

# DEVELOPING CLARITY: INNOVATING IN LIBRARY SYSTEMS

March 2017



**KNIGHT  
FOUNDATION**



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# PART 1: INTRODUCTION

- A letter from Knight Foundation
- Executive summary
- The people we interviewed

# A letter from Knight Foundation

Dear Friends,

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation has a history of supporting libraries. We made our first library grant to the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in 1964, and our first grant to an urban public library was to the Akron-Summit County Public Library in 1971. Since then we have made nearly 200 library grants totaling more than \$12 million.

In 2014, our appreciation of libraries' importance to civic life deepened for two reasons. First, that spring our hometown library system in Miami-Dade County, Florida, faced the prospect of a 40 percent budget cut. Following Knight-funded polling that revealed broad opposition to the cut, combined with public pushback, the county restored the funding. Simultaneously, we ran [a Knight News Challenge on strengthening the internet](#) that awarded \$3.5 million in grants to 19 projects. To our surprise, three of the winners were libraries. That summer, I sat in on a lunch

discussion with the heads of three big-city libraries and a mayor from another city. The mayor was stopped short when he heard the array of services the libraries were developing.

The confluence of those insights enabled us to see the importance of libraries in the shift to the digital age and inspired us to launch the [first](#) of [two](#) Knight News Challenges. Through two open calls for ideas, we invested nearly \$5 million in 36 projects. During the process of running those challenges, we learned about the state of innovation in libraries, from both librarians and non-librarians. In May 2016, at the end of our review of News Challenge entries, we heard a desire from the library leaders in the room to learn more about what innovation means in a library context.

This report is a result of the questions we heard as we talked to people who lead, work in, use and love libraries. What do urban public libraries need to succeed? How might they leverage their unique assets of trusted public

spaces, a professional workforce trained in information needs, and the openness to collaborate to maximize their value to the public?

Today, libraries are more important than ever to American democracy. At a time of [unprecedented public distrust in institutions](#), people still believe that libraries have an essential role to play in our communities. As we search for new ways of improving the flow of accurate information, of connecting with one another, and preparing ourselves for an ever-more digital future, libraries are being called on to do more and more. We hope this document advances libraries' ability to fulfill that mission.

Sincerely,

**John Bracken**

VP/Technology Innovation

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Knight Foundation wanted to understand the state of innovation capability and culture of urban libraries.

## WHAT WE DID

Knight Foundation hired Machine, a strategy and innovation consultancy, to help gather information and data on innovation in libraries and how they can better adapt to the digital age, and to highlight promising case studies.

We interviewed 25 leaders from library systems, Knight News Challenge winners, key programming partners, and others interested in our work to understand better how innovation is being discussed in the field.

## WHAT WE HEARD

- Innovation is a choice. For libraries that choose to dedicate time and effort to innovation, this report will be most helpful. All urban library systems have the immediate opportunity to articulate and communicate clearly to staff, funders and patrons the particular problems they have prioritized for innovation (versus sustaining and improving existing offerings and operations).
- Most library systems aren't organized to consistently develop new offerings for patrons, lack innovation processes (for example, human-centered design, service design and open innovation), or lack commitment to do so. Library systems that get early traction benefit from starting with a centralized team approach, coupled with selective involvement of front-line staff.
- The use of technology as an enabler is likely to be a key predictor of innovation success, yet most library systems avoid technological challenges because of a lack of resources and capabilities as well as an unfamiliarity within leadership and staff of what it takes to develop technology-enabled services and solutions.
- Innovation is met with skepticism. In this report, we try to clarify the concepts of innovation in urban libraries.



THE PEOPLE WE INTERVIEWED



**Brian Bannon**  
Commissioner and CEO  
Chicago Public Library  
Illinois



**Story Bellows**  
Chief Innovation and  
Performance Officer  
Brooklyn Public Library



**Cynthia Berner**  
Director of Libraries  
Wichita Public Library  
Kansas



**Jill Bourne**  
Library Director  
San Jose Public Library  
California



**Jane Eastwood**  
Library Director  
St. Paul Public Library  
Minnesota



**Felton Thomas Jr.**  
Executive Director  
Cleveland Public Library  
Ohio



**Tom Fortin**  
Chief of the Main Library  
San Francisco Public  
Library, California



**Joshua M. Greenberg**  
Program Director  
Sloan Foundation  
New York



**Ann Hammond**  
Executive Director  
Lexington Public Library  
Kentucky



**Pamela Hickson -  
Stevenson**  
Deputy Director  
Akron-Summit Public  
Library, Ohio



**Melanie Huggins**  
Executive Director  
Richland Library  
Columbia, South Carolina



**Lee Keesler Jr.**  
CEO  
Charlotte Mecklenburg  
Library  
North Carolina



**Crosby Kemper III**  
Executive Director  
Kansas City Public Library  
Missouri



**Michael Lambert**  
Deputy City Librarian  
San Francisco Public  
Library, California



**Maura Marx**  
Deputy Director for  
Library Services, Institute of  
Museum and Library Ser-  
vices, Washington, D.C.



