EXPANDING POSSIBILITIES:

Public Libraries and Adult Learning

INSIGHTS AND INNOVATIONS FROM THE FIELD

PublicLibrary ASSOCIATION

Public Library Association,
a division of the American Library Association

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CHICAGO | 2025

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Written by Bobbi L. Newman, MLIS, Associate Professor of Practice at the School of Library and Information Science, University of Iowa; Librarian and Consultant.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public libraries are at the forefront of adult education in the United States, serving as trusted, accessible providers of lifelong learning opportunities. This white paper presents results from a national survey with 352 public library respondents, (Public Library Association, Survey on Adult Learning in Public Libraries, survey conducted June 2025), supplemented by current research and case studies, to better understand the landscape of adult education in libraries today.

KEY FINDINGS

Libraries serve diverse learners. Adults of all ages, backgrounds, and educational levels use libraries for digital literacy, workforce skills, health information, financial literacy, and cultural enrichment.

There is a high demand for adult education. Workforce development, English as a Second Language (ESL), digital skills, and health literacy were consistently cited as high-priority needs.

Barriers persist. Major obstacles include lack of time (80.7%), scheduling conflicts (66.8%), digital access and skills (70%), transportation (56.2%), and childcare (51.4%).

Technology is both a resource and a hurdle. While 70.5% of libraries use virtual platforms to reach patrons, many learners struggle with limited digital literacy.

Funding is fragile—52.6% of libraries cited insufficient funding as a barrier to sustaining programs. Recent threats to federal and state library funding further threaten library programming.

Evaluation is inconsistent. Nearly all libraries track attendance (98.3%), but fewer measure outcomes such as skill development (21.6%) or job attainment (14.5%).

Innovation is growing. Libraries are experimenting with gamification, hybrid learning, embedded services, and community partnerships to expand reach and impact.

Partnerships are essential—The vast majority of libraries collaborate with external organizations, with an average of four partners per library, extending capacity and expertise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, libraries, policymakers, and funders should:

- Strengthen sustainable funding streams at federal, state, and local levels to ensure continuity of adult education services.
- Invest in digital equity through broadband expansion, device lending, and digital literacy training.
- Support workforce development and credentialing programs that directly impact economic mobility.
- Promote equity and inclusion by addressing childcare, transportation, and multilingual access barriers.
- Advance evaluation tools to measure skills gained, confidence built, and long-term community impact.
- Foster partnerships with nonprofits, educational institutions, healthcare providers, and local businesses to broaden resources.

CONCLUSION

Libraries are uniquely positioned as free, community-based adult learning hubs. They combine accessibility, trust, and adaptability, reaching learners who may be excluded from traditional education systems. However, without stable funding, expanded digital equity, and stronger outcome measurement, this potential cannot be fully realized.

This report demonstrates both the remarkable work already being done and the urgent need for systemic investment in libraries as engines of lifelong learning. Every adult deserves the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive, and in communities across the country, libraries are making that possible.

PREFACE

Public libraries have always been more than buildings filled with books. They are essential community learning hubs where people of all ages come to build skills, access resources, and find opportunities. In an era of rapid change, libraries remain trusted, welcoming spaces for adult learners seeking to navigate new technologies, strengthen job skills, or simply enrich their lives.

This white paper reflects the insights of more than 350 public libraries nationwide, gathered through a survey, case studies, and supporting research. It offers a detailed look at how libraries are addressing adult learning needs, the barriers patrons face, and the innovative approaches shaping the future of lifelong learning.

We are deeply grateful to Gale, part of Cengage School, for supporting this project, and to the many public library staff members who generously shared their time, experiences, and stories through our survey and case studies. Your contributions are the heart of this report, ensuring that the findings reflect the real challenges and opportunities libraries encounter every day.

The Public Library Association is proud to present this work as part of our ongoing commitment to advancing equity, access, and excellence in library service. We hope it serves as both a resource and a call to action for policymakers, funders, library leaders, and community partners who believe in the transformative power of public libraries.

— Mary Davis Fournier, Executive Director
Public Library Association, 2025

INTRODUCTION

Public libraries have long served as cornerstone institutions for lifelong learning, and their role as adult education providers has evolved in recent decades. As community needs have shifted and traditional educational pathways have become increasingly expensive and inaccessible, libraries have emerged as essential providers of free, community-based adult education programming. From digital literacy training to financial education, from health and wellness workshops to workforce development, libraries now offer a wide range of opportunities for adults at every life stage.

This report examines the current state of adult learning in public libraries through both original survey data and a review of current research. Drawing from survey data collected from 352 public libraries across all 50 states (Public Library Association, National Survey on Adult Learning in Public Libraries, survey conducted June 2025), as well as current research and best practices documentation, this analysis provides a detailed picture of how libraries are meeting adult learners' needs, the challenges they face, and the opportunities that lie ahead.

THE SCOPE OF ADULT LEARNING IN LIBRARIES

Libraries serve diverse populations, from young adults navigating career transitions to seniors seeking cognitive engagement and social connection. Programming ranges from basic literacy and English language learning to advanced technology skills and professional development. This diversity reflects libraries' unique position as trusted, accessible learning environments that can adapt to community needs without the barriers often associated with formal educational institutions.

The timing of this research is particularly significant. The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally reshaped how libraries deliver services, accelerating the adoption of digital programming while simultaneously highlighting the persistent digital divide affecting many adult learners. A 2025 executive order seeking to eliminate the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) has created new funding challenges and uncertainty for state and public libraries. Meanwhile, societal issues such as social isolation, rapid technological change, and economic uncertainty have increased demand for library-based adult learning opportunities.

LEARNING THAT OPENS DOORS

After joining Los Angeles Public Library's adult literacy program, one learner gained the reading and writing skills to complete job applications with confidence. Within months, she landed stable employment, something she once thought impossible. For her, the library became more than a place for books; it was a place to build skills and a new future.

***Source:** LAPL Blog*

KEY THEMES AND FINDINGS

This report reveals several themes that define the current state of adult learning in public libraries. Libraries demonstrate remarkable adaptability, successfully pivoting to hybrid programming models that combine in-person and virtual delivery. However, this adaptability is constrained by persistent challenges, including limited staffing, insufficient funding, and the complex barriers adult learners face in accessing educational opportunities.

The research identifies gaps between community needs and current service provision. While 93.5% of libraries serve older adults, only 50% provide programming specifically designed for emerging adults aged 18–24. Similarly, despite high demand, only 28.7% of libraries offer basic literacy programming, and just 21.9% provide high school equivalency support. These gaps highlight the tension between libraries' vision as comprehensive adult education providers and the constraints of funding and capacity.

Partnership emerges as both a necessity and a strength in library adult education. With 84.9% of surveyed libraries maintaining active partnerships with community organizations, collaboration has become essential for expanding programming capacity and accessing specialized expertise. These partnerships range from literacy nonprofits and senior centers to healthcare providers and workforce development agencies, demonstrating libraries' deep connection with community support networks.

METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE

This report synthesizes findings from multiple sources to provide a detailed view of adult learning in public libraries. The primary data source is a voluntary survey of 352 public libraries, representing diverse community types and geographic regions. This quantitative data is supplemented by a literature review encompassing recent research on adult learning trends, library service innovations, and community partnership models. Throughout this white paper, unless explicitly stated otherwise,

all data and statistical findings are derived from the Public Library Association Survey on Adult Learning in Public Libraries (survey conducted June 2025).

The report is organized into interconnected sections that build from foundational demographic analysis through current programming practices to forward-looking recommendations. Each section combines survey findings with literature review insights to provide both statistical validation and contextual understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing library adult education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

The findings presented in this report have significant implications for library administrators, adult education professionals, policymakers, and community leaders. Libraries are positioned to play an increasingly important role in addressing educational equity and supporting lifelong learning, but realizing this potential requires strategic investment, innovative programming models, and sustained community support.

As traditional adult education providers face funding cuts and accessibility challenges, libraries offer a unique alternative: institutions that are already embedded in communities, trusted by residents, and committed to free and equitable access to learning opportunities. However, the research also reveals that libraries cannot fulfill this role without addressing challenges related to staffing, funding, and program sustainability.

This report aims to inform evidence-based decision-making that can strengthen library adult education programming and better serve the learning needs of diverse adult populations. By documenting current practices, identifying successful models, and highlighting persistent challenges, this analysis provides a foundation for strategic planning and advocacy efforts that can enhance libraries' capacity to serve as national adult learning centers.

The following sections examine in detail the demographics of adult learners in libraries, current programming practices, technological resources and barriers, evaluation approaches, funding challenges, emerging trends, partnership models, and equity considerations. Together, these analyses paint a picture of a field in transition, adapting to new challenges while working to fulfill its fundamental mission of providing free and accessible learning opportunities for all community members.

CHAPTER 1

Demographics of Adult Learners in Public Libraries

Public libraries across the United States serve diverse adult learning populations, with patterns emerging in engagement, participation, and programming needs. This analysis examines the demographic characteristics of adult learners in public libraries, based on survey data from 352 libraries representing all 50 states and various community types. Understanding these demographics helps libraries design responsive lifelong learning programs.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF ADULT LEARNERS BY AGE GROUP

Service Provision by Age Group

Public libraries demonstrate a clear hierarchy in their adult education programming based on age demographics. Libraries most extensively serve older adults (55+), with 93.5% of surveyed libraries providing programming for this population. Working adults (35–54 years) represent the second most served group at 82.7%, followed by young adults (25–34 years) at 61.1%. Emerging adults (18–24 years) are the least served demographic, with only 50.0% of libraries offering targeted programming for this age group. (See figure 1.1.)

Libraries focus programming on demographics with the highest and most consistent demand, especially older adults. This group has more time for structured learning and prefers in-person, community-based experiences. For libraries, this suggests the need to both sustain robust older adult programming while also innovating new models to better reach younger, less engaged learners.

Engagement Patterns Across Age Groups

Engagement levels mirror service patterns, with age-related participation trends. Libraries report that adults aged 55 and older demonstrate the highest engagement rates, with 62.2% of libraries identifying this group as their most active participants in adult education programming. Working adults (35–54 years) show moderate engagement levels, reported by 21.3% of libraries, while younger adult demographics (18–34 years) consistently show lower engagement rates across all library types. (See figure 1.2.)

FIGURE 1.1

Public Library Adult Education Programming by Age Group

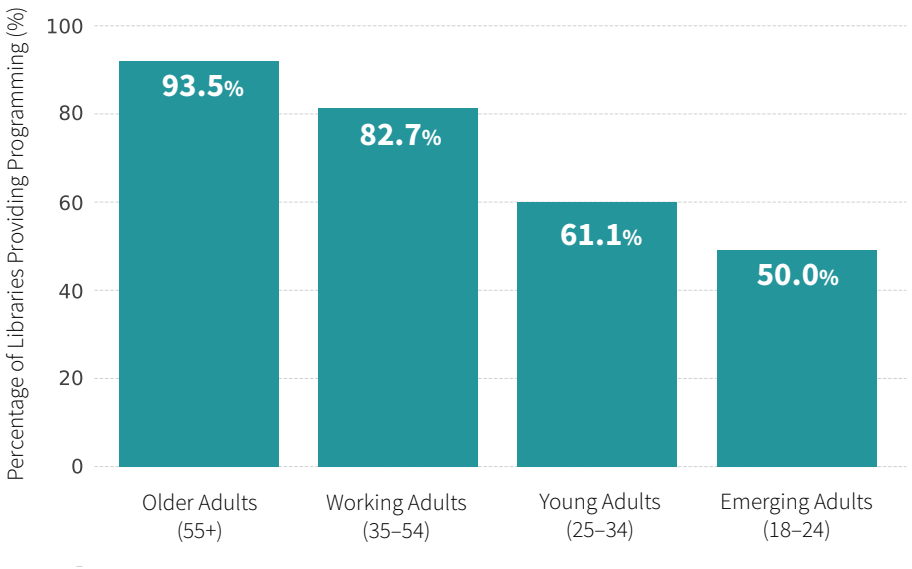
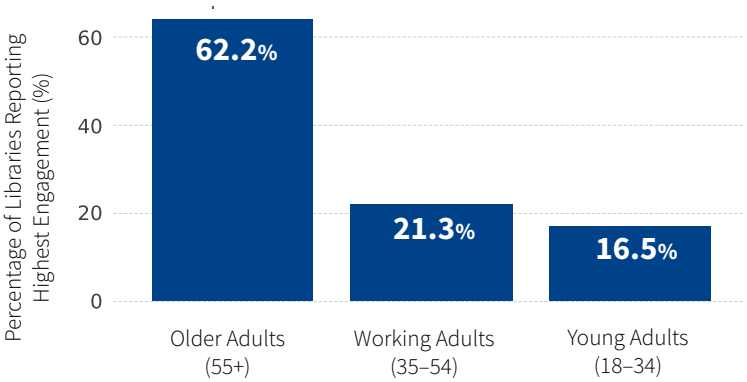


FIGURE 1.2

Engagement in Library Adult Education by Age Group



The data reveals only 11.9% of libraries report equal engagement across all age groups, indicating age-based disparities in adult education participation. This pattern suggests that younger adults may prefer different learning modalities or access educational content through alternative channels outside traditional library programming. Libraries may need to experiment with flexible, digital-first, or pop-up learning models to engage this group.

Age-Specific Programming Challenges

The survey data reveals challenges in engaging younger adult learners (18–35 years), who are identified by 21.0% of libraries as the most difficult demographic to reach and retain. Libraries consistently report that emerging adults often engage with

academic libraries during college years but disconnect from public library services until later life stages, creating a gap in lifelong learning continuity. This disconnect underscores a critical opportunity for libraries to develop transitional programs that retain engagement beyond college.

Working adults face distinct barriers, including irregular work schedules, caregiving responsibilities, and competing time demands that limit their participation in traditional library programming schedules. This demographic requires flexible programming approaches, including evening and weekend options, to accommodate their complex schedules.

TRENDS IN LIBRARY USAGE AMONG ADULT POPULATIONS

Geographic Distribution and Community Type

Adult education programming shows significant variation across community types, reflecting diverse demographic needs and resource availability. Suburban libraries demonstrate the strongest programming capacity, with 89.6% offering 25 or more sessions annually. City libraries follow closely with robust programming offerings, while rural libraries face greater constraints, with 30.9% offering only 13–24 sessions annually. (See figure 1.4.)

The geographic distribution of surveyed libraries provides representative coverage across regions: South (32.1%), Midwest (26.4%), West (20.2%), and Northeast (19.9%). This balanced representation ensures the findings reflect national trends rather than regional anomalies.

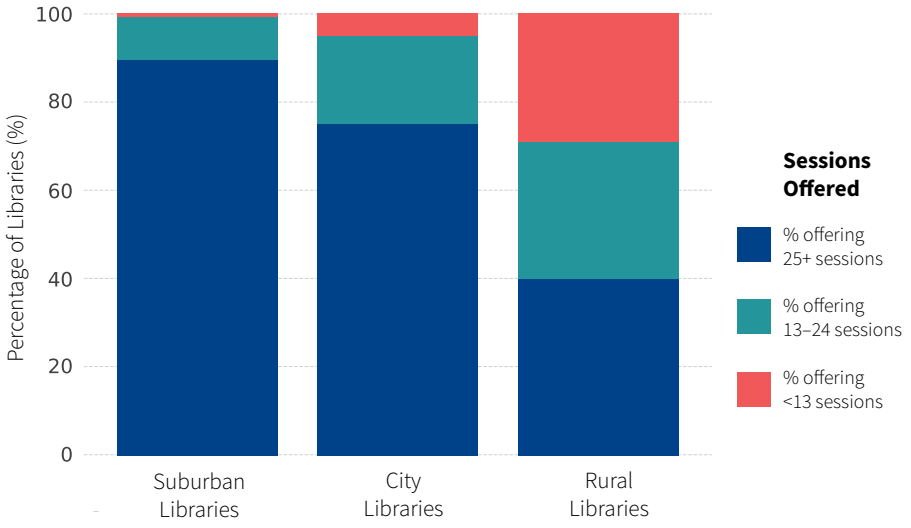
Population Size and Service Capacity

Medium-sized communities (10,000–24,999 population) show the highest survey representation at 21.4%, followed by metropolitan areas (250,000+) at 15.4%. This distribution indicates that adult education programming scales with community size, with larger libraries offering more sessions but serving proportionally similar demographics.

