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IMLS, COSLA Launch “Measures That Matter”

by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

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The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the Chief Offices of State Library Agencies (COSLA) recently announced a project called “Measures that Matter,” with the aim of evaluating data collection by public libraries in the United States. This project will survey the current state of public library data, assessing current strengths and weaknesses and formulating a plan for future action. Measures that Matter came into being because, while public libraries collect a vast amount of data each year concerning infrastructure, resources, and impact, there is very little coordination between libraries in order to share this wealth of information. Disorganized data collection can also create duplicated efforts and an additional burden for public librarians that already have considerable responsibilities on their plates. This collaborative effort between IMLS and COSLA, it is hoped, will create a framework in which libraries can effectively gather data and put it to use. Vailey Oehlke, director of Multnomah County Library, OR, told *LJ* that she feels “frustrated by the current landscape” of disorganized data collection among public libraries, but that COSLA and IMLS seem to have listened to and acknowledge her concerns and those of other librarians. Outdated or disorganized data can handicap library professionals seeking to demonstrate the value and impact of libraries. “For someone like a library director who is having to advocate on behalf of their organization for funding purposes and relevancy purposes, having data that is two years outdated isn’t fairly compelling,” she explained.



SEEKING A NARRATIVE

According to Maura Marx, IMLS deputy director for library services, in its current state library “data wasn’t telling the whole narrative” of “the impact that public libraries are having on peoples’ lives in so many areas.” As IMLS began engaging in preliminary conversations about public library data collection, it also uncovered immense fatigue among librarians tasked with gathering and making sense of voluminous data, Marx explained, with librarians finding that the survey data they exerted so much effort collecting was not put any real use by library administrators. There was a frequent mention of the need for “better data, richer data.” “On a very practical level, we don’t want people to be dismayed” with data results, said COSLA executive director Tim Cherubini, who also noted that data fatigue can impact participation levels and quality of the data. Cherubini described library data as an “untapped” resource. “Our data is quite powerful for telling the library story,” he said. It could be “powerful in context, or if we...could look at it with

other data from schools or from other state agencies. If we have our house in order and have good plans and solid ways of storing and maintaining and making the data available, we can increase our standing” when lobbying for adequate library funding and communicate the vital impact of public libraries. Measures that Matter is meant to be a truly collaborative undertaking. By “bringing together all the stakeholders...with a great deal of care, we can kind of map out the landscape,” Marx said. “We can work together as a national community to update things in a thoughtful way.” The partnership with COSLA came about because, Marx explained, “COSLA is a unique organization in that it has a relationship with every type of library. We saw that they have the capacity to pull the community together.”

HUNTING AND GATHERING

The project, conceived as a year-long undertaking, will have three phases. The first is data mapping—determining who is asking for data, what is being asked for, where libraries overlap, and whether there are any gaps. IMLS and COSLA are also in the process of putting together a project steering and advisory committee, including researchers and data consultants from within and outside the library field. The information from phase one will be pulled together, shared, and discussed during the second project phase, a “data summit” gathering a number of people from across the field. It is currently anticipated that it will take place in Spring 2017. A series of webinars leading up to the summit will provide context for the discussion and keep stakeholders involved, looking at and thinking about data in different ways. At the end of the summit, participants will have a greater understanding about how data should be collected, stored, and made accessible. Said Cherubini, “when we leave the data summit, various organizations and individuals will have responsibility or be identified with particular steps that we have come to consensus on that need to occur.” The partners do not view Measures that Matter as a project that will definitively solve all public library data problems, he explained. Instead, it will “galvanize the field to take action to address these complex issues.” The improvement of data collection and the creation of a dialog about data is meant to empower public libraries in advocating for positive outcomes and impact on their communities. Oehlke expressed enthusiasm for a potential plan that works both “on a local level, providing a tool for library advocacy, but also on an aggregated, national scale, so that we will continue to have that conversation about why are public libraries important.”

BUILDING ENGAGEMENT

In the third phase, the partners will disseminate results from the data summit and move forward with an action plan. Cherubini explained, “it is so important and central to our thinking that this effort is being developed with the active engagement of the broadest range of stakeholders, including local libraries, professional associations, researchers, the public, and people who are collecting the data on the state level.” That broad stakeholder group is critical to the success of the program, he said, as this is not an issue that any one person or organization can handle.

Measures that Matter has thus far been met with “resounding enthusiasm,” said Marx. “We have heard from lots of people that this is important and timely, receiving emails that ‘this is really important to me, I want to be part of this.’ ” Moving forward, according to Cherubini, the project team hopes to “confidently know that our efforts are contributing to our need to understand the library in the 21st century.”

COSLA

IMLS

library data