**John Meier**  
Deputy Director for IT  
and Digital Strategies  
Free Library of  
Philadelphia



**Jo Anne Mondowney**  
Executive Director  
Detroit Public Library  
Michigan



**Meghan O'Connor**  
Assistant Director,  
Programs & Partnerships  
Washington, D.C., Public  
Library



**Lisa Peet**  
Associate News Editor  
Library Journal  
New York



**Siobhan Reardon**  
President and Director  
Free Library of  
Philadelphia



**Francesca Rodriquez**  
Foundation Officer  
Madison Public Library  
Foundation  
Wisconsin



**Philipp Schmidt**  
Director of Learning  
Innovation  
MIT Media Lab  
Massachusetts



**John Szabo**  
The City Librarian  
Los Angeles Public Library  
California



**Marcellus Turner**  
City Librarian  
Seattle Public Library  
Washington



**Glenda Williams**  
Director of Library  
Services  
Long Beach Public Library  
California

Where should libraries  
play and how could they  
win when it comes to  
innovation?

What does it mean to  
be an innovation-ready  
urban library system?

What are the cultural  
elements, behaviors  
and structures that are  
conductive to innovation?

# PART 2: STATE OF THE FIELD

- A working definition of library innovation
- Library advantages and opportunities
- Innovation challenges
- The role of technology
- Characteristics of innovation-ready urban libraries

# A WORKING DEFINITION OF LIBRARY INNOVATION

In many of our conversations with library leaders, they asked for a definition of innovation that made sense for the library field. We offer a definition that is informed by how they reflected on their mission and opportunity. (See Appendix for further discussion.)

This definition covers not just the creation of new offerings but also their growth over time; they outlast a single campaign or event. Offerings should solve important problems for both today's

and tomorrow's patrons. In many of our conversations we heard leaders wonder how novel a solution needed to be for it to be considered "innovative." While some new offerings might have the potential to move the field forward, an innovation might primarily move a single system forward, too.

**Innovating in urban libraries means:**  
Creating and growing new services and platforms that solve essential problems for new or existing patrons



# LIBRARY ADVANTAGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

While innovation uncovers many structural and systemic challenges, we heard consistently from both library leaders and those outside of the field that libraries have several unique advantages and opportunities for innovation.

## Customer Intimacy

Libraries revolve around serving people and listening to what patrons want.

## Trust

Libraries are seen as bastions of safety and help in their communities.

## Cooperative

Libraries have a sharing mentality and don't "compete" with one another, setting up the possibility of more fluid sharing.

# INNOVATION CHALLENGES: WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF INNOVATION?

As institutions, urban libraries have particular and real challenges to innovation. We heard many such examples in our conversations.

**1. Organization:** Leaders described libraries as being organized functionally while innovation requires crossing silos.

**2. Staff:** We heard most staff members aren't trained in innovation processes and skills. Hiring for innovation- focused staff is often difficult because of union rules and headcount/job definitions.

**3. Technology proficiency:** Our interviews revealed that in addition to lacking web and mobile technology capacity, most libraries lack design and prototyping skills that accelerate innovation.

**4. Metrics and measurements:** Libraries often lack project-specific rubrics and systems for assessing the impact of innovation.

**5. Distributed systems:** With many branches, leaders said it can be difficult to spot good ideas in one part of the system, then edit, amplify and syndicate them to other areas.

**6. Strategic alignment:** While many libraries periodically engage in strategic planning, we heard these processes don't align with the process and rapid speed of innovation.

**7. Bureaucratic budgeting:** In many instances, we heard it can be difficult to secure funding for innovation because a) the program must "exist" first or b) asking for innovation funds feels inappropriate when other existing services lack committed funding.

**8. Competition:** The internet has brought forward many services, brands and companies that cater to the behaviors and needs of library patrons.

**9. Marketing:** Leaders said that their teams don't always have the capacity to market new programs and services to government, the public or staff.

## SOME OF WHAT WE HEARD

In order to innovate you need to get away from the thing that you do every day.  
— **Francesca Rodriquez, Madison PLF**

The people who will innovate will end up being the ones who take work home at night.  
— **Lisa Peet, Library Journal**

In order to do new things, you have to let other things go. That's always hard in library culture because it's half about preservation of the history and cultural narrative and half about service to informational needs of the community, which are always changing.  
— **Jill Bourne, San José PL**

How do you tell the story of the library beyond the metrics that fund the library?  
— **Lisa Peet, Library Journal**

How we measure impact is a huge need and a real challenge.  
— **Story Bellows, Brooklyn PL**

We're trying to help libraries with skills training and design thinking training. For example, how do you use your data to read your city?  
— **Francesca Rodriquez, Madison PLF**

The new building is a driver for innovation. We think it can be a blank canvas with which to move forward.  
— **Cynthia Berner, Wichita PL**

If a public library comes to us for a \$500,000 grant, they usually want to do a public thing in their city. But they're not thinking big, syndication.  
— **Maura Marx, IMLS**

We're accidentally reinventing what a library is because we're focused on the needs of our community and not the needs of the library.  
— **Melanie Huggins, Richland Library**

