as rural school librarians, without a community of similar colleagues with whom to collaborate or share experiences. The cohort model of the APP program provided participants with this community. Participants were able to bounce ideas off other members of their cohort, and, importantly, they benefitted from hearing about one another's projects and the challenges others in their cohort were facing. One participant offered this assessment of the cohort model: "*When it comes to school library grants, there should be, at least in some cases, a cohort like this… It's been really beneficial in the school library sense. Especially rural school libraries – we're so isolated. [The cohort model] helps us get the access and support we need.*"

- **TSLP participants physically transformed their library spaces and increased the presence and usefulness of their libraries within their schools.** Several participants described transforming their libraries into more engaging spaces. In some cases, participants created spaces that were more welcoming, with new furniture, fresh paint, and updated book collections. In other cases, participants developed maker spaces in their libraries and introduced programming to implement in these spaces. Across the board, participants shared that the transformed spaces were attracting more users, that teachers and students were shifting their conceptualization of what a library could be, and that they were "raising the profile of the library." One participant said, "*I think it has increased awareness of what actually happens in the library and what our role can and should be.*"

- **TSLP participants were often able to increase their libraries' funding for future TSLP work.** By the end of the grant period, over half of the participating libraries were able to increase their libraries' TSLP-designated funds.

Challenges in Implementing the TSLP COP

- **Cohort 2 was unable to meet in person at the beginning of their program, which may have contributed to a less rich community experience.** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Cohort 2 was unable to gather in-person until their final convening. Cohort 1, on the other hand, came together for a kick-off meeting at the beginning of their program. Many Cohort 1 participants spoke of the importance of meeting their fellow cohort grantees in-person and getting to know them at the outset, attributing that in-person meeting with helping them to build relationships, community, and comfort with one another that facilitated their positive interactions throughout the program. Cohort 2 also reflected positively on the cohort model; however, they spoke of their cohort more as a group of people going through a similar experience than as a community. One Cohort 2 participant shared that they likely would have felt more a part of a learning community with their cohort if they had had the opportunity to meet one another in-person.

- **Participants in Cohort 1 saw greater gains in their connection to other librarians working to transform school library practices.** Compared to how they felt at the beginning of the APP program, Cohort 1 participants were more likely at the end of the program to feel that they regularly interacted with and learned from other librarians working on TSLP projects. Cohort 2 participants also saw improvement in this area, but their improvement was smaller than Cohort 1's. While we are unable to confidently attribute this difference to any aspect of the program, the TSLP mentors suggested that differences in cohort size, ability to meet in-person at the beginning of the program, and personality of participants may have all been contributing factors.

- **TSLP participants were the least likely to have clear community support (outside of their schools) for sustaining their TSLP work beyond the project period.** When interviewed, many TSLP participants felt they hadn't yet been able to fully engage parents and other community partners in their projects and this was largely due to pandemic restrictions on bringing outside people into the schools. Many of them, however, were working on ways to engage their communities more in their new library programs and uses.

Learnings from the TSLP COP

- **The mentor and cohort model of the APP program both add value for school librarians in small or rural communities.** TSLP participants from both cohorts attributed successes with their projects to working with their mentor organization and to being part of a cohort of grantees who were undertaking similar projects and going through similar experiences. As school librarians in small or rural districts, TSLP participants often lack opportunities to collaborate with other school librarians or to engage in professional development opportunities such as those provided by their mentor organization.

- **Differences in the structure and make-up of the two TSLP cohorts suggest elements to pay attention to in future mentor and cohort model programs.** While participants in both TSLP cohorts had positive experiences and achieved positive outcomes, some changes were stronger for Cohort 1 than for Cohort 2. Variability across the cohorts, in terms of meeting structure, cohort size, and cohort personality may have contributed to these differences. Cohort 1 was larger than Cohort 2, was able to meet in-person at the outset of the program and may have been comprised of more outgoing members. IMLS cannot control the circumstances that led to the lack of a Cohort 2 in-person meeting (the COVID-19 pandemic), and it may not be able to or wish to select grantees based on personality. However, knowing that these variables potentially contributed to differential experiences and outcomes could inform the design or implementation of future grant programs. For instance, IMLS could advise mentors working with a cohort of grantees that differences in participants' personalities or their comfort speaking up and sharing in a group may impact their engagement in group meetings and activities. With that knowledge in mind, the mentors may build flexibility into their plans for participant engagement, so they are prepared to make adjustments based on the participants' personalities.

Case Studies

March 2023

The Community Memory Community of Practice built skills and connected participant librarians and their libraries.