The relationship between community size and programming reveals that very small communities (under 2,500) average 18.5 programs annually, while very large communities (50,000–99,999) peak at over 75 programs. This scaling pattern suggests that resource constraints limit programming expansion beyond certain thresholds, regardless of potential demand.

FIGURE 1.4

Adult Education Programming by Community Type



MEETING LEARNERS WHERE THEY ARE

At Milbridge Public Library in rural Maine, many new immigrants arrived seeking ways to connect and learn. The library responded with bilingual programs and digital literacy support, adapting its services to match the community it actually serves. For many families, the library became their first trusted bridge into civic and educational life.

Source: ***ALA Idea Book***

Attendance and Participation Trends

Current attendance patterns demonstrate positive momentum, with 46.7% of libraries reporting increasing participation over the past three years. Only 10.3% report declining attendance, while 37.3% maintain steady participation levels. (See figure 1.5.) This growth trend indicates continued recognition of libraries as adult learning centers.

Average session attendance shows healthy participation levels, with 58.7% of libraries reporting 16 or more participants per session. However, 36.2% report 5–15 participants per session, suggesting that program size varies significantly based on topic, timing, and community factors. Libraries may need to diversify program formats to accommodate both small, intimate sessions, and larger community events.

FIGURE 1.5

Adult Education Participation Trends in Public Libraries

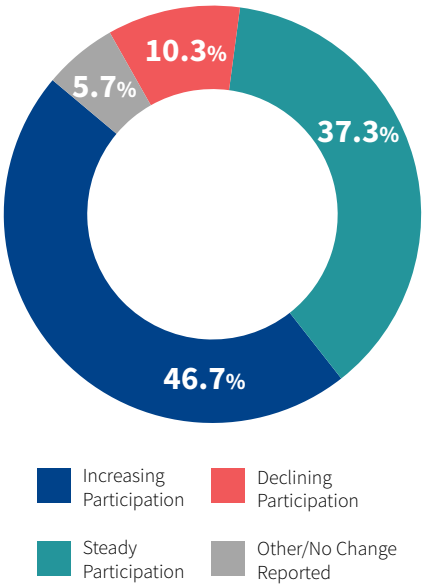
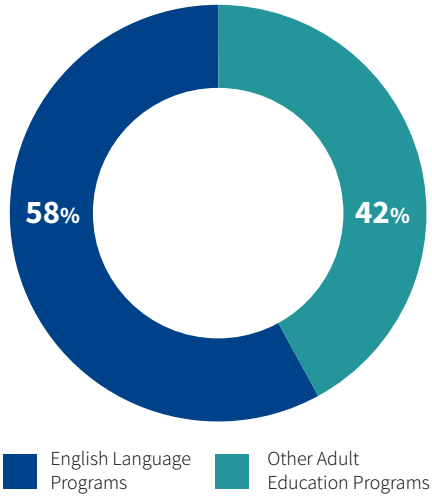


FIGURE 1.6

Federally Supported Adult Education Enrollment (2022–2023)



FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Younger adults, including the 18–25 and part of the 25–55 age group, are using public libraries both in person and digitally at higher rates compared to older generations.[1] A 2022 American Library Association (ALA) report found that 54% of Gen Z and Millennials visited a physical library in the prior 12 months, and many of these users also borrow from digital collections.[2] Interestingly, these younger adults demonstrate a strong preference for print books, reading and buying twice as many print books as other media types on average.[3]

Recent research continues to affirm the impact of public libraries as essential learning institutions. The Institute of Museum and Library Services' Public Libraries Survey (2023) reports that libraries hosted more than 800 million visits and over 93 million program attendees nationwide.[4] The American Library Association's State of America's Libraries Report (2023) highlights their expanding role in civic engagement, digital access, and literacy, even amid persistent funding and staffing challenges.[5] Findings from the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA) further demonstrate that library programs foster not only individual skill development but also community connections and civic participation.[6] Together, these sources illustrate the enduring and evolving importance of libraries.

54%

of Gen Z and Millennials visited a library last year *—and they prefer print.*

DIGITAL SKILLS FOR NEW BEGINNINGS

Through a national initiative supporting libraries with laptops and training, a rural community library discovered that older adults—not just younger workers—were among their most eager learners. From video calls with family to applying for jobs online, participants gained confidence and independence. The library's flexibility revealed that digital literacy isn't just for the young—it's for everyone.

Source: ***Digital Inclusion Blog***

Digital use of libraries has surged over recent years. In 2019, there was a record 20% increase in digital book checkouts, with 326 million ebooks, audiobooks, and digital magazines borrowed, 15% more ebooks and 30% more audiobooks than the previous year.[7] Audiobook usage has outpaced ebook growth for at least six consecutive years.[8] This trend spans all adult age groups, reflecting a shift toward digital access. Library programs, especially those targeting children and young adults, saw attendance growth through at least 2018.[9]

Middle-aged adults (25–55) typically use libraries for family and practical needs, while older adults (55+) tend to value libraries as important community centers.[10]

58%

of federally supported adult education learners are enrolled in English language programs (2022–2023).

Profiles of Adult Learners

Adult learners form a diverse and growing demographic. Since 2019, their profiles, shaped by educational background, cultural diversity, and socioeconomic status, reveal both opportunities and persistent challenges.

Adult learners often return to education after a gap or as "stop-outs" (previous enrollees returning to education).[11] There is a trend toward online and hybrid programs, with more than half of the student population at primarily online colleges being over 25.[12] Popular fields among adult learners include health-related and business programs, as well as certificate, diploma, and associate degree offerings, which generally require fewer credits than bachelor's programs.[13] Many adult learners combine study with employment responsibilities; about 70% work full or part-time while enrolled.[14]

Nationally, more adult learners are immigrants, refugees, or multilingual English learners, with 58% of participants in federally supported adult education programs enrolled in English language classes or integrated programs in 2022–2023 (see figure 1.6).[15] These learners bring a wealth of linguistic and cultural assets, though they may encounter challenges navigating different educational norms.[16] Culturally proficient adult education recognizes learners' diverse backgrounds, accommodates religious and cultural practices, and encourages learning environments where experiences are shared and valued.[17]

Adult learners disproportionately come from lower-income backgrounds. The majority juggle work and family responsibilities, with many adult learners supporting dependents (over 60% of those age 30+).[18]

Financial constraints, lack of childcare, need for flexible scheduling, and transportation challenges are major barriers.[19] Adult learners are more likely than traditional students to be working, parenting, and balancing complex life roles. They represent race, ethnicity, and nationality groups not always reflected in faculty or administration, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive practices. On average, they earn less and face more barriers to persistence and completion. Together, these findings show that while older adults are the most engaged in library-based learning, younger and working-age adults represent critical growth opportunities. Addressing barriers of time, access, and modality will be key to sustaining lifelong learning in public libraries.

Notes

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16. Jamie Harris et al., *Valuing Diverse Cultural Assets in Adult Education*.
17. Jamie Harris et al., *Valuing Diverse Cultural Assets in Adult Education*; Javier Suárez-Álvarez et al., "Five Key Actions for Redesigning Adult Skills Assessments from Learners, Employees, and Educators," *Zeitschrift Für Weiterbildungsforschung* 47, no. 2 (2024): 321–43, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40955-024-00288-8.
18. Minnesota Office of Higher Education, *Minnesota's Adult Learners Examining First-Enrolled and Stop-Out Adult Learners in Minnesota*; Koller, *Adult Learners: A Literature Review*.

CHAPTER 2

Adult Education Offerings in Public Libraries

FROM THE SURVEY

Public libraries have evolved into comprehensive adult learning centers, offering diverse educational programming that addresses both practical skill development and enrichment learning. Survey data from 352 libraries reveals patterns in program offerings, with certain learning areas achieving near-universal adoption while others remain specialized services targeting specific community needs. This chapter highlights the most common areas of adult education in libraries—digital literacy, financial literacy, health and wellness, creative arts, history and genealogy, cognitive health, social connection, workforce development, and post-retirement learning—illustrating both widespread practices and emerging trends.

Digital Literacy: Bridging the Technology Divide

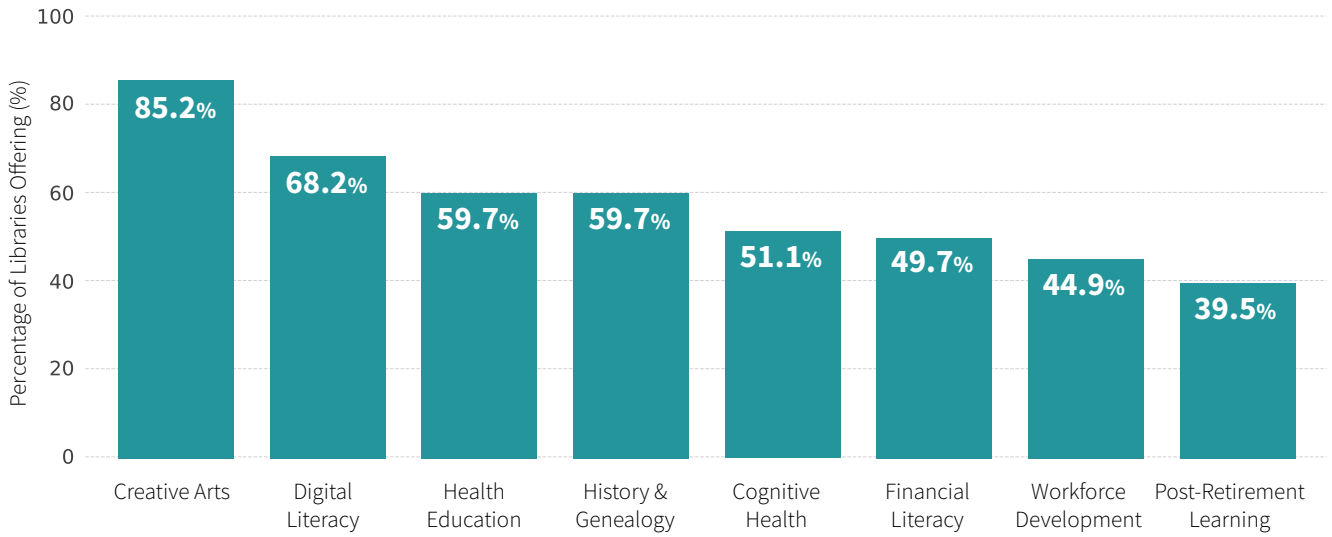
Digital literacy programming ranks as the second most common offering among public libraries, provided by 68.2% of surveyed institutions (see figure 2.1). This widespread adoption reflects libraries' recognition of their critical role in addressing the digital divide that affects multiple demographics, particularly older adults and economically disadvantaged populations.

Libraries report that digital literacy gaps affect 22.0% of their programming efforts, with staff often lacking specialized training to teach advanced computer skills, internet safety, and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence. The challenge is particularly acute for multilingual learners and seniors, where basic computer use, email management, and online service access represent fundamental barriers to full community participation.

Technology support extends beyond formal programming, with 80.4% of libraries providing one-on-one tech help and coaching. Additionally, 50.0% offer device loaning programs, including laptops and tablets, demonstrating libraries' comprehensive approach to digital access. These services address both skill development and equipment availability, recognizing that digital literacy requires both knowledge and tools.

FIGURE 2.1

Adult Education Offerings in Public Libraries



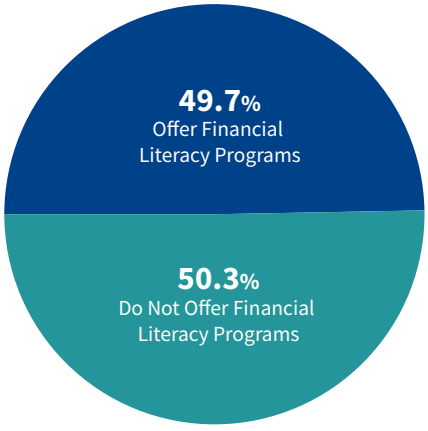
The evolution toward hybrid programming formats has intensified the importance of digital literacy education. Libraries report that 42.9% of participants have limited digital skills, creating barriers not only to online learning but also to accessing increasingly digital community services and employment opportunities.

Financial Literacy: Economic Empowerment Through Education

Financial literacy programming is offered by 49.7% of libraries, representing a moderate but significant educational focus (see figure 2.2). Expanding financial literacy programming could position libraries as critical partners in community economic stability. These programs typically include budgeting workshops, personal finance education, and tax preparation assistance, addressing fundamental economic skills that affect household stability and long-term financial security.

FIGURE 2.2

Libraries Offering Financial Literacy Programs



The moderate adoption rate suggests that financial literacy may require specialized expertise that not all libraries can provide independently. However, the programs that do exist often demonstrate high community value, with libraries reporting strong attendance and practical outcomes for participants who apply learned skills directly to their personal financial management.

Financial programming often intersects with workforce development initiatives, as financial planning skills prove essential for career transitions, small business development, and retirement planning. Libraries report that combining financial literacy with other practical skills creates more comprehensive programming that addresses multiple aspects of adult learners' lives.

Health Education: Promoting Community Wellness

Health and wellness education programs are provided by 59.7% of libraries, reflecting growing recognition of libraries as community health resources. These programs range from health information sessions and wellness classes to specialized programming addressing aging-related health concerns and chronic disease management

The popularity of health programming among libraries corresponds with demographic trends, particularly the aging of many communities served by public libraries. Older adults, who represent the most engaged library demographic at 62.2% of high-participation groups, show particular interest in health and wellness programming that addresses age-related concerns and promotes active aging.

51%

of libraries report health education partnerships with providers.

Libraries often partner with healthcare providers, mentioned by 51% of libraries with partnership programs, to provide credible health education that goes beyond basic information sharing. These collaborations allow libraries to offer programming with medical expertise while maintaining their role as trusted community information sources.

Creative Arts: Cultural Enrichment and Community Building

Creative and cultural programs achieve the second-highest adoption rate among libraries at 85.2%, encompassing writing workshops, arts and crafts, and cultural history programming. This high adoption rate reflects both community demand and libraries' traditional role as cultural institutions within their communities.

Arts and crafts programs dominate successful programming examples, representing 48.7% of libraries' most effective initiatives. These programs succeed because they provide tangible outcomes that participants can take home, offer immediate gratification, and naturally create social connections as people work together on projects. Examples include fused glass classes, wreath making, pottery, and "craft and chat" sessions that combine skill-building with social interaction.

Creative programming serves multiple functions beyond skill development, including social connection, cultural preservation, and therapeutic engagement. Libraries report that creative programs often attract participants who then discover other library services, making arts programming an effective gateway to broader library engagement.

The success of creative programming appears linked to its accessibility across skill levels and its accommodation of various learning styles. Unlike some technical programming that requires prerequisite knowledge, creative arts programming can welcome absolute beginners alongside experienced practitioners.

BUILDING SKILLS, FINDING HOPE

At Natrona County Library (WY), one participant used library classes to strengthen digital literacy, job search, and interview skills. With staff guidance, she polished her résumé, gained confidence, and secured employment. Her story illustrates how libraries meet learners where they are, helping them not only find work but also rebuild hope for the future.

Source: ***Natrona County Library***

History and Genealogy: Connecting Past and Present

Genealogy and history programming is offered by 59.7% of libraries, demonstrating community interest in family research and local history preservation. These programs often leverage libraries' traditional strengths in research assistance and archival materials while addressing more recent interests in family history and cultural heritage.

41.8%

Local relevance was named the most important factor in program success.

Local relevance emerges as an important success factor, mentioned by 41.8% of successful programs. History and genealogy programming succeeds when it addresses community heritage, local historical events, or regional cultural traditions that resonate with the served population. Programs focusing on local history, area-specific genealogical resources, or cultural celebrations specific to community demographics show particularly strong participation rates.

The intersection of history programming with technology education creates opportunities for comprehensive learning experiences. Libraries report success with programs teaching digital genealogy research, online archives navigation, and family history documentation using contemporary tools.

Cognitive Health Programming

Cognitive health and social connection programming is provided by 51.1% of libraries, representing targeted efforts to address aging-related cognitive concerns and promote mental acuity across age groups. These programs include games and gaming activities, memory and brain fitness exercises, and social isolation reduction initiatives.