Innovation has to become a natural part of our DNA if we are to evolve with our communities' needs and sustain ourselves long-term.  
— **Lee Keesler, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library**

While there are many advantages to the civil service environment we work within, retention, leadership development, etc., there are certainly challenges: developing new position titles and classifications that respond to the need for 21st-century skill sets and competencies like teaching skills, early childhood literacy specialists; people who understand digital collections and exhibits.  
— **John Szabo, Los Angeles PL**

It would be great for libraries to be more independent from the structures that restrict change so we can do things in a way that makes sense timing-wise.  
— **Jill Bourne, San Jose PL**

The fear is that if you take money from the foundation to start a program and then budgets are cut, the public will say, "What happened to the program?" when it gets cut.  
— **Francesca Rodriquez, Madison PLF**

We have to deal with bureaucracy, which puts up barriers, and my job is to open doors so my people can run through them.  
— **Jill Bourne, San Jose PL**

I think we can do a better job as a profession sharing the tools that we're using.  
— **Melanie Huggins, Richland Library**

Sometimes we might have a great program but the librarians have done nothing to market it so no one knows about it.  
— **Felton Thomas Jr., Cleveland PL**

There's a strong, genuine interest in working with libraries in the innovation community.  
— **Philipp Schmidt, MIT Media Lab**

We're not only innovating to digitize info or help people become citizens, but to paint a picture of the library as a relevant, public institution that is a steward of philanthropic goods and services.  
— **John Szabo, Los Angeles PL**

# THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN LIBRARY INNOVATION

Technology is a challenging subject within urban libraries. When technology came up in our conversations with library leaders, many saw it as a red herring: “Shiny new things” distracted from programs that patrons need. Others acknowledged that while technology is important, the reality is that they don’t have the people, skills and resources in order to incorporate technology into their innovation strategies or create technology-enabled solutions.

Many libraries cited digital strategies that distribute and extend their collections. Many large urban systems were using sophisticated management software that automates resource handling. Other systems have developed patron services to bridge the digital access divide such as offering Wi-Fi hotspots, digital media training or makerspaces.

We believe libraries should take a considered look at how and in what ways they think about using, integrating and even developing software and technology. Technology has a crucial role to play in innovation generally, and without it, urban libraries will be left behind in the coming years.

## EXAMPLES OF TECHNOLOGY HAPPENING

We have lot of folks who are a generation behind in technology. We have lots of folks who are not good at it and therefore don’t do it.

— **Felton Thomas, Cleveland PL**

We need tech to be innovative and all technology is not innovative.

— **Jane Eastwood, St. Paul PL**

People are moving away from straight up tech innovation and looking at social and service innovation because the technology can’t reach people until you reach the actual people.

— **Lisa Peet, Library Journal**

Sometimes I have to introduce the shiny new object to get funding but we understand tech as a tool and innovation can happen with or without it.

— **Meaghan O’Connor, DCPL**

Maker[Space]Ship: a program-centered mobile makerspace. “We asked ourselves what we could do to empower all residents in San Jose but especially those without access to the technology developed here.”

— **Erin Berman, Innovations Manager, San Jose PL (Library Journal, March 18, 2016)**

We have to run our system efficiently because of budget constraints. And so technology is used to its fullest extent to provide services.

— **Jill Bourne, San Jose PL**

We have a tech tryout cart and a librarian who shows patrons how to take advantage of digital resources.

— **John Szabo, Los Angeles PL**

We don’t use innovation as a synonym for something that’s just cool or shiny. We want it to be something that’s relevant to accomplish the goals of the strategic plan.

— **Ann Hammond, Lexington PL**

We need to affect the perception that libraries and technology are competing forces and instead re-brand libraries as being tech forward, nimble, and quite readily changeable with technology. It’s what we do.

— **John Szabo, Los Angeles PL**

Our Digital Inclusion Programs provide basic knowledge and skills. We’re seeking funds to figure out how and what we could add in terms of training that could help adults—young, old, entrepreneurs, etc.—take the next step along a pathway toward a tech job.

— **Jane Eastwood, St. Paul PL**

Book bikes: A bike that enables free distribution of books and library cards, and training on ebook downloading at local schools and festivals. It is now a marketing tool beyond what we could have imagined. Every elected official wants a picture on the book bike.

— **John Szabo, Los Angeles PL**

# CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATION-READY URBAN LIBRARIES

Organizations of all types can build innovation capability and culture, layering on proficiency over time. One way to organize such a progression in capability is described at right. This approach draws from what we heard, both about what’s working for those library systems that are innovating, as well as what’s lacking or challenging for those struggling to achieve their aspirations. In Section 4 of this report, we provide worksheets to help capture thoughts on your systems’ proficiency.