The Community Memory (CM) Community of Practice (CoP) supported the role libraries play as trusted stewards of their communities' knowledge and built their ability to serve as spaces for engagement and dialogue. The Accelerating Promising Practices for Small and Rural Libraries Program (APP), an initiative funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), awarded grants for CM libraries to complete projects that engaged local communities in the collection, documentation, and preservation of their local histories, experiences, and identities. Participants were located in communities from Aniak, Alaska to Belfast, Maine. WiLS, the mentor organization, offered libraries assistance in building community memory skills and organized cohort gatherings for grantees to share ideas and reflect on progress.

Community Memory CoP — At-a-Glance

Format	Capacity support for small and rural libraries focused on peer and mentor relationships
Time span	Cohort 1: October 2019 – October 2021 Cohort 2: December 2020 – August 2022
Participants	Cohort 1: 10 Libraries Cohort 2: 7 Libraries
Mentor Organization	WiLS (formerly Wisconsin Library Services)
Primary Interventions from Mentors	1:1 meetings In-person meetings Webinars and virtual meetings Curriculum Online portal

How **effective** were **program interventions for CM participants?**

Monthly cohort meetings helped those new at implementing CM address areas of uncertainty.

Through the meetings, participants discussed multiple areas of their CM projects where they had questions on issues such as digital archiving technologies and processes, managing interview transcriptions, project management, and community engagement, outreach and marketing for oral history and digitization projects.   The mentor organization asked CM participants for their input on what they wanted to cover in the sessions, which made the topics selected more relevant. CM participants found it particularly useful when outside speakers or resources were brought in, and when they had the opportunity to learn from other CM participants. In the future, they would like to learn more about selecting online platforms for virtual engagement, metadata, and overcoming obstacles in community engagement.

87%
of CM participants described their monthly meetings as "effective" or "very effective"

CM participants highly valued the guidance of their mentors in helping them adapt their project plans when both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19-related complications arose.

CM participants spoke about working with their mentor organizations and using them as a "sounding board" when complications within their projects arose. The mentors' guidance helped them to pivot when their projects weren't going according to plan. The pandemic caused further disruption to the plans CM participants had for

100%
of CM participants found the mentor organization to be valuable to their CM work

engaging their communities in oral history interviews or digitization projects. All of the CM participants found their mentor organization helpful in navigating those challenges.

What **impacts** did the program have?

Libraries' ability to implement CM projects improved.
The APP program improved libraries' skills in implementing CM projects by improving digital and community engagement efforts by the people at the library. Participants felt more comfortable creating CM projects that met their communities' needs and incorporated their priorities and perspectives. By the end of the program, most CM participants felt confident in their ability to continue CM work.

93%
of CM libraries indicated they are confident in implementing CM projects

CM libraries felt more connected to other libraries.
By the end of the APP program, all CME libraries indicated they felt part of a larger learning community. 92% of CM libraries agreed that they had other libraries that they could consult with, up from 18% at the onset of the program. A similar increase was seen in libraries' ability to regularly learn from other libraries working on CM projects (up from 6% to 92%). Exchanging ideas with their peers was one of the biggest values to CM participants of being a part of a cohort, however, there was no strong evidence to support that those connections would endure post-program. This is possibly due to the fact that each cohort only met in person once during the two-year period due to COVID-19 restrictions.

100%
of CM libraries indicated they feel part of a larger learning community

CM participants established foundations for designing and implementing CM projects for their libraries, although questions remained about how much those projects would be prioritized in the future.
By the end of the APP program, participating libraries were able to obtain oral history and digitization equipment, set up trainings and processes for future activities, and have digital archive or oral history collections for their communities. Some libraries also felt pride in helping tell the stories of their community and in establishing a bigger role for their library within their community. When interviewed, many CM participants weren't sure if community memory work would be prioritized by their library's leadership in the future, even if the initial idea of it was encouraged. CM was the CoP that was least likely to have secured or increased their libraries' funding for continued CM work by the end of the grant period, indicating more work may need to be done to establish buy-in for CM work by library leadership and funders.

What did we **learn** from the APP?

The mentor and cohort model of the APP program adds value for small or rural librarians working in community memory.
CM participants from both cohorts attributed successes with their projects to working with their mentor organization and to being part of a cohort of grantees who were undertaking similar projects and going through similar experiences. The peer-sharing component with mentors and cohorts built libraries' digital skills, community engagement capabilities, and confidence. As librarians in small or rural areas, CM participants often lack opportunities to collaborate with other librarians that face the same challenges as they do or to engage in professional development opportunities such as those afforded to them in the IMLS grant and provided by their mentor organizations.