Memory cafes represent an innovative programming model mentioned in successful program examples, providing specialized support for individuals experiencing cognitive challenges and their caregivers. These programs combine educational content with social support, creating safe environments for community members facing cognitive health concerns.

Gaming and puzzle programs serve dual purposes of cognitive stimulation and social engagement. Libraries report that these programs attract participants

across age groups, though they prove particularly popular with older adults seeking both mental exercise and social connection opportunities.

Social Connection and Community Building

Social isolation emerges as both a barrier to learning and a target for intervention through programming. Social and community building programs rank second among successful programming examples at 34.1%, highlighting libraries' recognition of their role in addressing community social needs.

Programs specifically designed for social connection include "Tuesday Morning Club" gatherings, discussion groups, and book clubs that prioritize social interaction alongside educational content. These programs address documented social isolation issues, particularly among older adults and individuals with limited community connections.

The social component of programming proves vital to success across multiple learning areas. Libraries report that programs incorporating social elements show higher retention rates and greater participant satisfaction than purely instructional formats. This finding suggests that adult learners value community connection as much as skill acquisition.

Workforce Development and Career Transition Support

Workforce development programming is offered by 44.9% of libraries, indicating significant institutional commitment to economic development support. These programs include:

- job search assistance
- résumé workshops
- career training
- and professional skills development designed to support adults navigating career changes or seeking advancement opportunities.

Career transition support becomes particularly critical during economic uncertainties, with libraries serving as accessible resources for individuals displaced from employment or seeking career changes. Programs often include professional networking opportunities, interview preparation, and industry-specific skill development tailored to local employment markets.

The intersection of workforce development with other programming areas creates comprehensive support systems. Libraries report success with programs combining financial literacy, digital skills, and professional development to address multiple aspects of career transition challenges.

Upskilling and Professional Development

Digital literacy programming serves dual purposes of basic technology education and professional upskilling, as workplace technology requirements continue to evolve. Libraries report growing demand for training in specific software applications, social media for business, and emerging technologies that affect various industries. Libraries are emerging as local hubs for career-relevant upskilling.

Professional development programming often leverages community partnerships with local businesses and employers, mentioned by 47.0% of partnering libraries. These collaborations provide current industry expertise and direct connections to employment opportunities while allowing libraries to offer programming beyond their internal capacity.

Small business support emerges as a specialized area within workforce development, with libraries providing entrepreneurship workshops, business planning assistance, and resources for individuals starting or expanding small businesses. This programming addresses both economic development and individual advancement goals.

Post-Retirement Learning and Engagement

Post-retirement learning programs are offered by 39.5% of libraries, serving adults transitioning from career-focused activities to enrichment-based learning. These programs recognize that retirement creates opportunities for intellectual engagement that may have been limited during working years.

Post-retirement programming often emphasizes personal enrichment over skill acquisition, including travel programs, cultural exploration, and hobby development. However, some programs address practical post-retirement needs including technology adoption, health management, and financial planning for fixed incomes.

The high engagement rates among older adults (55+) suggest that post-retirement programming meets significant community demand. Libraries report that retired adults often become highly engaged library users, participating in multiple programs and serving as volunteers for library initiatives. Lifelong learning emerges as a core theme in post-retirement programming, with libraries offering comprehensive educational experiences that span intellectual, creative, and practical domains. This holistic approach recognizes that retirement-age adults seek varied learning opportunities that address multiple interests and needs.

Integration Across Learning Areas

Successful adult education programming increasingly integrates multiple learning areas to address the complex, interconnected needs of adult learners. Libraries report that programs combining practical skills with social connection elements show higher success rates than single-focus initiatives.

The most effective programming strategies recognize that adult learners often face multiple barriers and seek a variety of outcomes from their educational engagement. Programs that address practical skills development while providing social connection and personal enrichment create comprehensive learning experiences that serve multiple community needs simultaneously.

FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Literacy

Research from Digital Promise reveals that access to devices, broadband internet, and digital literacy instruction are top priorities for today's adult learners.[20] The Barbara Bush Foundation's comprehensive resource guide shows adults want to use technology to meet learning goals, but many report needing support.[21]

However, significant barriers persist. Research indicates that adults with limited literacy are frequent social media users, making them vulnerable to misinformation due to inadequate digital literacy and critical thinking skills.[22] Studies show cognitive flexibility challenges when multitasking across digital media, and adults with low health literacy are less likely to use health information tools.[23] Time constraints and competing family/work responsibilities further limit sustained participation in digital literacy programs.[24]

Financial Literacy

Multiple large-scale surveys demonstrate unprecedented demand for financial education. The National Endowment for Financial Education found that 83% of U.S. adults believe states should require financial education in high school, with 82% wishing they had access to such education themselves.[25] This is reinforced by National Financial Educators Council research showing 83.3% support for financial literacy education in schools, and American Bankers Association data indicating 87% agreement that financial concepts should be taught in high school.[26]

The need is acute: only 34% of U.S. adults pass basic financial literacy tests.[27] Research reveals persistent financial literacy challenges even among highly educated individuals, particularly African American and Hispanic populations, while two-thirds of Gen Z could answer only 50% or less of financial literacy questions correctly.[28]

Health Literacy, Cognitive Health, and Social Isolation

Adult Basic Education learners consistently identify health information, communication with healthcare providers, and healthcare navigation skills as high-priority learning topics. Research demonstrates that adult education personnel rank health services and insurance among their greatest priority concepts for curriculum development. [29]

Research demonstrates that later-life learning is associated with nearly a 6-year delay in cognitive decline among older adults.[30] Studies using nationally representative samples show adult education participation correlates with higher verbal ability, memory, and fluency in midlife, with benefits equivalent to a 6-year age difference in cognitive function.[31]

Research demonstrates that educational programming significantly reduces social isolation and loneliness.[32] Intergenerational programs show significant reductions in loneliness among older adults, with 86% of virtual service-learning participants reporting positive mood changes and 71% reporting increased social

connection. Studies indicate social isolation can have the same health impact as smoking 15 cigarettes daily.[33]

Technology training programs for older adults not only build digital competence but measurably reduce loneliness and improve quality of life.[34] Group-based educational activities, including exercise classes, showed decreased loneliness and social isolation among participants. Adult day services that incorporate educational programming provide an effective antidote to social isolation through group activities and cultural programs.[35]

Career Transitions, Upskilling and Post Retirement

Studies demonstrate that career pathway participants are employed and retained at higher rates with higher wages than comparison groups. Research shows 20–30% higher GED/developmental placement pass rates for career pathway participants, 11–50% higher entry-level credential attainment rates, and $4,500–$5,000 higher annual earnings two years after program enrollment.[36]

Key success factors include engagement between adult basic education and postsecondary education, contextualized basic skills curriculum, case management and navigational services, and job-readiness and employment assistance services. [37]

Research on retirement education programs shows participants report increased confidence in feeling better prepared for retirement and high satisfaction with self-exploration sessions focusing on values, beliefs, and strengths. Studies reveal that cross-domain engagement during retirement transition is associated with better psychological adjustment, with 76% maintaining high engagement profiles before retirement and 72% after.[38]

Future Directions

Adult learners face multiple barriers, including time constraints from work and care responsibilities, financial costs, and institutional inflexibility. Research emphasizes the need for more flexible learning options, financial support mechanisms, and programs that accommodate diverse learning needs and schedules.[39]

The research demonstrates overwhelming evidence of demand for continuing education across all examined areas, with measurable benefits for cognitive health, social connection, career advancement, and overall wellbeing. However, significant barriers remain in accessibility, program design, and institutional capacity to meet this documented need. Libraries are well-positioned to meet overwhelming demand, but need flexible models, funding, and capacity support.

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CHAPTER 3

Current Role of Public Libraries in Adult Education

FROM THE SURVEY

Gaps in Library Programming and Unmet Needs

Despite the diversity of program offerings, critical gaps persist in addressing the needs of vulnerable adult populations. Language learners and immigrants were the most frequently identified underserved group, cited by 29.4 percent of respondents. Programs such as ESL classes and citizenship preparation are in high demand but are often limited by staffing or instructional expertise.

Digital and technology skill gaps were noted by 22.0 percent of libraries, with many patrons lacking basic computer literacy or access to devices. Libraries seeking to close this divide struggle with outdated technology, insufficient staff for one-on-one coaching, and limited space for group instruction.

Young adults aged 18–35 represent another underserved group, identified as the hardest demographic to engage. Only 50 percent of libraries offer programs targeted to adults aged 18–24, and engagement among this group remains low. Respondents cited time constraints, inconsistent schedules, and low awareness as key barriers.

Equally concerning is the low number of libraries offering programs for low-literacy adults. Only 28.7 percent reported offering basic literacy programming, and just 21.9 percent provided high school equivalency support. This leaves a significant gap for adults who lack foundational skills necessary for employment and civic participation.

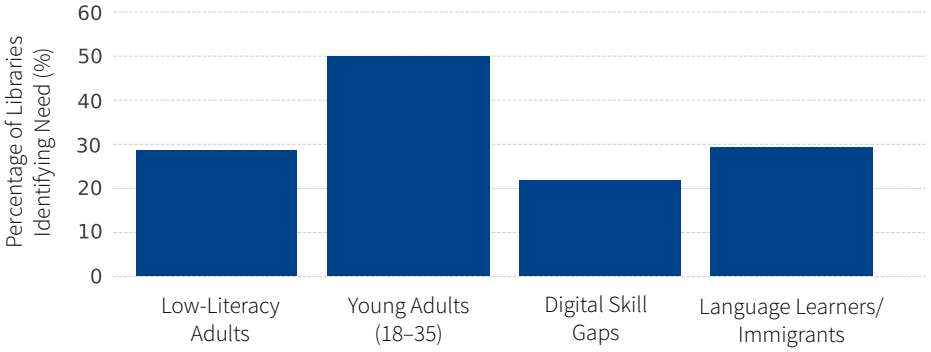
Libraries are aware of these gaps: 63.9 percent of respondents provided open-ended responses detailing underserved populations and unmet needs, demonstrating an acute awareness of where current offerings fall short. (See figure 3.1.)

Showcasing Successful Case Studies and Innovative Initiatives

The most successful adult education programs are those that are locally relevant, socially engaging, and co-created with the community. Arts and crafts emerged as the most successful program category, reported by 48.7 percent of libraries. These programs, such as wreath making, fused glass, and sewing circles, not only

FIGURE 3.1

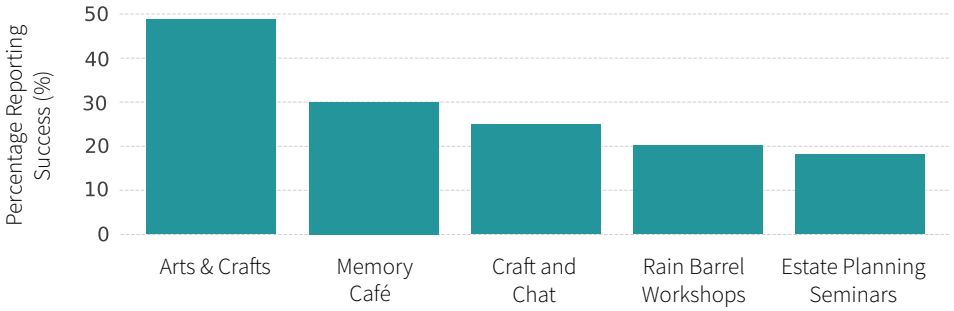
Underserved Populations in Adult Library Programming



Libraries report key unmet needs among language learners, young adults, low-literacy adults, and those facing digital skill gaps.

FIGURE 3.2

Examples of Successful Adult Education Programs



Creative and locally relevant programs—such as arts and crafts, memory cafés, and hybrid social-learning models—draw the strongest engagement from adult learners.

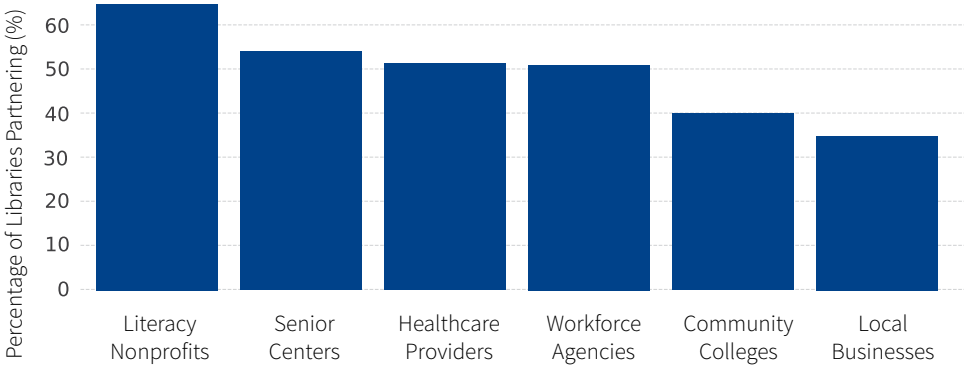
teach creative and sometimes necessary skills but also create space for social interaction, helping to address the loneliness epidemic.

Other innovative approaches include “Memory Cafes” for older adults with cognitive decline, “Speed Dating with Books” for literary engagement, and hybrid models like “Craft and Chat” that combine education and socialization. Programs that combine utility and interest, such as rain barrel workshops (environmental skills) or estate planning seminars (legal literacy), have also been cited as highly successful. (See figure 3.2.)

Programs rooted in community-specific needs, like regional gardening, local history talks, or employment-focused digital skills, draw higher attendance and greater engagement.

FIGURE 3.3

Common Partnership Types in Public Libraries



Partnerships with nonprofits, senior centers, healthcare providers, and workforce agencies expand libraries' reach and impact in adult education.

Libraries also reported successful use of gamification techniques (e.g., passport stamp programs for session attendance), practical incentives like professional headshots, and hybrid learning formats that allow in-person and virtual participation.

Partnerships with Community Organizations and Local Governments

Partnerships are essential to the success and sustainability of adult education in libraries. An overwhelming 84.9 percent of libraries report active partnerships, with an average of nearly four partner types per institution. These relationships expand a library's reach, diversify offerings, and bring in critical expertise that library staff may not have.

Top partnership types include literacy and adult education nonprofits (64.8%), senior centers (54.0%), healthcare providers (51.0%), and workforce development agencies (50.7%). These collaborations result in expanded program offerings, increased visibility in the community, and shared resource use. Community colleges, immigrant-serving organizations, and local businesses also play key roles. (See figure 3.3.)

Libraries report a strong benefit-to-challenge ratio in these collaborations: 81.1 percent of partnership experiences are positive, with program expansion (55.2%), broader audience reach (33.9%), and access to expertise (32.8%) being the most commonly cited benefits.

While some challenges exist, such as resource constraints and communication hurdles, libraries overwhelmingly value partnerships as vital for meeting adult learners where they are and extending the library's capacity beyond its own walls.

Understanding Influencing Factors

A complex mix of internal and external factors influences whether libraries can offer robust adult education services. The most significant constraint is staffing: 70.5 percent of libraries cited a lack of staff time or dedicated personnel as the primary reason for limited adult programming. Funding shortages (52.6%) and physical space limitations (40.6%) also heavily impact service delivery. Other barriers include a lack of staff training, outdated technology, and low perceived demand in some communities.

Competing institutional priorities, such as children's services, teen programs, or digital access initiatives, can further limit the resources allocated to adult learning. Despite this, 21.4 percent of libraries identified adult education as a high organizational priority, and another 62.1 percent named it a moderate priority.

Libraries that are able to offer more adult education programming often share certain conditions: supportive leadership, access to funding (often through grants or local partnerships), flexible space, and a staff culture committed to community-responsive service. These libraries are also more likely to use multiple formats, provide multilingual services, and invest in proactive outreach.

FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally reshaped how public libraries approach adult education programming. Research from 2023 indicates that libraries experienced unprecedented demand for digital literacy services and workforce development programming during the pandemic period. The shift to remote work and online learning created both opportunities and challenges for library adult education services.[40] Libraries rapidly adapted by developing hybrid programming models that combine in-person and virtual delivery methods.

84.9%

of libraries report active partnerships, averaging nearly four partner types each.