## LEVEL 1

**Clearly framed innovation problems**  
We know why we’re innovating

**Patron focus**  
We identify priority patrons for innovation

**An identified innovation process**  
We know how we do the work of innovation and who is involved

## LEVEL 2

**Experienced innovation project leadership**  
We have people who have the mandate, time and skills to lead the process

**Technical proficiency and resource availability**  
We can build and integrate technology and digital solutions into our offerings

## LEVEL 3

**Deliberate storytelling and marketing**  
We get people excited by the stories of what we’re doing and how we work

**Manage a strategic portfolio**  
We have multiple, complementary projects happening

## WAYS TO ELEVATE THE URBAN LIBRARY FIELD

In many of our conversations with leaders, we heard ideas for ways to help the field as a whole overcome the challenges to innovation and increase the capacity for innovation.

**The common challenges**  
Align the field on a list of top innovation challenges, identifying the library systems leading the way in each problem area to attract funders, support and resources in order to tackle the challenge.

**Patron relationship platform**  
Support the development of common patron engagement metrics and develop a software platform to manage that relationship.

**Innovation capability accelerator**  
An organization serving the field as a whole run by an outside entity that centralizes hands-on training via focused, “learn by doing” innovation efforts.

**Librarians helping librarians**  
A digital space for libraries to share pre-packaged programs and processes that have been successful so others can adopt what suits their libraries best.

**Successful pitches repository**  
Develop a central repository of successful innovation project pitches.

**National campaign**  
A campaign that seeks to reframe what libraries do in our communities, especially urban communities, and highlights and markets those innovation stories we want to emulate.

**Data platform**  
A customized data platform that enables libraries to have more impact with their services and programs. Tools might include: tracking patron behavior in order to be more targeted in marketing, developing new metrics for evaluating successful programs.



## PUTTING THESE CHARACTERISTICS INTO PRACTICE: LEVEL 1

According to those we interviewed, most library systems find themselves in “Level 1” and occasionally engaged in “Level 2” and “Level 3” activities. Translating these characteristics into action via processes and systems will take time, but there are examples from across the field to emulate.

### 1. Clearly framed innovation problems

We know why we’re innovating

Library leadership, funders and staff understand the priority problems, questions and challenges that are the focus of the system’s innovation efforts. They differentiate innovation efforts (developing new offerings for new and existing patrons) from improvements to existing offerings and operations. They regularly connect innovation challenges to the library’s mission and the goals of interested parties and funders where appropriate.

#### Recommendation

Libraries should start with identifying their innovation problems in concert with funders, patrons and staff. By being clear about the problems and desired/measurable outcomes, better projects and ideas will follow from staff.

### 2. Patron focus

We identify priority patrons for innovation

The beneficiaries of innovation efforts have been identified (for example, the influx of immigrants to our city who don’t know how best to take advantage of our library, patrons who reserve resources), and the library engages in a process of understanding and elevating the patrons’ experience (such as behaviors, motivations, use cases, jobs to be done, etc.) of the library system.

#### Recommendation

Urban libraries should focus innovation efforts on strategic populations, such as families, children, lifelong learners and immigrants. From there, they should identify and develop the ability to continually measure patron goals (for example, reducing the time spent on reserving resources) and general/related goals for the overall system (for example, engagement with number of services and customer experience metrics).

### 3. An identified innovation process

We know how we do the work of innovation and who is involved

We embrace a primary approach (for example, human-centered design, service design, participatory design), and manage a pipeline of scheduled innovation projects. Staff know whether, when and how they get involved in projects, whether it’s to support execution or active development of a new offering or technology.

#### Recommendation

Urban libraries should create centralized structures and teams, using proven methodologies, with selective frontline, patron and partner involvement as the right starting point for most urban library systems. Distributed approaches (for example, challenges and idea submission campaigns) without a centralized or corresponding process to develop the idea are unlikely to lead to sustained change.

## PUTTING THESE CHARACTERISTICS INTO PRACTICE: LEVEL 2

### **4. Experienced innovation project leadership**

We have people who have the mandate, time and skills to lead the process.

Experienced project leaders guide less-experienced staff and partners through a process of patron discovery, offering development and experimentation. Other functional groups accept and partner productively with project leadership. Leaders are able to evolve and depart from processes and approaches and integrate other skills into projects when necessary.

#### Recommendation

Hire and equip project leaders to tackle the highest-priority innovation challenges. Systems newer to innovation should look to hire outcome-oriented (rather than process-oriented) project leaders to drive toward initial results.

### **5. Technical proficiency and resource availability**

We can build and integrate technology and digital solutions into our offerings.

Delivering new offerings efficiently and reaching patrons beyond the branch requires technology. Patrons expect technology and expect it to work well, having had their expectations set by well-designed consumer technology.

#### Recommendation

We believe that every urban library system should strive to have at least one technology integration effort ongoing in order to build the skills necessary for the future. A good starting point is to focus on simplifying digital access to core services, meaningfully improving key patron metrics in the process. (See the UK Government Service Manual — [gov.uk/service-manual](http://gov.uk/service-manual) — which helps government teams create and run great digital services.)



## PUTTING THESE CHARACTERISTICS INTO PRACTICE: LEVEL 3

### 6. Deliberate storytelling and marketing

We get people excited by the stories of what we're doing and how we work.