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The Digital Inclusion Community of Practice positively impacted participant librarians and their libraries.

The Digital Inclusion (DI) Community of Practice (CoP) supported the role libraries play in addressing the gaps in access to and understanding of the digital environment. Projects funded in the IMLS' Accelerating Promising Practices for Small and Rural Libraries (APP) grant program included efforts to provide access to the Internet as well as educational programming for members of the communities served by the small and/or rural libraries. Participants were primarily in the eastern and mid-western states.

Kansas City Public Library, the IMLS-designated mentor organization, offered libraries assistance in refining their programming, engaging with their communities and partner organizations, and organized cohort gatherings for grantees to share ideas and reflect on progress.

Digital Inclusion CoP — At-a-Glance

Format	Capacity support for small and rural libraries focused on digital inclusion for community members
Time span	Cohort 1: November 2019 – August 2021 Cohort 2: June 2021 – July 2022
Participants	Cohort 1: 10 Libraries Cohort 2: 3 Libraries
Mentor Organization	Kansas City Public Library (KCPL)
Primary Interventions from Mentors	1:1 meetings In-person meetings Webinars and virtual meetings Curriculum Online portal

How **effective** were **program interventions for DI participants**?

Most DI participants deeply valued being part of a cohort.

Whether through formal presentations and subsequent question and answer periods, conversations held through the online peer discussion portal, or other informal conversations among their peers, the DI program participants found the sharing of ideas, progress, and challenges on their projects to be extremely valuable. Many indicated that they learned more from those conversations than they did from the prescribed webinar sessions – often due to the fact that peer sharing helped further demonstrate how webinar-generated ideas could actually be implemented. Additionally, those who found their libraries and programs significantly affected by the pandemic were able to rely on their peers for suggestions and found personal support from other members of their cohort. They sensed that they weren't facing their challenges alone, but rather as a group.

Many DI participants valued the connections and resources provided by their mentor organization.

DI participants appreciated the access to resources, individuals, and organizations introduced to them by their mentor organization. The mentor organization served to

82%
of participants described their cohort as "valuable" or "very valuable"

75%
of participants described their mentor organizations as "valuable" or "very valuable"

connect the cohort members to the thought leaders and doers in the digital inclusion field, broadening their horizons beyond networking with other small regional libraries.

What **impacts** did the program have?

DI libraries increased their capacity to support digital inclusion work.

The APP program improved libraries' capacity to plan and implement digital inclusion work through webinar instruction, access to educational resources, and peer learning. By the end of the program, 92% shared they knew about available resources and tools for implementing DI projects, an increase of 38% from the beginning of the program. The percentage of participants who indicated that they had a clear plan for how they could continually implement projects that met the community's needs also increased, from 61% to 83%.

DI libraries increased their connection to the broader library field.

By the end of the APP program, 92% of DI libraries agreed that they had other peer libraries that they could consult with, up from 38% at the onset of the program. Similarly, at the end of the program, 100% of the libraries indicated that they felt they were part of a larger community of libraries working on digital inclusion. Following the program, 92% indicated that they participated in relevant associations, listservs, and events.

Many DI participants were able to increase support for DI work.

By the end of the APP program, 56% of the participating libraries were able to increase their libraries' designated funds to support their digital inclusion work. Sixty-three percent found an increase in community support through greater volunteer involvement with their projects. Participants also were able to leverage sustained support throughout the project from organizational partners with regional library agencies, county jails, and broadband companies.

92%
of Digital Inclusion libraries indicated they are confident in implementing DI projects

92%
of Digital Inclusion libraries indicated they regularly interact with other libraries working in Digital Inclusion

What did we learn from the APP?

The mentor and cohort model of the APP program added significant value to the librarians in the program.

The structure of the program, combined with the content shared within it, enabled the participating librarians to grow their confidence and skills in digital inclusion work. The program provided librarians the resources and support needed not only to engage in their own project work, but also to learn from peers and consider other digital inclusion work that they would otherwise not have considered designing and implementing.

The size and composition of cohorts could significantly affect the experience and success of capacity-building efforts.

Cohorts 1 and 2 differed significantly. Cohort 1 was larger, had more senior staff representatives, had a higher chance of finding commonalities among the larger group, and was able to meet in person at the project kick-off. Cohort 1 also reported a better experience with the program. Recognizing that those conditions potentially contributed to the cohort's different experiences and outcomes can inform the design or implementation of future capacity-building grant programs.