Post-pandemic research reveals that social isolation has become a significant barrier to adult programming participation. One director observed that programs must be 'compelling enough to draw people out of their homes,' highlighting the challenge of post-pandemic social reluctance. This has forced libraries to reconsider how they design and market adult programming to overcome increased reluctance to participate in group activities.[41]

Digital Equity as Central Mission

Recent research demonstrates that digital equity has moved from a supplementary service to a central component of library adult education programming. The 2023 Public Library Technology Survey found that 95.3% of public libraries now offer some form of digital literacy training, representing near-universal adoption of this service.[42]

Libraries have expanded technology lending programs, with 46.9% now offering internet hotspots for checkout, a 14.4% increase from 2020. Additionally, about one-quarter of libraries (24.6%) now have digital media production equipment, and over one-third (39.5%) offer maker production equipment for patron use.[43]

The expansion of 24/7 Wi-Fi access has become standard practice, with many libraries extending their Wi-Fi signals to serve patrons outside building hours.[44] This adaptation reflects recognition that adult learners often need flexible access to learning resources that accommodate work and family schedules.

An emerging trend is the implementation of digital navigator programs, with almost 30% of libraries now offering these services to provide individualized technology assistance.[45] These programs represent a more intensive, personalized approach to addressing digital literacy needs compared to traditional group training sessions.

Digital equity has moved from a supplementary service to a central component of adult education programming.

Current Barriers to Adult Education Programming

Recent studies confirm that time constraints remain the most significant barrier to adult learning participation, whether related to work or family obligations. The 2025 JFF Literature Review on adult learners identifies three persistent categories of barriers that directly impact library programming decisions:[46]

- Family obligations, financial constraints, work schedules, and transportation challenges continue to prevent adult participation in library programs. Recent research shows that 37% of college students with children complete their degrees within six years, compared to 60% of those without children, highlighting the challenges faced by parent-learners.[47]
- Library policies and procedures that lack flexibility for adult learners, including inflexible scheduling, complex registration processes, and limited faculty/staff availability outside traditional hours due to limited funding and staffing options.[48]
- Fear and anxiety about returning to learning environments, particularly for adults who have been away from formal education for extended periods.[49]

Post-Pandemic Barrier Changes

Research from 2022 indicates that adult learner barriers have been exacerbated by the pandemic and post-pandemic experience. Financial pressures have increased, with many adults working longer hours or multiple jobs, further limiting time available for educational programming. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) identifies that institutions must address these barriers through more flexible, supportive programming approaches.[50]

MORE THAN A CLASS—BUILDING COMMUNITY

In an English Conversation class at Clifton-Park Halfmoon Library (NY), adult learners meet weekly not only to improve their language skills but also to share life stories and support one another. One student from Korea said attending class helped them feel less alone and more connected. Through learning together, they gained confidence – and built a community.

Source: ***Clifton-Park Halfmoon Public Library "Your Library Stories"***

Community Partnerships and Collaborative Models

Learning Circles and Community College Partnerships

Recent research highlights the growing use of learning circles as an innovative partnership model.[51] These librarian-facilitated study groups support adults taking online courses together in library spaces, addressing both social isolation and learning support needs.

Community college partnerships have proven particularly effective for adult education programming. Research from 2024 shows that libraries partnering with adult education providers can leverage specialized expertise while providing accessible community locations for classes. [52]

Cross-Sector Collaboration Networks

The 2020–2025 strategic planning documents from multiple library systems emphasize the importance of developing formal partnership agreements with community organizations, workforce development agencies, and social services providers.[53] Research indicates that partnerships can increase program sustainability significantly while expanding the range of services libraries can offer.

Innovative Program Models and Service Delivery

Recent research shows a growing adoption of Excel Adult High School programs, offered through partnerships with educational technology companies. St. Louis County Library (MO) has graduated over 100 students from its online high school completion program and currently serves nearly 40 students. Denver Public Library invested in this programming after identifying increased dropout rates across Colorado.[54]

Maker spaces are increasingly being utilized for adult programming beyond traditional children's and teen activities. Libraries are incorporating 3D printing, coding workshops, and technical skill-building programs as part of their adult education offerings.[55] Marion County (WV) Public Library System's strategic plan

specifically mentions developing “transitioning Maker Spaces” to encourage collaborative, community-driven adult programming.[56]

Factors Influencing Library Decision-Making

There is a shift toward evidence-based programming decisions. Denver Public Library exemplifies this approach by using library and city surveys, community profiles at the neighborhood level, and Geographic Information System (GIS) data to inform adult programming investments.[57] This represents a significant evolution from programming based primarily on librarian intuition or traditional service models.

North Carolina’s adult programming environmental scan reveals varying levels of organizational commitment to adult programming, with commitment decreasing at higher organizational levels: 86% of librarians, 81% of administrators, 67% of staff, 50% of library boards, and only 45% of communities were perceived as highly committed.[58]

Taken together, the evidence shows that public libraries are indispensable providers of adult education, yet their full potential is often constrained by staffing, funding, and community commitment. What emerges most clearly is the dual role libraries now play: they remain trusted hubs for cultural and lifelong learning while also becoming frontline providers of digital equity and workforce development. To meet rising community needs, libraries will need sustained investment, deeper partnerships, and a stronger organizational commitment to adult education at every level. With these supports in place, libraries can move beyond filling gaps to shaping the future of lifelong learning in their communities.

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CHAPTER 4

Technological Resources and Barriers

FROM THE SURVEY

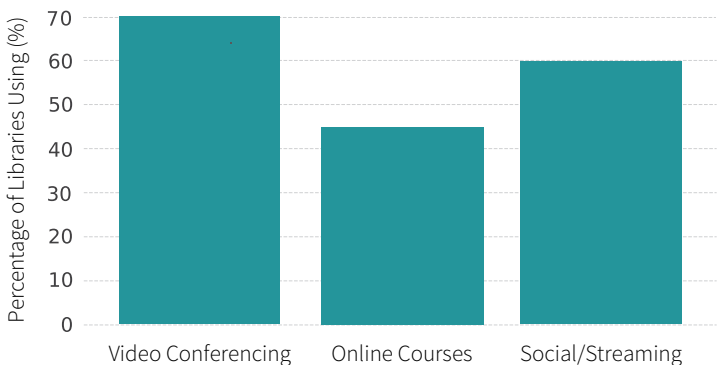
The Role of Technology in Supporting Adult Learning

Technology plays an increasingly important role in how public libraries deliver services, including adult education. Over 70 % of surveyed libraries report using virtual platforms to support programming and services, with many employing a combination of tools to enhance learning. The most used technologies include video conferencing platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams (used by 73.8 percent of libraries), followed by online course platforms such as Coursera and LinkedIn Learning (45.2 percent), and social media or streaming services like Facebook and YouTube (39.1 percent). These platforms allow libraries to deliver flexible, on-demand learning to patrons who may be unable to attend in-person sessions. (See figure 4.1.)

Some libraries also use online portals, such as their own websites or DigitalLearn.org, to share asynchronous content. Specialized platforms mentioned include Cell-Ed, Burlington English, Reading Horizons, and state-provided learning systems, which support ESL learners, literacy development, and professional development goals.

FIGURE 4.1

Adoption Rates of Virtual Platforms in Libraries



Hybrid delivery models—blending virtual and in-person formats—are emerging as key strategies to increase flexibility and accessibility, especially for patrons who work irregular hours or face mobility challenges.

Challenges Patrons Face with Technology

Despite its potential, technology remains a double-edged sword in adult education. Patrons face numerous barriers, most notably limited digital skills (42.9%), lack of interest or low engagement with online programs (42.0%), and technical difficulties such as unreliable internet or devices (33.2%). These issues are particularly pronounced in rural areas and among older adults, immigrants, and low-income patrons.

42.9%

of patrons face limited digital skills, creating barriers to learning, services, and jobs.

Engagement with virtual programming is often lower than with in-person offerings. Among libraries that offer both formats, 60.8 percent report lower attendance for virtual sessions. Only 2.8 percent report higher engagement online. This suggests that digital programming must be accompanied by support services to be effective. Or that most patrons are simply not interested in virtual programming. Attending in-person programming provides connections with other people, which is particularly important during the current loneliness epidemic.[59]

Accessibility concerns also emerged. Some patrons lack the devices necessary to participate, while others struggle with the platforms themselves due to disabilities, language barriers, or usability. Though some libraries provide assistive technology or specialized e-learning platforms, adoption remains inconsistent. Only 10.8 percent of libraries report high engagement with their website-based learning portals.

Library Strategies for Addressing These Challenges

To counter these barriers, libraries have implemented a range of digital support services. The most common intervention is one-on-one technology coaching, offered by 80.4 percent of libraries. Other strategies include device lending programs such as loaner laptops, tablets, or Wi-Fi hotspots (50.0%), and structured digital literacy classes or tutorials (23.0%).

FIGURE 4.2

Barriers to Technology Use in Adult Learning

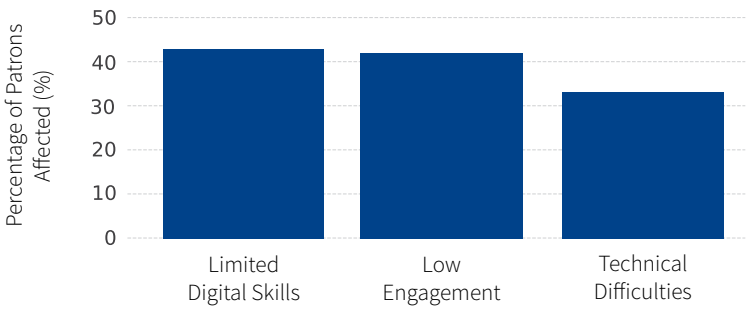
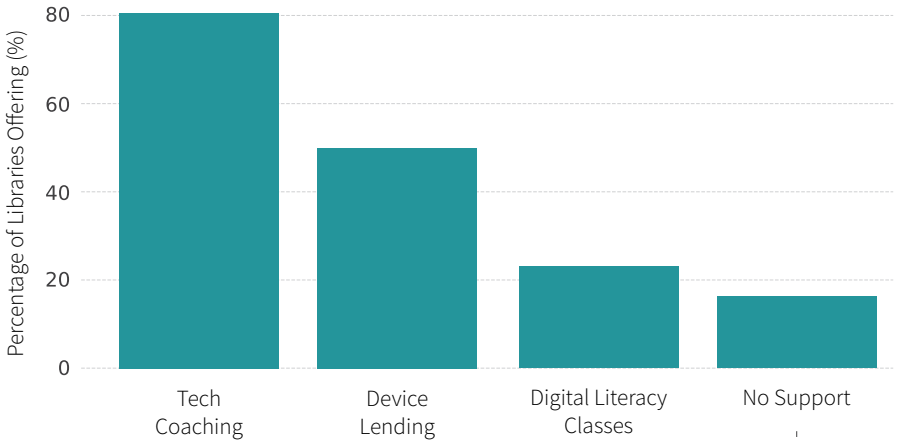


FIGURE 4.3

Library Strategies for Addressing Technology Barriers



Innovative approaches mentioned by respondents include "Library in a Box" self-paced learning kits, staff-facilitated tech help drop-in hours, and partnerships with organizations that provide specialized instruction. A number of libraries also offer hybrid program options, enabling patrons to choose the format that best fits their needs.

Still, 16.2 percent of libraries reported offering no additional tech support beyond access to devices or Wi-Fi, indicating that gaps in staff capacity or funding continue to limit broader adoption of these services.

Other Barriers to Accessing Programming and Communication Challenges

In addition to technology-related issues, patrons face other systemic and logistical barriers to participating in adult education programs. The most reported include:

- Lack of time due to work or family responsibilities (80.7%)
- Scheduling conflicts (66.8%)
- Low awareness of programs (57.7%)
- Transportation barriers (56.2%)
- Childcare needs (51.4%)

80.4%

of libraries offer one-on-one technology coaching to help patrons overcome digital barriers.

These barriers suggest that increasing access is not solely a matter of providing content. Libraries that offer multiple time slots, asynchronous learning, or simultaneous adult and children's programs report better engagement.

On the communication front, libraries have adopted a multi-channel promotional approach. Nearly all promote programs using in-library methods (97.4%), their websites (95.2%), and social media (93.5%). Outreach beyond library walls, including flyers, community calendars, and school visits, is used by 68.8 percent. However, word-of-mouth remains a major driver of participation, used by 82.7 percent of libraries, emphasizing the importance of relationship-based promotion.

To further improve awareness and engagement, libraries could expand outreach methods, partnerships with trusted community organizations, and targeted communications tailored to underrepresented groups.

FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Adult learners face a complex landscape of technological opportunities and challenges that significantly impact their educational journeys and access to public library services. This literature review examines the role of technology in supporting adult learning, challenges faced by public library patrons, and strategies libraries employ to address barriers to access and participation.

The Role of Technology in Supporting Adult Learning

E-learning Platforms and Digital Delivery

Technology has transformed adult education by offering new tools and methods that address the unique needs of adult learners. Mobile learning has emerged as particularly effective, leveraging the ubiquity of smartphones to deliver educational content anytime, anywhere through interactive applications, quizzes, videos, and microlearning modules.[60] This flexibility allows adult learners to integrate study into their daily routines wherever they are, whenever they have time. Helping to accommodate work and family responsibilities.

Blended learning combines online and face-to-face instruction. This approach provides adult learners with the flexibility of online learning while maintaining the personal interaction and support of traditional classroom settings.[61] Research demonstrates that blended learning environments can enhance adult engagement by providing both structured support and flexible access to educational resources.[62]

The effectiveness of e-learning for adult education stems from several key advantages: increased flexibility and accessibility that remove geographical and time barriers, enhanced motivation and engagement through interactive elements and gamification, and cost-effectiveness that eliminates expenses related to physical classrooms, textbooks, and transportation.[63]

Digital Literacy Frameworks for Adult Learners

The Maryland Department of Labor's Digital Literacy Framework identifies seven interconnected elements essential for digitally literate adult learners: Technical, Civic, Communicative, Collaborative, Computational Thinking, Investigative, and Productive skills. This framework emphasizes that digital literacy extends beyond operational skills to encompass cognitive processes such as evaluating, sharing, and communicating information.[64]

Research shows that adult learners benefit from contextual learning approaches where digital skills are embedded in real-world applications relevant to their personal and professional goals.[65] The Barbara Bush Foundation's research

indicates that adults are most motivated to develop digital skills when they see practical applications and immediate benefits.[66]

Assistive Technologies and Accessibility

Assistive technology (AT) serves as a critical resource for adult learners with disabilities, providing both remedial and compensatory support in educational settings. AT can enhance functional capabilities in reading, writing, spelling, mathematics, listening, reasoning, and organization, thereby promoting independence and reducing anxiety while fostering self-esteem.[67]

Screen readers and text-to-speech software support learners with visual impairments or reading difficulties, while speech recognition programs assist those with stronger verbal than writing skills. Word prediction software helps learners with spelling and grammar challenges, and alternative keyboards can be customized with graphics, color coding, and simplified input options.[68]

A systematic review and meta-analysis confirmed that AT interventions significantly improve employment performance and educational outcomes for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Word processing, multimedia, and hypertext interventions demonstrated the highest effectiveness rates.[69]

Barriers to Assistive Technology Access

Despite the proven benefits of AT, significant barriers persist in access and adoption. Research indicates that up to 30% of AT devices are abandoned within a year of adoption, often due to inadequate user input in selection processes, insufficient training, or mismatched needs assessment.[70] Effective AT service delivery requires collaborative, client-centered approaches that address both functional and psychological needs.

CROSSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

One adult learner came to the library struggling with both literacy and technology. With support from library tutors, they not only gained stronger reading and writing skills but also learned how to navigate computers and digital tools. These new skills helped them earn a GED, secure employment, and better support their family, showing how libraries can bridge barriers to both education and opportunity.

Source: ***A.K. Smiley Public Library – "Adult Literacy Graduates Achieve Personal and Business Success"***

The Digital Divide remains a persistent challenge, disproportionately affecting rural, older, and low-income communities.