Innovation leadership crafts compelling project briefs, "pitches" and proposals for innovation project funding. In turn, they capture and share innovation project stories, including the impact of the project, to inspire staff and secure more support and funding.

#### Recommendation

Develop concrete pitches for current and past marquee projects, focused on funders, that describe the innovation challenge, solutions, key patron insights and how the work was done. Share these pitches with staff so they can see "what good looks like" in the realm of library innovation.

### 7. Manage a strategic portfolio

We have multiple, complementary projects happening.

Allocating incremental resources across the portfolio of projects, innovation leadership adjusts or stops efforts that fail to grow and scale strategically. There's a process for transitioning ideas and prototypes to experiments and full-scale offerings supported by execution teams rather than innovation teams.

#### Recommendation

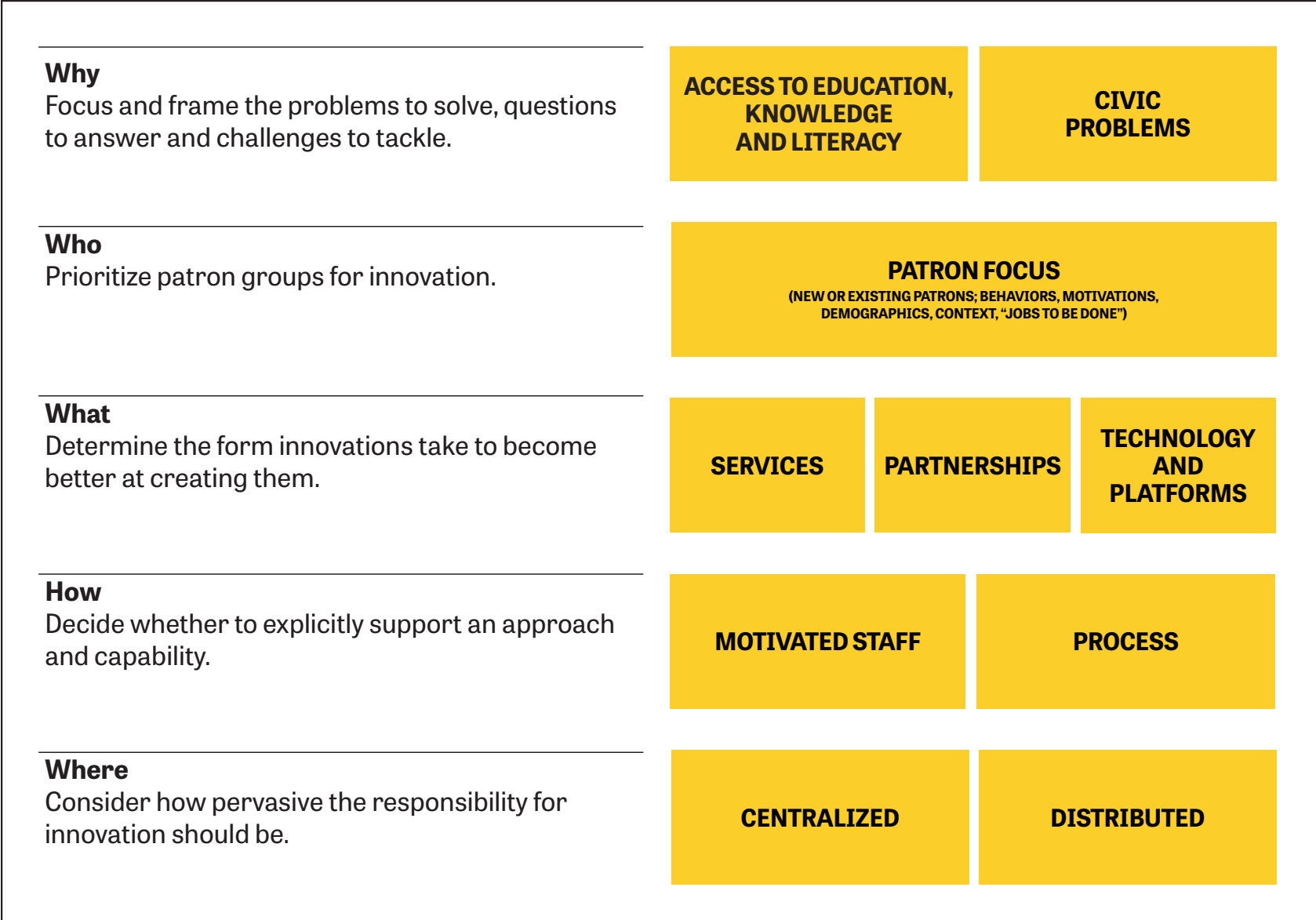
Start by simply describing your innovation portfolio and identifying projects that have been abandoned. Develop a funding allocation strategy that matches investment with the minimum needed to progress, rewarding projects that grow and flourish.

# PART 3: INNOVATION AGENDA FRAMEWORK

— Answering the question:  
What's our innovation agenda?

# ANSWERING THE QUESTION: WHAT'S OUR INNOVATION AGENDA?

Each system can have a different innovation strategy, yet communicating one can help align interested parties, staff, partner organizations and even patrons. In the following pages we offer a framework for articulating an innovation agenda along with what we heard from library leaders to bring it to life.