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The Transforming School Library Practice (TSLP) Community of Practice (CoP) supported grantees in implementing projects intended to help school libraries shift toward dynamic hubs for self-directed, inquiry-based learning, and to position school library professionals as integral partners to classroom teachers. The TSLP CoP was one of three CoPs funded by IMLS as part of the Accelerating Promising Practices for Small and Rural Libraries (APP) program, a cohort and mentor model capacity-building grant program aimed at strengthening the ability of small and rural libraries and archives to serve their communities. TSLP participants represented 15 libraries from small or rural schools or school districts across 11 U.S. states and Puerto Rico. Highlights from a multi-year program evaluation conducted by TCC Group are presented here.

TSLP CoP — At-a-Glance

Format	Capacity support for small and rural libraries focused on peer and mentor relationships
Time span	Cohort 1: October 2019 – October 2021 Cohort 2: December 2020 – August 2022
Participants	Cohort 1: 10 Libraries Cohort 2: 5 Libraries
Mentor Organization	OCLC
Primary Interventions from Mentors	1:1 meetings In-person meetings Webinars and virtual meetings Curriculum Online portal School thought partners

How effective were program interventions for TSLP participants?

TSLP participants valued the sense of community they felt with their fellow cohort members.

Many participants described feeling isolated as rural school librarians, without a community of similar colleagues with whom to collaborate or share experiences. The cohort model of the APP program provided participants the opportunity to bounce ideas off other members of their cohort, and, importantly, they benefitted from hearing about each other's projects and the challenges others in their cohort were facing. One participant offered this assessment of the cohort model: *"When it comes to school library grants, there should be, at least in some cases, a cohort like this... It's been really beneficial in the school library sense. Especially rural school libraries – we're so isolated. [The cohort model] helps us get the access and support we need."*

TSLP participants benefitted from the guidance and accountability their mentors provided.

TSLP participants described their mentors as knowledgeable, supportive, responsive, and resourceful. They appreciated the accountability that came with regularly meeting with and providing updates to the mentors and their cohort and the professional development opportunities and connections provided. They also found the mentors' guidance on their projects and on managing a federal grant to be helpful with keeping them "on track" with their project objectives.

TSLP participants who had active thought partners found value in the relationship.

Eight of the 15 TSLP participants had a designated thought partner from their school that was consistently engaged in their project. Those participants spoke positively of their partners as people they could bounce ideas off, or who brought a different and complementary perspective or expertise than their own. However, seven participants either

didn't have a thought partner or had a thought partner that was too busy to participate in a meaningful way. In those cases, the pairing did not add value to the project or the APP participant's experience.

What **impacts** did the program have?

TSLP participants increased their confidence and skills related to designing and implementing projects to transform school libraries.

Participants reported gaining confidence and skills needed to manage a grant-funded project, engage with other school stakeholders and thought partners, and adapt their libraries to meet their schools' emerging needs. At the outset of the program, 53% of surveyed participants indicated they were confident adapting their libraries to meet their schools' emerging needs and 60% reported having the skills to do so. At the end of the program, both of those percentages had increased to 93%. Similarly, before participating in the TSLP program, 67% of surveyed participants felt confident in managing a grant-funded project and 47% indicated they had the skills or knowledge to do so. At the conclusion of the program, those percentages also increased to 93%.

93%
of TSLP participants indicated they have **confidence** to transform their school libraries

TSLP participants physically transformed their library spaces and increased the presence and usefulness of their libraries within their schools.

Several participants described transforming their libraries into more engaging spaces. In some cases, participants created spaces that were more welcoming, with new furniture, fresh paint, and updated book collections. In other cases, participants developed maker spaces in their libraries and programming to implement in them. Across the board, participants shared that the transformed spaces were attracting more users, that teachers and students were shifting their conceptualization of how they envisioned the library, and that they were "raising the profile of the library." One participant shared, "*I think it has increased awareness of what actually happens in the library and what our role can and should be.*"

93%
of TSLP participants indicated they have **knowledge and skills** to transform their school libraries

What did we learn from the TSLP CoP?

Both the mentor and cohort elements of the TSLP program design added value for school librarians in small or rural communities.

TSLP participants from both cohorts attributed successes with their projects to working with their mentor organization and to being part of a cohort of grantees who were undertaking similar projects and going through similar experiences. As school librarians in small or rural districts, TSLP participants often lack opportunities to collaborate with other school librarians or to engage in professional development opportunities. The program provided such opportunities.

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