Challenges Patrons Face with Technology

The digital divide represents a persistent challenge affecting library patrons' ability to access and utilize technology-based resources and services. An estimated one-third of Americans still lack internet access at home, with disparities most pronounced among minorities, older adults, rural communities, and those with lower incomes or education levels.[71]

Income emerges as the largest determinant of internet access, and a significant percentage of the population relies on their smartphone for internet access.[72] This disparity directly impacts library usage patterns, as lower-income communities rely more heavily on libraries for technology access.

Older adults face particular challenges in technology adoption and usage. Studies found that internet access rates were significantly lower among rural residents compared to urban or suburban residents.[73] Rural older adults showed more negative attitudes toward technology, perceiving it as "too complicated," "too hard to learn," and less accessible.[74]

Socioeconomic and Educational Barriers

The digital divide correlates strongly with educational attainment and socioeconomic status. Research indicates that fully 25% of workers lack foundational digital skills, with 29% of those having no digital skills and up to 40% of American students from Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities experiencing insufficient digital literacy.[75]

For adult learners specifically, limited digital literacy creates compounding barriers as educational institutions increasingly require baseline technological competencies for participation. The "homework gap" affects 35% of lower-income households with school-age children who lack broadband internet access at home.[76]

Privacy and Security Concerns

Library patrons face increasing privacy challenges as libraries adopt digital technologies. A comprehensive study of over 800 public libraries found that most libraries identify technical knowledge as their primary weakness in protecting patron privacy.[77] Libraries struggle with limited training, budget constraints, and inadequate tools to maintain privacy protections in digital environments. The study revealed that while all library professionals recognize the importance of privacy protection, practices vary significantly across institutions, with smaller libraries particularly challenged in implementing comprehensive privacy safeguards.

Communication and Awareness Challenges

A fundamental challenge facing libraries is that many potential users remain unaware of available services and resources. One of the primary reasons people don't fully utilize public library services is inadequate information about new and non-traditional offerings.

Communication barriers include:

- Limited marketing budgets that restrict outreach capacity[78]
- Outdated perceptions of library services among community members[79]
- Ineffective communication channels that don't reach target populations[80]
- Staff capacity constraints that limit community engagement efforts[81]

While libraries increasingly utilize digital marketing strategies, effectiveness varies significantly based on resources and expertise. Research indicates that subscription costs are the top factor influencing digital content offerings.[82]

Professional Development and Staff Training

Library staff require ongoing professional development to effectively serve adult learners facing technological barriers. Research indicates that a lack of staff expertise or training (27%) significantly hinders libraries' ability to offer effective technology programs.[83]

Professional development priorities should include:

- Adult learning theory and culturally responsive pedagogy
- Technology troubleshooting and digital literacy instruction
- Community engagement and partnership development
- Privacy protection and ethical technology use

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CHAPTER 5

Measuring Success and Outcomes

98.3%

of libraries track attendance, making it the most universal evaluation method.

FROM THE SURVEY

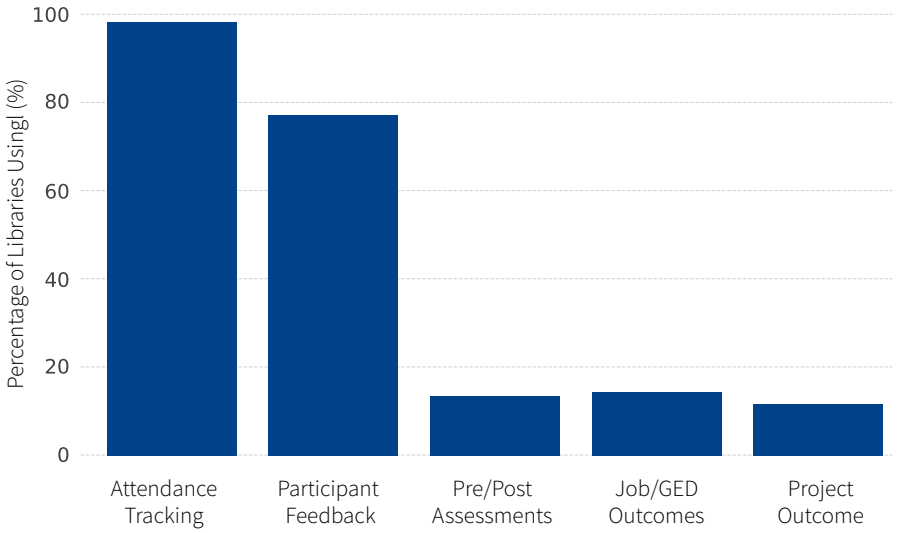
Key Metrics and Evaluation Tools

Most libraries measure program success through basic metrics like attendance and participant feedback. According to the survey, 98.3 percent of libraries track attendance, making it the most universally used evaluation method. Feedback from participants is also widely gathered, reported by 77.2 percent of libraries.

More rigorous outcome measures are far less common, including pre/post assessments (13.4%), tracking real-world results such as job placement or GED attainment (14.5%), and use of formal tools like Project Outcome (11.6%). (See figure 5.1.) These findings indicate that while libraries are committed to evaluation, most rely on informal or surface-level measures. Evaluation practices vary widely, ranging from basic to advanced:

FIGURE 5.1

Library Evaluation Methods



- Basic—Attendance only (63 libraries)
- Intermediate—Attendance + feedback or usage (196 libraries)
- Advanced—Structured outcomes and formal tools (92 libraries)

This points to an opportunity to expand evidence-based evaluation tools that show the broader impact of adult education programs.

Collecting and Analyzing Feedback from Adult Learners

The most common form of feedback collection is informal patron comments, often gathered through verbal feedback, observation, or casual conversations. Libraries also mentioned using short post-program surveys or email follow-ups. Anecdotal evidence, such as repeat attendance, thank-you notes, or patrons traveling long distances to attend, is often used to gauge program value.

A few libraries document informal debriefs for future planning. Some cited partnerships (e.g., with adult education providers housed in the library) as sources of learner outcomes, such as GED completion or continued participation.

While these approaches provide useful real-time insights, they rarely generate quantifiable data. Formal surveys, focus groups, or structured interviews are used by less than half of libraries (45.2%), despite their value in revealing program effectiveness, unmet needs, and long-term impact.

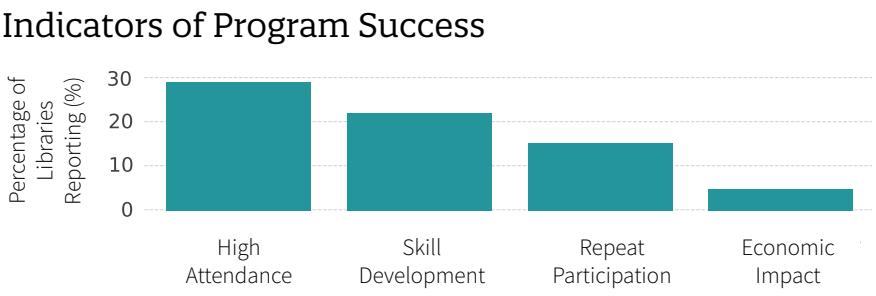
Factors Demonstrating Measurable Success

Libraries reporting strong outcomes often linked success to thoughtful program design and alignment with community needs.

High-performing programs often shared common traits (see figure 5.2):

- High Attendance—28.4 percent of libraries identified this as a top indicator of success.
- Skill Development—21.6 percent cited measurable learning outcomes.
- Repeat Participation—Some programs had waiting lists or saw patrons returning multiple times.
- Economic Impact—A small but notable number (4.7%) mentioned job skills or career advancement as direct results.

FIGURE 5.2



Most libraries reply on informal or surface-level measures to assess success, highlighting the opportunity for growth in rigorous outcome measurement.

Examples of successful programs include:

- Technology/digital skills workshops where participants received certificates or transitioned to job searches.
- Craft and chat or arts-based programs that not only filled rooms but also fostered community-building, social connections, and support.
- Estate planning classes and professional headshot sessions attracted patrons for high-value practical outcomes and exposed them to other library services.

Libraries also reported using gamification strategies, such as a "passport system" to track attendance and incentivize completion, tools that helped both engagement and tracking.

Potential Data Sources for Measuring Library Outcomes

PLA offers a range of guidance, tools, and resources to support public libraries in measuring patron outcomes such as knowledge gain, increased confidence, and application of skills. Libraries that adopt such tools can generate more nuanced data and align outcomes with institutional and funder priorities.

Additional potential data sources include:

- Library usage statistics (e.g., program registration, room reservations)
- Digital platform analytics (e.g., engagement with online courses or video recordings)
- Partnership outcome data (e.g., referrals, completed certifications, GED pass rates)

Broadening use of these data sources could help libraries better demonstrate return on investment and guide continuous improvement.

A library workshop helped an adult learner build confidence in basic skills and job-search tools. After finishing the program, they applied for and landed work in retail, citing that the hands-on practice and encouraging feedback made all the difference. It wasn't just about the job—it was knowing they could set goals, follow through, and feel capable.

Source: ***Marketplace – "How Public Libraries Help People Find Jobs"***

FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Public libraries need stronger evaluation frameworks to demonstrate impact beyond traditional metrics like circulation and attendance.

Key Metrics and Evaluation Tools

Project Outcome

(https://www.ala.org/pla/data/outcomemeasurement)

The Project Outcome surveys, developed by the Public Library Association, represent the most comprehensive and widely adopted outcome measurement instruments specifically designed for public libraries. The freely available surveys and resources help libraries understand and share the impact of essential programs across nine key service areas.

Core Outcome Measures:

- Knowledge: What patrons learned that was new to them
- Confidence: Increased self-assurance or self-reliance
- Application: Whether patrons will apply or use what they learned
- Awareness: Enhanced recognition of available resources and services

Service Areas Assessed:

- Civic/Community Engagement
- Digital Learning
- Early Childhood Literacy
- Economic Development
- Education/Lifelong Learning
- Health
- Job Skills
- Library Technology
- Summer Reading

Impact Survey: Technology-Focused Assessment

(https://www.ala.org/pla/data/impactsurvey)

The Impact Survey, originally developed by the University of Washington's Information School, measures patron outcomes related to public library technology services. They survey instruments are available from the Public Library Association for libraries to evaluate how patrons use library technology resources, including public computers, wireless networks, and digital literacy training across eight outcome areas, including education, employment, health and wellness, and civic engagement.

Benchmark: Library Metrics and Trends

(https://librarybenchmark.org/)

Benchmark, launched by the Public Library Association in 2021, serves as the newest tool for data-driven planning and advocacy in public libraries. This platform provides comparative data and trends to help libraries understand their

performance relative to peer libraries and make informed strategic decisions. Robust dashboards incorporate data from the PLA annual surveys, IMLS Public Libraries Survey, Census Bureau's American Community Survey, and the historic Public Library Data Service.

PLA Annual Surveys

(https://www.ala.org/pla/data/plasurveys)

Since 2020 PLA has conducted annual surveys of public libraries on a rotating cycle of topics: Technology; Staff; and Services for Strong Communities. The surveys complement other existing data collection efforts in the library field, capturing information such as the types of programs and services libraries offer, the condition of infrastructure, staff roles, partnerships, and more. Results are available in published reports on the PLA website and the data is available in full from Benchmark.

Counting on Results (CoR) Assessment Tools

(https://www.lrs.org/closer-look-studies/counting-on-results-new-tools-for-outcome-based-evaluation-of-public-libraries/)

The Counting on Results project developed specialized tools for outcome-based evaluation of public library services, including:

- Customizable software for collecting standardized data on library outputs and observable patron activities
- Standardized questionnaires eliciting outcome reports directly from patrons
- Data collection capabilities across six service categories aligned with the Public Library Association's Planning for Results model

Collecting and Analyzing Feedback from Adult Learners

Multi-Method Data Collection Strategies

Effective feedback collection benefits from multiple methods tailored to patron needs and library capacity.

Digital Methods:

- Email campaigns using membership databases to reach registered users
- QR codes placed in high-traffic areas, books, and program materials for quick survey access
- Social media integration through Facebook and Instagram to engage broader audiences
- Online survey platforms embedded in library websites and catalogs

In-Person Methods:

- Intercept interviews using tablets for quick patron surveys during visits
- Survey kiosks at entry points and circulation desks
- Paper surveys distributed during programs and events
- Focus groups with 6–12 participants for detailed qualitative feedback[84]

Best Practices for Adult Learner Surveys

Research identifies several key principles for effective adult learner feedback collection:[85]

Survey Design:

- Keep surveys concise (8–12 questions) to maintain engagement and avoid survey fatigue
- Use clear, jargon-free language appropriate for diverse literacy levels
- Mix closed-ended and open-ended questions for both quantitative and qualitative data
- Include demographic questions to understand how outcomes differ across populations

Distribution Strategies:

- Time surveys during periods of steady patron traffic
- Provide multiple completion options (online, paper, mobile-friendly)
- Offer incentives like library merchandise or entry into prize drawings
- Use multiple distribution channels to reach diverse patron populations

Implementation Tips:

- Train staff on survey administration and importance of feedback
- Create anonymous options to encourage honest responses
- Follow up with participants to measure longer-term impact
- Integrate feedback collection into regular program workflows

Focus Group Methodology

Focus groups provide rich qualitative data about adult learner experiences and reveal insights not captured through surveys. Public libraries have successfully used focus groups for:[86]

- Strategic planning processes to understand community needs and priorities
- Program evaluation to gather detailed feedback on specific services
- Service development to test new program concepts before implementation
- Community engagement to build relationships and gather input on library direction

Best practices include using neutral facilitators, maintaining groups of 6–12 participants, allowing 1–2 hours for discussion, and ensuring diverse representation across community demographics.

Taken together, survey findings and research show that while libraries consistently measure participation, they often stop short of capturing deeper outcomes like skill development, confidence, or economic advancement. Expanding use of structured tools such as Project Outcome, Benchmark, and Impact Survey would allow libraries to demonstrate their value more convincingly to stakeholders and funders. By combining attendance metrics with learner feedback, outcome-based assessments, and community data, libraries can create a more complete picture of adult education's return on investment and its role in strengthening communities.

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CHAPTER 6

Funding and Sustainability

FROM THE SURVEY

52.6%

of libraries report insufficient funding as a barrier to sustaining adult learning programs.

Overview of Funding Opportunities for Library Programs

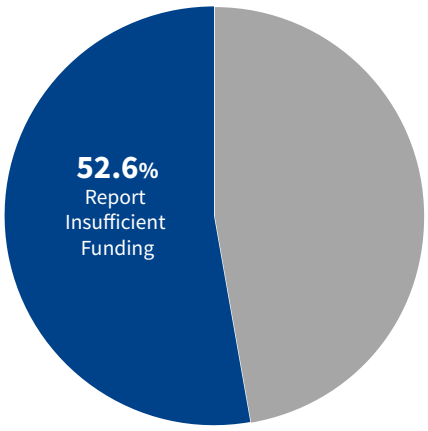
Funding remains one of the most significant factors shaping the scope and sustainability of adult learning programs in public libraries. Among surveyed libraries, 52.6 percent identified insufficient funding as a major barrier to expanding or maintaining their adult education offerings (see figure 6.1). Limited resources often restrict program frequency, instructor availability, technology access, and the ability to serve underserved groups such as language learners and adults with low literacy.

While the survey did not ask about specific funding sources, open-ended responses and national trends suggest libraries rely on a mix of local government allocations, grants, donations, and in some cases, corporate or nonprofit sponsorships. Partnerships with healthcare providers, workforce agencies, or adult education nonprofits can provide both expertise and shared funding.

Libraries also benefit from national and regional grant opportunities. These include state library agency grants, foundation funding, and federal or state workforce development programs that align with adult education goals.

FIGURE 6.1

Funding as a Barrier to Adult Learning Programs



Strategies for the Long-Term Sustainability of Adult Learning Programs

Sustainability hinges on more than just one-time funding. Survey responses identified multiple strategies that libraries are using to sustain adult learning programs over time:

- **Partnerships:** The most frequently cited strategy, with 34.4 percent of libraries reporting that partnerships help extend programming capacity and cost-sharing. Collaborators often provide instructors, venues, marketing, or direct financial contributions.
- **Flexible Staffing Models:** Some libraries use trained volunteers, community experts, or embedded partner staff to offer instruction without increasing internal personnel costs.
- **Shared Resources:** Libraries noted that co-hosting programs with nearby institutions, such as community colleges or local nonprofits, can lower costs while improving reach.
- **Efficient Programming Formats:** Libraries that offer hybrid or asynchronous programs reduce the need for repeated instruction and can reach larger or more flexible audiences.
- **Community Relevance:** Libraries that consistently align offerings with specific community needs, like digital skills for job seekers or ESL classes for immigrants, report stronger attendance, repeat participation, and increased justification for ongoing support. (See figure 6.2.)