# INNOVATION AGENDA FRAMEWORK : OVERVIEW

**Why**  
Focus and frame the problems to solve, questions to answer and challenges to tackle.

**Who**  
Prioritize patron groups for innovation.

**What**  
Determine the form innovations take to become better at creating them.

**How**  
Decide whether to explicitly support an approach and capability.

**Where**  
Consider how pervasive the responsibility for innovation should be.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION,  
KNOWLEDGE  
AND LITERACY

CIVIC  
PROBLEMS

PATRON FOCUS  
(NEW OR EXISTING PATRONS; BEHAVIORS, MOTIVATIONS,  
DEMOGRAPHICS, CONTEXT, "JOBS TO BE DONE")

SERVICES

PARTNERSHIPS

TECHNOLOGY  
AND  
PLATFORMS

MOTIVATED STAFF

PROCESS

CENTRALIZED

DISTRIBUTED

## WHAT WE HEARD

Staying focused would help libraries tackle shared problems rather than trying to come up with innovative ideas across the whole system.  
— Maura Marx, IMLS

There are never any innovation emergencies. You need to devote time to think about who you want to be and how to get there.  
— Story Bellows, Brooklyn PL

Critical thinking and problem-solving skills, expanded vision, creativity, organizational speed, the ability and energy to engage effectively with our communities and external partners, and an appetite for risk-taking will account for the difference between good and great libraries, not the depth and breadth of our librarianship.  
— Lee Keesler, Charlotte Library

We use MindMixer (an online discussion tool) to put out questions that we're tackling. We then go through a transparent process to select ideas for experimentation. We form project teams that go through a human-centered design boot camp. An executive project sponsor helps clear the path in the organization and each team is assigned a mentor with design experience. The team gets one to three months and resources to explore the question and prototype. We don't launch many new programs as a result, but it's a way to keep the whole organization invested and learning together.  
— Brian Bannon, Chicago PL

INNOVATION AGENDA:  
WHY?

Innovation is a choice that libraries must confront directly. If they choose innovation, the next question should be, “What problems do we want to solve?”

Starting with clearly identified problems helps to align funders and staff, and helps point to likely patrons, types of offerings and ways to deliver them.

Library leaders repeatedly cited a number of innovation “problems” in our discussions. Reflecting on this list, we saw a pattern of common problems among many library systems.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION,  
KNOWLEDGE  
AND LITERACY

CIVIC  
PROBLEMS

WHAT WE HEARD

We’re specific about our unique value proposition and how to leverage it to support what the city is trying to achieve. Connecting our mission to the city’s goals is a way for us to be innovative while staying laser focused.  
— **Brian Bannon, Chicago PL**

For good innovation you need good framing. You have to understand what is the problem you are trying to solve.  
— **Maura Marx, IMLS**

Knight can help libraries clarify what the problems are that they want to work on.  
— **Lisa Peet, Library Journal**

Our innovation agenda is our racial equity agenda.  
— **Jane Eastwood, St. Paul PL**

Once you have a tangible outcome that you can explain to people then things can happen—in both the political realm and with staff.  
— **Jill Bourne, San Jose PL**

Libraries have an identity crisis: They are the only remaining trusted community institution in the U.S. that reaches a large amount of people, from all walks of life, and they are being asked to deliver more and more of the social services that traditionally other institutions have taken care of.  
— **Philipp Schmidt, MIT Media Lab**



The Maker[Space]Ship is an innovative mobile workshop developed by the San Jose Public Library to overcome access barriers in San Jose and to foster creative ideas, connect people with technology and encourage problem-solving, collaboration and discovery.



INNOVATION AGENDA:  
CLARIFYING “WHY”

Many libraries are focused on solving the problems and developing new offerings for which they have traditionally been associated, namely those involving access to education, knowledge and literacy.

In contrast, other libraries are focusing their innovation agendas on expanding the scope of the library to address civic problems in their cities. This second group continues to deliver the core services the first group is seeking to reinvent, yet they are focusing their innovation efforts in a way that may reinvent what an urban library does.

Here is a selection of example innovation problems we heard from library systems.



The Akron-Summit County Public Library's Microbusiness Center has been created to provide accessible business training, educational resources and individualized direction to entrepreneurs, students and established business owners.

WHY: WHICH PROBLEMS ARE THE FOCUS  
OF YOUR INNOVATION EFFORTS?

### Access to education, knowledge and literacy

Reinventing how libraries do what they do

<b>Closing the urban early childhood literacy gap</b>  Developing new solutions that meaningfully increase the success rate for early childhood literacy throughout the year	<b>Leveling access to top digital technology</b>  Providing world-class access to internet, mobile, social and consumer technologies at little or no cost to patrons
<b>Developing direct patron relationships</b>  Delivering segmented and targeted services that deepen engagement with individual platforms	<b>Opening up / Turning the library inside out</b>  Reaching new under-served urban library patrons and partners outside of traditional environments and operations via new services/APIs
<b>Revolutionizing operations</b>  Developing operational solutions and processes that help library systems deliver more value in a constrained environment	<b>Creating informed media and technology consumers and creators</b>  Building familiarity and proficiency with digital media, software, maker technology, and connected hardware
Etc.	Etc.