34.4%

of libraries rely on partnerships to extend programming capacity and share costs.

Libraries that document outcomes and gather participant testimonials are better positioned to advocate for ongoing investment from funders and local decision-makers.

Advocacy Strategies to Help Libraries Secure Funding and Support

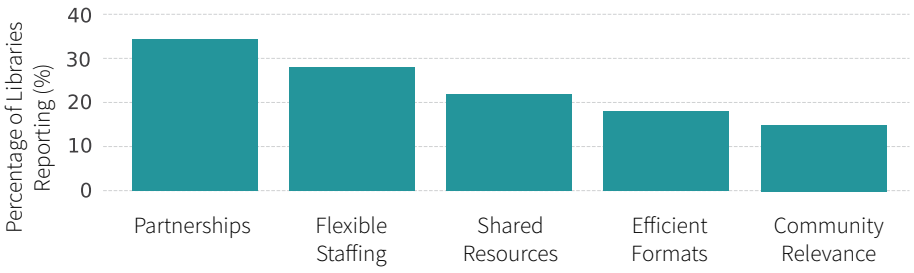
Securing sustainable funding often depends on effective advocacy, both within the library's institution and to external stakeholders. Survey data indicate that libraries with high satisfaction levels in their programming often pair service delivery with active outreach to decision-makers and the broader community.

Recommended advocacy strategies include:

- **Telling the Story:** Using both quantitative (attendance, skills gained) and qualitative (personal success stories) data to demonstrate impact.
- **Engaging Stakeholders:** Inviting funders, elected officials, and community leaders to attend programs or receive direct reports on outcomes.

FIGURE 6.2

Strategies for Program Sustainability



- **Leveraging Partners:** Asking partner organizations to co-advocate for library programming, especially when outcomes align with shared missions (e.g., workforce development, public health, civic engagement).
- **Applying Strategic Messaging:** Framing adult education programs as essential infrastructure for workforce readiness, digital inclusion, and lifelong learning.
- **Aligning with Broader Policy Goals:** Demonstrating how library-based adult learning supports local economic development, public health goals, or educational equity can strengthen the case for funding from multiple sectors.

Libraries that integrate programming, partnerships, and outcome data into a clear narrative are best positioned to secure long-term resources.

FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

While most pubic library services are funded through local sources, recent threats to federal funding at IMLS, the Department of Education, and other federal agencies are disrupting programming and increasing uncertainty for the future.

The dismantling of IMLS represents a catastrophic reduction in federal support for libraries.

2025 IMLS Defunding Crisis

The most pressing development for libraries is the March 14, 2025, executive order directing IMLS and six other agencies be eliminated to the maximum extent of the law. The executive order came the same day the Senate passed and President Trump signed a continuing resolution that would fund IMLS through the end of Fiscal Year 2025. The impact was immediate and severe, including staff placed on administrative leave, and many grants and contracts terminated. From technology classes for jobseekers to literacy programs to shared digital resources for education and learning, IMLS funding makes a real, concrete difference in the lives of Americans every day. The president's executive order puts all of those services at risk.

Two lawsuits, one by the ALA and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), were filed in April 2025 and led to a temporary restraining order in one case and a preliminary injunction in the other. Both legal actions seek to restore IMLS funding and services, and are still in the courts as this paper goes to print. Library advocacy also continues in Congress to ensure IMLS funding for Fiscal Year 2026.[87]

Overview of Current National Funding Opportunities

Despite the IMLS crisis, multiple funding streams remain available for library adult learning programs from sources established since 2020:

- Distribution of funding source types available for adult learning programs in public libraries
- Federal Funding Sources, which may also be eliminated or significantly reduced.

Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA)

- Provides federal grants to states for adult education and literacy services
- States distribute funds to local providers, including libraries
- Formula-based funding supporting basic education, GED preparation, ESL programs, and family literacy

Department of Education Programs

- Adult Education Basic Grants to States support workplace literacy, family literacy, and English literacy programs.
- Funding limited to adults and out-of-school youth age 16 and older

Private Foundation and Corporate Support

Dollar General Literacy Foundation

- Adult Literacy Grants: Funds organizations providing adult basic education, GED preparation, or English language acquisition
- Ten-year track record with over 200 libraries supported

WHEN GRANTS FADE, SERVICES SHRINK

A small library in rural Missouri used IMLS grant funds to run summer reading programs, tech kits, and an Adult High School credential program. When the federal funding stopped arriving—still owed tens of thousands in reimbursements—it had to scale back summer programs and limit technology support. For community members, that meant losing access to learning tools, social space, and opportunities many depended on.

Source: ***KBIA — "Missouri library services at risk due to federal funding cuts"***

ProLiteracy Funding Programs

- Literacy Opportunity Fund: Grants up to $6,000 for general operating expenses, funded by Nora Roberts Foundation
- Quarterly application cycles supporting diverse literacy organizations

First Literacy Grants

- Supports innovative Adult Basic Education programs and curriculum initiatives
- 2025–2026 grants ranging from $2,500–$7,500 for specific projects
- Focus on creative approaches like mother/child reading programs for incarcerated women and digital storytelling initiatives

Long-Term Sustainability Strategies

Libraries should build diversified funding portfolios that combine federal, state, private, corporate, and local sources. The IMLS crisis illustrates the risk of over-reliance on federal dollars. Approaches include:

National Advocacy Campaigns

ALA leads several national efforts to protect and strengthen federal library funding.

- ALA's Fund Libraries is a coordinated advocacy campaign that mobilizes supporters to speak out in support of strong federal investment in libraries. It provides messaging, tools, and easy ways for individuals and organizations to contact their members of Congress. Learn more: ala.org/advocacy/fund-libraries
- Show Up for Our Libraries is a grassroots action initiative designed to turn advocacy into visible, collective impact. Through rallies, legislative outreach, and community engagement, it empowers people to demonstrate public support for libraries nationwide. Learn more: ala.org/advocacy/show-up

Federal Advocacy

- Contact Congressional representatives to support IMLS restoration
- Participate in ALA's "Fund Libraries" campaign and Show Up for Libraries initiative
- Submit videos and stories to state departments documenting library impact

State and Local Advocacy

- Engage with state library agencies and state library associations to support their education and advocacy efforts.
- Build relationships with local government officials and library board members
- Document and communicate program outcomes to stakeholders

Operational Sustainability

Partnership Development

- Collaborate with adult education providers, community colleges, and workforce development boards
- Partner with community-based organizations serving target populations
- Develop referral networks for comprehensive learner support

Professional Development and Capacity Building

- Invest in staff training for grant writing and program development
- Participate in continuing education focused on adult learning best practices
- Build expertise in evidence-based program evaluation

Technology and Efficiency

- Leverage digital platforms for program delivery and resource sharing
- Utilize online learning resources to extend program reach

Innovation in Service Delivery

Sustainable Programming Models

- Implement environmentally sound, economically feasible, and socially equitable programming approaches
- Develop train-the-trainer models to expand program capacity
- Create peer learning and support networks among adult learners

Community-Centered Design

- Use co-design approaches with adult learners and community members
- Implement trauma-informed and culturally responsive programming
- Develop referral systems to community service providers

Evidence-Based Program Evaluation

Sustainability requires demonstrating clear impact through rigorous evaluation. Libraries should implement:

Outcome Measurement

- Track learner persistence and achievement gains
- Document employment and educational outcomes
- Measure community engagement and civic participation

Data Collection Systems

- Utilize standardized assessment tools when appropriate
- Implement participant tracking systems
- Collect qualitative feedback from learners and partners

Reporting and Communication

- Develop compelling narratives about program impact
- Create visual representations of outcomes for diverse audiences
- Share evaluation findings with funders and stakeholders

Recommendations for Moving Forward

Immediate (2025–2026): Diversify funding, engage in federal advocacy, strengthen local/state ties, document impacts.

Medium-Term (2026–2028): Expand partnership networks, implement sustainable programming models, build staff capacity.

Long-Term (2028+): Establish libraries as leaders in community-based adult learning, develop endowments, scale models through train-the-trainer, influence state/federal policy.

Notes

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CHAPTER 7

Trends and Innovations

FROM THE SURVEY

Emerging Trends in Adult Learning Methodologies

Public libraries are adopting a variety of modern adult learning methodologies to enhance engagement, retention, and outcomes. While traditional workshops and services remain common, libraries increasingly report incorporating gamification, hands-on learning, and peer-based approaches into their program designs. Examples include "passport" programs that reward attendance with stamps or prizes, "speed dating with books" events that make literary engagement interactive, and "craft and chat" sessions that combine learning with social connection.

Hands-on workshops in areas such as arts, gardening, and technology are increasingly popular, giving participants tangible outcomes. These informal, participant-driven models reinforce retention by connecting learning with real-world relevance. Peer learning, such as language conversation circles or collaborative genealogy projects, was also mentioned in open-ended responses as a strategy for promoting inclusivity and community ownership of the learning process.

Libraries are tailoring programs to different learner needs, with specific strategies emerging for seniors, young adults, and language learners, including culturally responsive facilitation, bilingual instruction, and one-on-one support.

Libraries are increasingly embracing gamification, peer learning, and hands-on approaches to boost adult engagement.

Expanding Access Through Virtual and Hybrid Learning Models

Virtual and hybrid programming models have become vital tools for expanding adult education access. As of the survey, 70.5 percent of libraries use virtual platforms, and those that do report using an average of two platforms, demonstrating a multi-modal approach. Most commonly used tools include video conferencing (Zoom, Teams), online course platforms (Coursera, LinkedIn Learning), and streaming/social platforms (Facebook Live, YouTube).

Although virtual attendance is often lower than in-person engagement, hybrid formats are helping bridge the gap. Some libraries now record programs for on-demand viewing, offer simultaneous live/virtual sessions, or use self-paced "Library in a Box" kits that patrons can check out for at-home learning.

These innovations help patrons facing work, transportation, or caregiving barriers. Still, success depends on digital literacy and reliable device access, challenges libraries continue to address through tech coaching, device lending, and infrastructure upgrades.

70.5%

of libraries use virtual platforms, with most relying on at least two tools.

How Library Resources Can Be Better Positioned to Meet Emerging Needs

To meet growing demand, libraries must evolve from static programming toward responsive, learner-centered design. Survey data shows growing demand for programs in digital skills, ESL, basic literacy, and technology access, yet these remain underdeveloped due to capacity limits. Only 28.7 percent of libraries offer basic literacy programming, and just 21.9 percent support high school equivalency, despite strong community need.

Innovative Approaches to Attract and Retain Adult Learners

Libraries shared a variety of innovative strategies to attract and retain adult learners. These include:

- Locally Relevant Content: Programs rooted in community culture or history, such as regional gardening, local art, or estate planning.
- Flexible Scheduling: Evening, weekend, and drop-in formats to accommodate working adults, caregivers, and older adults.
- Social Learning Environments: Learning tied to food, discussion, or group projects.
- High-Value Incentives: Professional headshots, certificates, or giveaways to encourage participation.
- Embedded Services: Collaborations with social workers, adult education providers, and legal clinics offering holistic support.

INNOVATION MAKES EVERYONE WELCOME

A library makerspace event opened its doors to teens with visual impairments and adults with cognitive disabilities, turning tinkering into an inclusive experience. Stations like “wiggle robots,” a “marble run,” and a wind tube let participants explore playful STEM challenges through touch, sound, and collaboration. Attendees reported feeling proud when they created something themselves, something they once assumed was out of reach.

Source: ***MakeAbility: Creating Accessible Makerspace Events in a Public Library***

Libraries also noted greater success with personalized outreach (direct invitations from staff) than with general marketing, building trust especially for adults returning to education after long absences.

Together, these trends suggest a future where libraries act not just as content providers, but as facilitators of lifelong learning, inclusion, and empowerment.

Public libraries are evolving to meet the increasingly diverse and complex educational needs of adult learners. Responding to shifts in technology, pedagogy, and user behavior, libraries are embracing innovative methodologies and flexible delivery formats to engage adults of all ages.

28.7%

of libraries offer basic literacy programming, leaving a significant unmet need in communities.

FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Literacy and Technology Skills

Digital illiteracy represents one of the most pressing educational challenges facing American adults today. According to recent data, approximately one-third of U.S. workers lack essential digital skills, with 13% having no digital skills whatsoever and another 18% possessing only limited capabilities. The gap disproportionately affects Black (50%) and Hispanic (57%) workers.[88]

By 2030, 90 percent of jobs will require digital skills, yet many adults still struggle with basic computer use, email, web search, and software applications. The issue extends to digital problem-solving—navigating websites, evaluating content, and managing digital processes.

Even younger adults are affected: 24 percent of those without digital skills are ages 16–34, showing that growing up with smartphones does not guarantee workplace-ready digital competencies.

Health Literacy and Wellness Education

Health literacy represents another critical area where adult educational needs are severely undermet. A staggering 88% of U.S. adults have inadequate health literacy, with only 12% demonstrating proficient skills in finding, understanding, and using health information to make informed decisions.[89] This deficiency directly impacts health outcomes, with higher health literacy associated with 31% more flu shots, 26% fewer avoidable hospitalizations, and 13% lower healthcare costs per beneficiary.[90]

The complexity of navigating modern healthcare systems, understanding medical forms, medication instructions, and insurance requirements creates substantial barriers for most adults. This need is particularly acute among older adults, with 71% over age 60 having difficulty with print health materials and 80% struggling with medical documents and forms.[91]

Financial Literacy and Economic Security

According to the Federal Reserve's 2022 survey, about 28 percent of non-retirees have no retirement savings at all, and only 31 percent believe their plan is on track. Meanwhile, other surveys suggest that over half of U.S. households report living paycheck to paycheck, indicating a broad and deep need for financial-literacy support.

Adults express strong interest in topics like budgeting, retirement planning, and debt management. Yet programs remain fragmented, and many adults understand basic concepts but struggle to apply them in daily life.

Adult learners consistently express strong interest in financial education topics, particularly budgeting and saving, retirement planning, and debt management. However, many adults lack access to comprehensive financial education programs that address their specific life situations and challenges. The gap between financial knowledge and financial behavior remains substantial, with many adults understanding basic concepts but struggling to implement sound financial practices in their daily lives.

Entrepreneurship and Small Business Skills

There is significant interest in entrepreneurship education among adults, driven by the growth of the gig economy and desires for career autonomy. Adults seek training in:

- Business planning and strategy development
- Financial management and funding acquisition
- Marketing and digital marketing strategies
- Legal and regulatory compliance
- Innovation and problem-solving approaches

Entrepreneurship education serves multiple purposes, providing real-world context for basic skills development while fostering creativity, adaptability, and self-reliance. These programs are particularly valuable for disenfranchised communities, offering pathways to economic empowerment and self-sufficiency.

Caregiving and Family Support Skills

The aging population and increasing care responsibilities have created substantial demand for caregiving education.[92] Adults need training in:

- Personal care techniques and safety protocols
- Communication with healthcare providers and systems
- Managing medical conditions and medications
- Understanding insurance and healthcare navigation
- Self-care and caregiver stress management

This education is crucial for both professional caregivers and family members taking on care responsibilities, with training programs addressing everything from basic care techniques to specialized knowledge about conditions like dementia.

Civic Engagement and Community Participation

Civic education for adults has emerged as an essential need for maintaining democratic participation and community engagement. This includes:[93]

- Understanding government processes and structures
- Community organizing and advocacy skills
- Voter education and electoral participation
- Understanding the rights and responsibilities of citizenship
- Skills for community problem-solving and collaboration

These programs are particularly important for immigrant populations learning to navigate American civic systems, but also benefit native-born adults seeking to increase their community involvement and democratic participation.

Environmental Sustainability and Green Skills

Growing awareness of environmental challenges has created demand for education in sustainability practices and green skills.[94] Adults seek learning opportunities in:

- Environmental awareness and conservation practices
- Sustainable living and consumption choices
- Green technologies and renewable energy
- Environmental health and safety
- Climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies

These skills serve both personal lifestyle goals and workforce preparation in green economy sectors.

Mental Health and Wellness Education

Mental health literacy has become increasingly important, with adults needing education on:[95]

- Recognizing signs of mental health challenges
- Understanding stress management and resilience
- Developing emotional regulation skills
- Supporting others experiencing mental health difficulties
- Accessing mental health resources and services

Mental Health First Aid training and similar programs help adults develop skills to support themselves and others in mental health crises, contributing to community wellness and support networks.

Survey and research findings confirm that libraries are rapidly innovating, experimenting with gamification, hybrid models, and culturally responsive programming, while also facing growing demand for digital, health, financial, and civic literacies. By leveraging creative methodologies, flexible delivery formats, and strong community partnerships, libraries are positioning themselves as essential hubs for lifelong learning and social resilience.

Notes

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CHAPTER 8

Community Partnerships and Collaboration

Public libraries have increasingly embraced their role as community anchors for adult education by building partnerships with local agencies, nonprofits, educational institutions, and private organizations. These partnerships are essential—extending reach, enhancing offerings, and addressing complex needs that no single institution can meet alone.

FROM THE SURVEY

The Impact of Collaboration

Community partnerships are essential to the success, reach, and sustainability of adult education in public libraries. Survey responses show that 84.9 percent of libraries partner with one or more organizations, averaging nearly four types of partners each.

84.9%

of libraries reported working with one or more partner organizations, averaging nearly four per library.

These collaborations enhance both capacity and credibility. Partners often provide instructors, facilities, marketing, or funding—resources many libraries lack. The impact is particularly pronounced in areas requiring specialized expertise, such as ESL instruction, GED preparation, health education, or workforce development.

As shown in figure 8.1, libraries report that partnerships enable them to:

- Expand programming (55.2%)
- Reach new audiences (33.9%)
- Access expertise or resources not available in-house (32.8%)

Together, these benefits allow libraries to respond more flexibly and comprehensively to diverse adult learning needs.

Overview of Successful Partnerships

As shown in figure 8.2, the most frequently cited partners include:

- Literacy and Adult Education Nonprofits (64.8%)
- Senior Centers (54.0%)
- Healthcare Providers (51.0%)

- Workforce Development Agencies (50.7%)
- Community Colleges (38.6%)
- Immigrant and Refugee Support Organizations (30.5%)
- Businesses (47%)

Successful partnerships are mission-aligned, community-rooted, and mutually beneficial. For example, collaborations with immigrant service agencies support ESL and citizenship classes, while partnerships with senior centers help libraries deliver wellness and digital literacy programming for older adults.

Libraries also cited examples such as co-presented legal and financial literacy sessions, shared cultural programming, and job skills training delivered in partnership with local employers or job centers. (See figure 8.3.) These partnerships not only extend the reach of the library but also embed it more fully into the fabric of the community.

Building Strong Networks

Libraries that invest in community partnerships are better positioned to promote lifelong learning and inclusive access to education. By working with organizations

FIGURE 8.1

Benefits of Partnerships

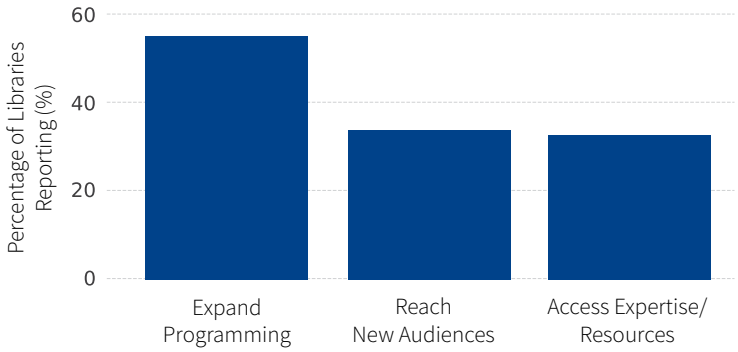


FIGURE 8.2

Types of Library Partnerships

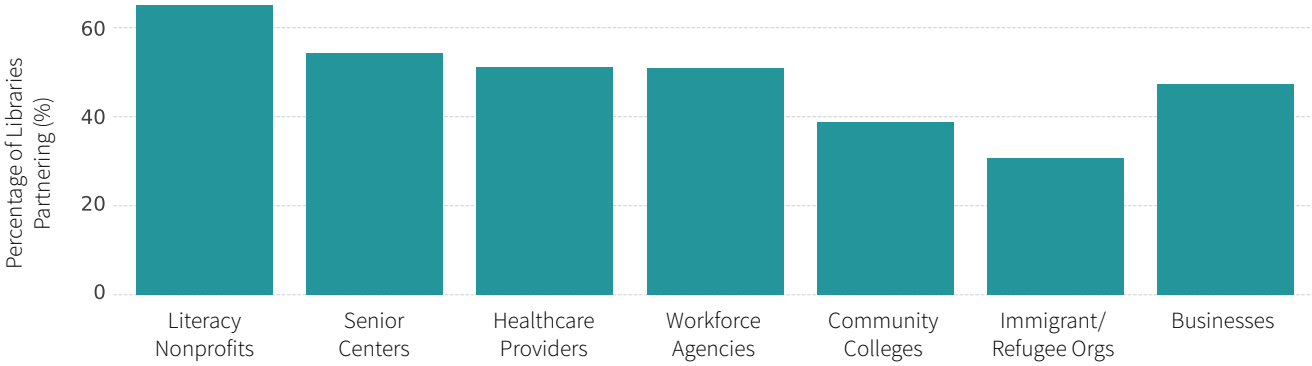
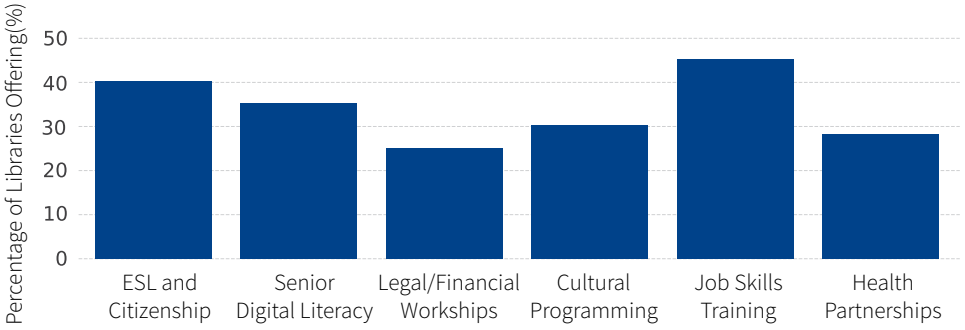


FIGURE 8.3

Services Supported by Partnerships



that already serve marginalized populations, libraries can reduce access barriers such as transportation, language, scheduling, and trust.

Examples of inclusive practices driven by partnerships include:

- Multilingual programming supported by bilingual staff or translated materials
- Outreach-based service models where library staff or partners deliver programs offsite
- Simultaneous programming for adults and children to address childcare needs
- Culturally responsive curricula co-developed with local community organizations

Strong networks also facilitate cross-referral systems, where patrons accessing one organization's services are introduced to complementary library programs. These relationships strengthen the library's role as a connector and navigator of local learning ecosystems.

Libraries reported that personalized outreach and one-on-one engagement, often initiated through partner organizations, were among the most effective strategies for building trust and engagement among underserved populations.

47%

of libraries collaborate with local businesses, supporting workforce development and small business growth.

Public-Private Partnerships

While most reported collaborations are public or nonprofit, 47 percent of libraries also partner with businesses or employers.

These collaborations often support:

- Workforce development programs, including résumé assistance, LinkedIn workshops, and digital job search skills
- Entrepreneurship and small business support, through seminars or one-on-one advising
- Financial literacy sessions, often sponsored or delivered by local credit unions or financial professionals

Private-sector partners can also contribute in-kind donations (e.g., technology, food, venues) or serve as guest instructors. In return, businesses benefit from workforce upskilling, community goodwill, and increased visibility.

When equitably designed, public-private partnerships can expand services sustainably—especially where public funding falls short. Libraries must ensure these remain mission-aligned, with clear boundaries on commercial influence and data privacy.

Partnerships allow libraries to expand programming, reach new audiences, and access expertise they don't have in-house.

FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The Impact of Collaboration

Enhanced Service Delivery and Community Reach

Community partnerships fundamentally transform how libraries serve their communities. Through collaborative efforts, libraries can expand their programming capacity, reach new audiences, and provide services that directly address community needs. These partnerships enable libraries to leverage external expertise and resources while positioning themselves as trusted community anchor institutions.[96]

Health and Wellness Partnerships have emerged as particularly impactful collaborations. Libraries are partnering with health departments to address critical community health issues, from opioid prevention programs to vision screenings for underserved children. The Vision to Learn partnership with the Cobb County Public Library System has distributed over 136 free pairs of glasses to children in need, demonstrating how libraries can serve as accessible venues for essential health services.[97]

POWER IN PARTNERSHIPS

Through partnerships with local businesses and nonprofits, a public library region increased program attendance by more than 10,000 in one year. Workshops on business planning, financial literacy, technology, and job readiness gave learners not only information but real opportunities. The result was stronger community connections and a surge in new library cardholders.

Source: ***"More than books," Northwest Indiana Business Magazine***

Adult Education and Literacy Collaborations represent another significant area of impact. The Los Angeles Public Library's decade-long partnership with Cell-Ed has brought mobile-based English language learning to adult learners across Los Angeles, addressing barriers to traditional in-person programs through flexible, accessible learning opportunities.[98] Similarly, the Taylor County Public Library's partnership with the Adult Learning Center provides ESL classes and literacy support, utilizing library space and promotional platforms to reach community members.[99]

Breaking Down Institutional Silos

Effective partnerships help libraries break down traditional institutional silos and create comprehensive support networks for community members. The Chatham Community Library's joint-use partnership between Central Carolina Community College and the community demonstrates how libraries can serve both academic and public constituencies simultaneously, maximizing resources and expanding access to vital services for diverse populations.[100]

Survey and literature findings confirm that partnerships are the foundation of sustainable adult education in libraries. By aligning missions, pooling resources, and reducing access barriers, libraries extend their role as trusted community anchors. Strong networks, public, nonprofit, and private, allow libraries not just to deliver programs, but to connect learners to a broader ecosystem of support."

Notes

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CHAPTER 9

Addressing Equity and Access

FROM THE SURVEY

Key Challenges and Strategies for Ensuring Equitable Access to Learning Opportunities

Equity remains one of the most urgent and complex issues facing adult education in public libraries. Survey results reveal a wide range of barriers that disproportionately impact marginalized populations. The most common challenges (see figure 9.1) include lack of time due to work or caregiving (80.7%), scheduling conflicts (66.8%), low awareness of programs (57.7%), transportation barriers (56.2%), childcare needs (51.4%), and digital literacy or access issues (70% combined).

These challenges are particularly acute for young adults, immigrants, low-income families, adults with disabilities, and those with low literacy levels. Together, these barriers mean that those who could benefit the most from adult learning opportunities are the least likely to access them.

70%

of libraries report digital literacy and access issues as a primary barrier for adult learners.

FIGURE 9.1

Key Barriers to Access

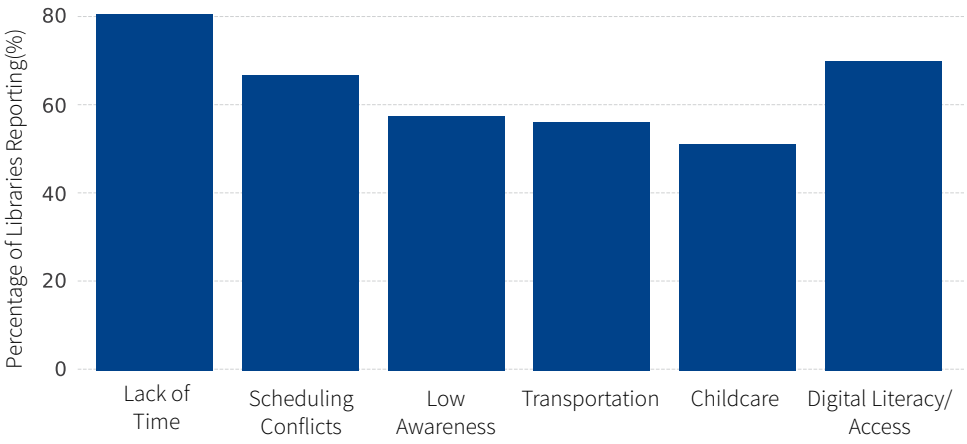
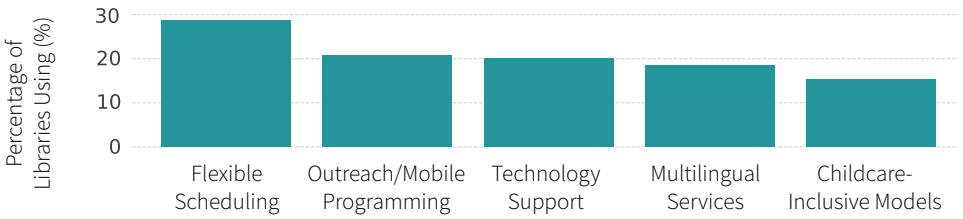


FIGURE 9.2

Strategies to Overcome Access Barriers



To counteract these barriers, libraries are employing multiple strategies (as shown in figure 9.2), including:

- Flexible scheduling (28.2%): Offering evening, weekend, or drop-in sessions
- Technology support (19.8%): Providing one-on-one coaching and device lending
- Multilingual services (18.1%): Hiring bilingual staff and translating materials
- Outreach and mobile programming (20.3%): Taking services into the community
- Childcare-inclusive models (e.g., co-scheduled programs for children and adults)

Libraries that address multiple barriers simultaneously report the greatest success. Advancing equity also requires staff training in cultural responsiveness and programs designed with community input.

Effective Outreach Initiatives

Outreach is critical to ensuring equitable access, but promotion alone is rarely enough. Libraries reported that personalized outreach (e.g., direct invitations from trusted staff) is significantly more effective than general advertising, especially when targeting groups who may feel excluded or intimidated by formal learning settings.

Successful outreach strategies include:

- Partnering with trusted community organizations to co-promote programs
- Attending local events and setting up pop-up tables in non-library spaces
- Using word-of-mouth networks, especially among immigrant and senior communities
- Collaborating with social workers, food pantries, and shelters to reach people experiencing housing or economic instability
- Distributing flyers in multiple languages across local businesses, places of worship, and social service agencies

Libraries that used five or more promotional channels, such as in-library signage, websites, social media, outreach flyers, and community calendars, were more likely to reach broader segments of the population.

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

A Detroit library patron borrowed a hotspot and joined virtual job-search workshops from home. With reliable internet and tech support, they could complete applications and even interview on Zoom. Access to these resources opened the door to new opportunities and greater connection.

Source: ***InfoToday***

Role of Libraries in Reducing Educational Disparities

Libraries play an important role in bridging educational gaps by offering free, local, and flexible access to learning resources, particularly for those who fall outside traditional education systems. Many surveyed libraries serve adults who left high school without a diploma, immigrants learning English, seniors seeking digital skills, and working adults unable to attend regular classes.

By focusing on practical skill-building, low-barrier access, and community relevance, libraries support personal empowerment and economic mobility. For example, only 28.7 percent of libraries offer basic literacy, and 21.9 percent offer high school equivalency, but those that do report high demand and strong outcomes. These programs directly address gaps left by traditional systems.

Libraries also play a connector role, helping learners transition into broader education or workforce systems. Partnerships with community colleges, nonprofits, and public agencies enhance this pipeline and reduce duplication of services.

How Libraries Can Better Market Their Adult Learning Programs

Improving awareness is essential for closing the equity gap. Survey results show that low awareness (57.7%) is one of the top barriers preventing adult learners from participating in programs. Despite libraries' heavy reliance on in-house promotion (97.4%), digital channels (95.2%), and social media (93.5%), these may not reach underserved audiences effectively on their own.