### Civic problems

Redefining the role of libraries in urban life

<b>Creating an informed and engaged citizenry</b>  Helping patrons better understand their local communities and influence local, state and national policies	<b>Becoming the trusted source for social services</b>  Creating marketing strategies and partnerships with providers to deliver access to urban governmental programs in a trustworthy environment
<b>Educating employable adults for tomorrow's economy</b>  Increasing the employment prospects of urban teens and adults of all ages through services, training and lifelong learning	<b>Adapting services for urban immigrant communities</b>  Making library-hosted services approachable and consumable to urban immigrant populations
<b>Reinvigorating urban spaces</b>  Creating vibrant urban destinations and spaces to serve the diverse needs of residents	<b>Etc.</b>
Etc.	Etc.



INNOVATION AGENDA:  
WHO?

Part of framing an innovation problem is developing clarity about which patrons you’re trying to help, when, why and how. And while libraries have the mandate and responsibility to serve all patrons, innovation efforts benefit from additional specificity.

While libraries are “close” to their patrons, many see the need to better know them so that they may more proactively help them.

Some groups that libraries have identified for innovation include: new and existing patrons (for example, Columbia, Chicago); low-literacy youth and adults (Philadelphia); racial minorities (St. Paul); and immigrants (Detroit, Washington, D.C., Charlotte).



Mayor Rahm Emanuel visits the main Chicago Public Library to announce its newly revamped Rahm’s Readers Summer Learning Challenge, in which kids can participate in hands-on activities around science, technology, engineering, art and math (STEAM).

Why

ACCESS TO EDUCATION,  
KNOWLEDGE  
AND LITERACY

CIVIC  
PROBLEMS

Who

PATRON FOCUS  
(NEW OR EXISTING PATRONS; BEHAVIORS, MOTIVATIONS,  
DEMOGRAPHICS, CONTEXT, “JOBS TO BE DONE”)

WHAT WE HEARD

78% of our youth are kids of color and there are many different immigrant populations. It’s about understanding more complex needs that people have of the library.  
— Jane Eastwood, St. Paul PL

Libraries need to do a better job of having a longitudinal path where we more intentionally guide people to learning experiences and always have something for them to do next, like colleges and universities.  
— John Szabo, Los Angeles PL

The People’s University: We have 18- to 21-year-old folks who spend a lot of time on the computers and lifelong learners who take our online courses. We asked: How can we take everything that someone does here and put it together to get credits and graduate from college?  
— Felton Thomas Jr., Cleveland PL

The Summer Learning Challenge: A redesign of our summer reading program that counteracts the summer slide by engaging kids in hands on learning. We asked: How does the summer slide really work?  
— Brian Bannon, Chicago PL

Words of Play: A program in North Philly, an area with high poverty and low literacy, that builds 3- to 4-year-olds’ vocabulary. We hired local advocates to help us work with the community. Our big push is to work with the whole family.  
— Siobhan Reardon, Free Library of Philadelphia

INNOVATION AGENDA:  
WHAT?

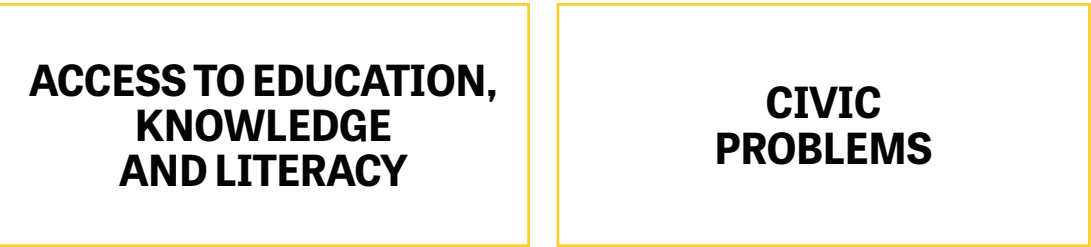
Libraries should decide the best form, the “what,” for an innovation to take. That decision might arise out of the project effort itself, but it’s likely that a library system will be better at delivering a specific type of innovation offering. Typically this is a service, usually delivered via an event or programming. At times, partnerships are created. We believe technology and platforms<sup>1</sup> should be a focus in the future as a way to advance the field as a whole.

1. A platform is a service that gets better the more people use it and the more it gets built upon.



With The People’s University Express Book Bike, the Cleveland Public Library combines two innovation initiatives: The People’s University, which gives college accreditation to coursework done in the library, and The Book Bike, which brings the library to neighborhood parks, festivals and events.