To enhance reach, libraries should:

- Develop targeted messaging for specific populations, such as young adults, new immigrants, or job seekers
- Utilize community influencers and existing participants as ambassadors
- Translate promotional materials and use plain, accessible language
- Leverage partner organizations to disseminate information through newsletters, email lists, and direct services
- Invest in outreach staff or liaisons embedded in community-based organizations

Marketing efforts should highlight not just what the program is—but why it matters: the need it meets, the skill it builds, or the way it fits into a participant's life. Emphasizing outcomes like "earn a certificate," "learn to use your smartphone," or "get help with job applications" can increase relevance and motivation.

Ultimately, equitable access to adult learning in libraries depends not only on removing barriers, but deliberately inviting and welcoming people in.

Equitable access to adult learning requires more than removing obstacles; it demands deliberate and inclusive design. Libraries succeed when they combine barrier-reduction with proactive outreach, culturally responsive practices, and strong community partnerships. By doing so, they transform adult learning into a truly accessible pathway for empowerment and opportunity.

Libraries succeed when they combine barrier reduction with proactive outreach, culturally responsive practices, and strong community partnerships.

CHAPTER 10

Lessons from the Field: Case Studies in Adult Learning

How libraries in Louisiana and California are advancing equity, access, and lifelong learning

The preceding chapters have outlined the many ways public libraries advance lifelong learning, from addressing equity and access to building partnerships, developing workforce skills, and fostering personal growth. To bring these themes to life, the following case studies highlight how two very different library systems, the Ascension Parish Library in Louisiana and the San Francisco Public Library in California, translate these ideas into action. Their experiences demonstrate that regardless of size, geography, or demographics, public libraries can leverage community partnerships, equity-driven strategies, and innovative programming to deliver transformative outcomes for adult learners.

CASE STUDY

Ascension Parish Library—Lifelong Learning in Action

Background

Since its founding in 1960, Ascension Parish (LA) Library (APL) has welcomed the community in all its diversity to enjoy the information, services, and programming it provides. Committed to fostering self-help and lifelong learning, the library serves as a vital resource for people of all ages. It is an award-winning library system that offers both traditional library services and innovative digital resources relevant in today's electronic age. Patrons benefit from 24/7 access to ebooks, audiobooks, movies, magazines, and more through the library's online catalog and mobile apps. With five branches and a mobile library, the system is embedded in neighborhoods throughout the parish, staffed by friendly professionals ready to connect residents with resources and opportunities.

The library serves a parish population of 133,534 (2024). Demographic indicators reflect both strengths and challenges: approximately 91% of adults hold a high school diploma or higher, and 26% hold a bachelor's degree or higher, yet 10% of residents live below the poverty line. These economic disparities underscore

the importance of equitable access to educational and workforce development programs.

Within this context, APL has positioned itself as a hub of lifelong learning, equity, and community connection. Its programming reaches adults at all life stages, from early career to retirement, while addressing challenges such as rising immigrant populations, digital skills gaps, and transportation barriers that complicate access to learning opportunities.

Approach

APL implements a multifaceted portfolio of adult learning and enrichment programs that blend workforce skills, creative expression, and wellness. Key initiatives include:

- Excel Adult High School for learners 21 and older, offering a pathway to a diploma. High demand has resulted in waitlists.
- ELL and Citizenship Classes, which integrate language instruction, digital skills, and naturalization preparation for a rapidly growing immigrant population.
- Digital Literacy and Workforce Development offerings, such as one-on-one computer help, tutorials on software and coding, and access to Gale Courses, LinkedIn Learning, and other platforms.
- Health, Wellness, and Creative Arts Programs, ranging from yoga and Tai Chi to arts, crafts, and an emerging teaching kitchen focused on homesteading and culinary skills.
- Makerspaces and Library of Things, giving patrons hands-on access to sewing machines, recording studios, 3D printers, telescopes, and virtual reality equipment.

A central pillar of the library's approach is its partnerships, which expand resources, increase capacity, and ensure programs reach the communities that need them most. Partners Advancing Literacy (PAL) provides scholarships that allow adults to enroll in high school diploma programs. Collaboration with the sheriff's office extends access through a satellite library in areas with limited transportation, bridging geographic barriers. Strategic grant funding from organizations such as the NEH, Google, and the Louisiana State Arts Council and Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities supports specialized programming, from creative arts to digital learning.

These partnerships are essential not only for financial sustainability but also for community trust and engagement. They enable the library to operate as a connector, bringing together residents, local government, businesses, and nonprofits to address education, equity, and workforce development collectively. By leveraging these collaborations, the library ensures that its services remain accessible, responsive, and sustainable.

Outcomes

APL's programs have generated broad and meaningful outcomes that demonstrate the library's role as a cornerstone for lifelong learning and community resilience.

Educational Achievement: The Excel Adult High School program has enabled adult learners to earn their diplomas, directly impacting their career and educational prospects. Participants have gone on to secure stable employment, pursue higher education, or advance in their current jobs. These individual successes ripple outward, strengthening families and contributing to the local workforce.

Skill Development and Workforce Readiness: Through digital literacy training, software tutorials, and professional development resources like Gale Courses and LinkedIn Learning, patrons have developed new technical and job-readiness skills. These include everything from basic computer use and online safety to coding, design, and business applications. As a result, community members are better positioned to navigate an increasingly digital economy and compete in the job market.

Civic and Social Impact: The library's ELL and citizenship preparation classes have supported immigrants in achieving significant milestones, including gaining U.S. citizenship. These programs also build confidence, foster inclusion, and strengthen civic participation, creating a more connected and engaged community.

Personal Growth and Well-Being: Beyond academic and workforce outcomes, the library has supported patrons in meeting personal goals, such as reading to a grandchild, learning a new craft, or practicing wellness through yoga and Tai Chi. These experiences contribute to improved mental health, creativity, and quality of life for participants of all ages.

Equity and Access Expansion: By offering flexible schedules, mobile services, satellite locations, and device lending programs, the library has reduced traditional barriers to education and engagement. These equity-focused strategies have enabled participation from groups who might otherwise be excluded due to financial hardship, transportation challenges, or lack of digital access.

Community Engagement and Advocacy: Patrons have become strong advocates for the library, publicly supporting its initiatives and promoting its role as an essential community resource. This advocacy has not only reinforced community goodwill but also positioned the library to secure funding, grants, and sponsorships that sustain long-term programming.

Institutional Sustainability and Reputation: The library's marketing and communications efforts, which emphasize storytelling and impact, have helped establish the system as a leader in innovation and lifelong learning. This visibility strengthens its reputation locally and nationally, ensuring continued recognition as an award-winning library system that adapts to evolving community needs.

Taken together, these outcomes highlight the transformative impact of Ascension Parish Library's work. By addressing practical needs like education and workforce skills while also supporting personal enrichment, equity, and wellness, the library demonstrates the holistic value of public libraries in fostering stronger, more resilient communities.

A FAMILY SURPRISE AT GRADUATION

"My daughter kept telling me to check out the library's program—she had no idea I was already taking classes."

When this mom invited her mother, daughters, and 17 other relatives to the library, they thought it was just another family outing. Instead, they found her in a cap and gown, ready to graduate. She had secretly earned her high school diploma through APL's Excel Adult High School program, finishing with a 4.0 GPA.

Now, diploma in hand, she's weighing her next step: enrolling in truck driving school or pursuing a career as a pharmacy technician. Either way, she's showing her family—and herself—what's possible with determination and a library card.

CASE STUDY

San Francisco Public Library—Connecting Communities to Opportunity

Background

The San Francisco (CA) Public Library (SFPL), originally opened as the San Francisco Free Library on June 7, 1879, has grown into one of the largest and most innovative library systems in the nation. Today, SFPL serves its diverse and dynamic community through a central Main Library in the Civic Center and 27 neighborhood branches, ensuring equitable access across the city.

The library system serves a population of 873,965 (2024). Educational attainment in the city is high, with 88% holding a high school diploma or higher and 61% holding a bachelor's degree or higher. However, 11.3% of residents live below the poverty line, underscoring the need for equitable services that address disparities in access to education, technology, and lifelong learning opportunities.

SFPL's mission is to provide free and equal access to information, knowledge, and the joys of reading, supporting lifelong learning and independent exploration. The library connects communities to learning through books, eResources, Wi-Fi, and a wide variety of programs for all ages. Services include online databases, free movie streaming, language learning, museum passes, and technology training, all designed to empower residents with the tools they need to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Approach

The library advances its mission through The Bridge at Main, a hub for print and digital literacy, alongside other specialized programs. Key initiatives include:

- Online High School Program, providing accredited diplomas for adults 19 and older.
- Project Read, a 40+ year adult literacy program.
- ESL Tutoring, offering one-on-one language instruction to working adults.
- Tech Drop-In Sessions, providing weekly hands-on support with computers and devices.
- Tech Week, a citywide digital literacy event with 40+ programs hosted with community partners.
- TinkerCAD Club, which meets monthly to teach 3D design and printing.
- Reentry Services, developed in partnership with JARS (Jails and Reentry Services), supporting formerly incarcerated individuals through programs and parole office meetings.

Programs are offered in multiple formats, including in-person, hybrid, and virtual, to ensure accessibility across diverse needs. Device lending (laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots) further bridges the digital divide for learners who lack access to technology at home.

Partnerships are central to SFPL's approach, expanding capacity, building trust, and ensuring services are responsive to community needs. Tech Week is co-created with 15–20 community-based organizations, many serving older adults. Reentry services rely on collaboration with JARS and other city services. The Friends of the San Francisco Public Library provide funding for programs, while the California State Library supports literacy and ESL initiatives through grants. These partnerships not only provide financial and programmatic sustainability but also strengthen SFPL's ability to reach populations that might otherwise be excluded.

Outcomes

San Francisco Public Library's initiatives have produced a wide range of outcomes that demonstrate the system's transformative role in supporting adult learners and building community capacity:

Educational Achievement: Adults earning diplomas through the Online High School Program celebrate with family and friends at graduation ceremonies, inspiring future generations and positioning themselves as role models for their children.

Skill Development: Digital literacy programs, from Tech Drop-Ins to Zoom 101, equip patrons with essential skills for employment, healthcare, and civic participation. The ongoing popularity of these offerings reflects their continued relevance across decades.

Civic and Social Impact: ESL tutoring and Project Read improve literacy and language skills, enabling patrons to fully engage in civic life and access employment opportunities. Multilingual services, including English, Spanish, Cantonese,

Mandarin, and Filipino, ensure inclusivity and compliance with the city's Language Access Ordinance.

Personal Growth and Creativity: Programs like TinkerCAD Club provide hands-on opportunities for creative expression and exploration of emerging technologies. Patrons also benefit from access to digital tools such as Mango Languages and Rosetta Stone, furthering independent learning.

Equity and Access Expansion: Device lending programs and multilingual services break down barriers related to cost, technology, and language. Outreach at jails and community events ensures programs reach those who might not otherwise engage with the library.

Community Engagement and Advocacy: Word-of-mouth referrals, particularly among adult learners, highlight the trust and enthusiasm patrons have for library programs. Graduations, public celebrations, and community recognition strengthen both individual pride and collective support for the library.

Institutional Sustainability and Reputation: With strong partnerships, grant support, and consistent feedback loops (such as post-event surveys), SFPL ensures its programming evolves alongside community needs while reinforcing its reputation as a forward-thinking, equity-driven library system.

Together, these outcomes demonstrate SFPL's ability to connect diverse communities to opportunities, advancing literacy, digital inclusion, and social equity while celebrating the achievements of learners and strengthening the city as a whole.

ADULT LEARNING AT SFPL

The San Francisco Public Library offers a wide range of adult learning opportunities, from ESL tutoring and reading/writing support through Project Read to digital literacy programs like tech drop-ins, one-on-one help, and device giveaways paired with training.

Learners regularly share how these programs change their lives:

"Each day I feel more confident in my English—now I can greet people, talk on the phone, and even prepare for college course-work in medical assistance."

"It's special because of the teachers and volunteers—they are open-minded and open-hearted. I receive much more effective help here … it's a big leap forward for people who had failed with technology before."

One determined entrepreneur, learning both English and computer basics, credited the library for providing not only a free device but also the skills to upload photos for his business proposal—a step that helped him secure a future job opportunity.

SFPL's programs meet learners where they are, combining patience, expertise, and resources to build skills and confidence that extend far beyond the library's walls.

Best Practices for Supporting Adult Learners in Public Libraries

Public libraries play an essential role in advancing adult learning by offering accessible, inclusive, and community-driven programs. Insights from Ascension Parish Library (Louisiana) and San Francisco Public Library (California) highlight several best practices that can be adopted and adapted by libraries nationwide.

Program Design and Delivery

Offer multiple learning pathways: Successful libraries combine academic, workforce, digital literacy, creative arts, and wellness programs, recognizing that adult learners have varied goals and needs.

Integrate flexible formats: Both in-person and virtual/hybrid programs ensure greater accessibility. Take-home kits, mobile outreach, and layered learning opportunities help reach those unable to attend traditional classes.

Reflect community demographics: Aligning services with community data—such as rising immigrant populations or disparities in educational attainment—ensures relevance and impact.

Partnerships as a Cornerstone

Collaborate Widely: Partnerships with nonprofits, businesses, and government agencies expand capacity and resources. For example, Ascension Parish Library partners with local businesses through Partners Advancing Literacy (PAL) to provide scholarships for adult high school students and expand seed library initiatives, while San Francisco Public Library collaborates with 15–20 community-based organizations during Tech Week to deliver over 40 programs citywide.

Leverage volunteer networks: Trained volunteers are integral to both libraries' ESL, literacy, and technology tutoring programs, enabling personalized learning at scale.

Seek diverse funding streams: Partnerships also unlock grants, sponsorships, and donations that sustain programs, from PAL scholarships in Louisiana to California State Library support for literacy in San Francisco.

Equity and Access

Remove financial barriers: Free programs, scholarships, and device-lending initiatives (laptops, hotspots) ensure affordability for learners in communities where poverty is a factor.

Address logistical barriers: Flexible scheduling (morning, evening, and weekend options), neighborhood-based satellite sites, and mobile services make learning more convenient.

Support multilingual access: San Francisco's compliance with the Language Access Ordinance—offering materials and instruction in English, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Filipino—demonstrates the importance of meeting linguistic needs.

Community Engagement and Storytelling

Celebrate achievements: High school graduations, citizenship ceremonies, and public recognition events, big and small, empower learners and highlight the transformative role of libraries.

Cultivate advocates: Patrons who succeed in programs often become vocal supporters of their libraries, helping build community goodwill and sustain advocacy for funding.

Use diverse outreach channels: From billboards and newsletters in Ascension Parish to word-of-mouth and outreach at citywide events in San Francisco, libraries employ multiple strategies to reach potential learners.

Continuous Improvement and Sustainability

Gather feedback: Surveys, satisfaction assessments, and community input ensure programming remains responsive and relevant.

Track measurable outcomes: Diplomas earned, jobs secured, citizenships achieved, and digital skills gained provide powerful evidence of impact.

Invest in communications: Dedicated staff and coordinated marketing amplify success stories, securing long-term community and stakeholder support.

In sum, adult learning in libraries thrives when programs are equitable, partnerships are strong, community voices are centered, and success is both measured and celebrated. Ascension Parish and San Francisco demonstrate that these best practices are scalable and adaptable, whether serving a small parish community or a major urban population.

Together, these case studies underscore a central finding of this report: public libraries are uniquely positioned to support lifelong learning by combining equitable access, strong partnerships, and innovative programming. Whether in a parish of just over 130,000 residents or in one of the nation's largest urban centers, the strategies remain strikingly consistent — libraries succeed when they align services with community needs, remove barriers to participation, and measure outcomes that matter. These lessons reinforce the broader themes of this white paper and provide practical models for libraries of all sizes as they plan, adapt, and advocate for the future.

IN CLOSING

MOVING FROM INSIGHT TO IMPACT

Public libraries are uniquely positioned to lead the nation in advancing adult learning. This report illustrates how libraries are meeting community needs through flexible programming, strategic partnerships, and innovative service models. It also makes clear that sustaining and expanding this work requires stable funding, investment in digital equity, and more robust tools for measuring impact.

Libraries are more than learning spaces, they are engines of opportunity. By working alongside policymakers, funders, and community partners, libraries can continue to remove barriers, expand access, and shape a more equitable future for adult learners. The success stories and strategies shared here offer a roadmap for libraries nationwide to build stronger, more resilient adult education ecosystems.