Why



Who



What



WHAT WE HEARD

We’re the connective tissue Aand the promoter of services that are being delivered by other folks.  
— Crosby Kemper III, Kansas City PL

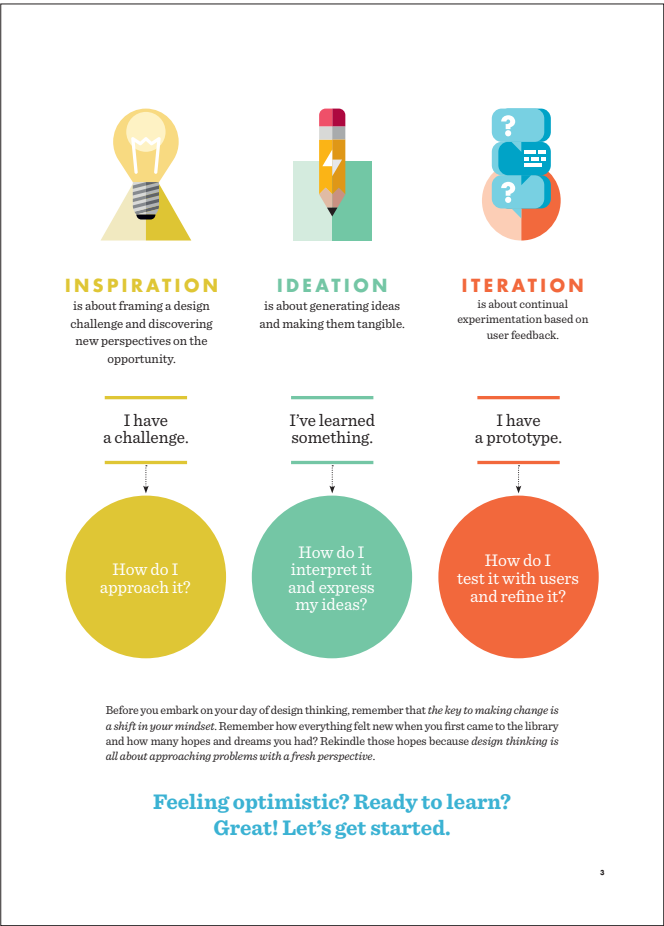
Bridge Libraries: This program leverages partnerships that lower the cost of bringing libraries to people in areas that have economic or geographic barriers to access. For example, the San Jose Housing Department is working with us to potentially develop a small “bridge branch” in affordable housing projects or on school district land in under-served neighborhoods.  
— Jill Bourne, San Jose PL

Libraries have the potential to be platforms for other things. For example, to use the space as a platform to reserve rooms and “borrow” spaces. Or to provide services or products that help people access others in their community who have similar interests. Or to partner with an R&D lab to probe the future of learning.  
— Philipp Schmidt, MIT Media Lab

There are few innovation projects that will be successful if we drive it in isolation, so we’re paying attention to what’s happening in the community and where the library can leverage some of the things that are trying to be achieved and to be that preferred partner.  
— Cynthia Berner, Wichita PL

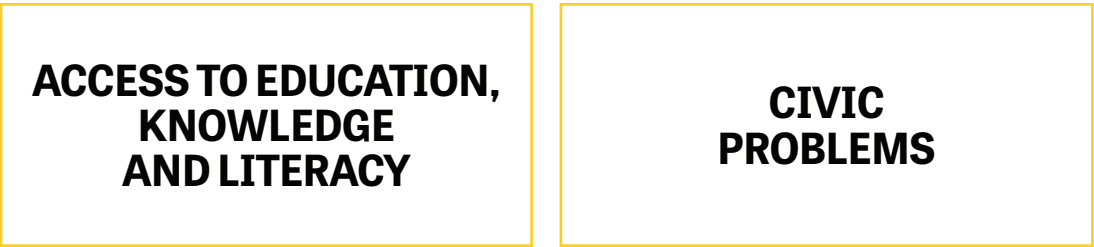
INNOVATION AGENDA:  
HOW?

Systems should answer the question, “How do we get innovation done?” Do they rely on entrepreneurial, motivated and capable staff to develop ideas, prototype programs and secure funding often of their own accord? Or do they rely on a centralized process that staff members join whether they are trained or not?

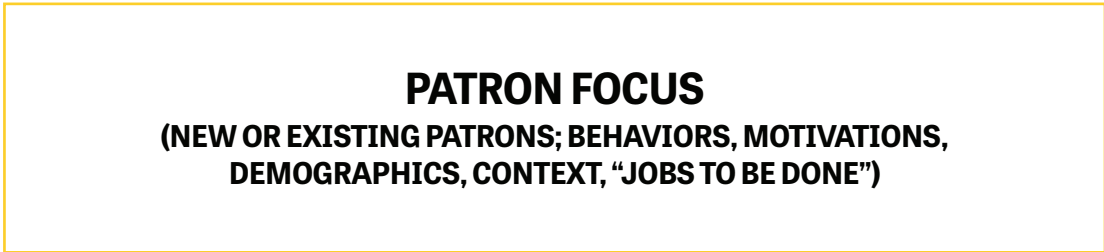


Page from “Design Thinking in a Day: An At-A-Glance Guide,” a quick primer on design thinking for libraries. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, IDEO led the creation of this content in partnership with Chicago Public Library and Aarhus Public Libraries in 2015. (Download guide at [designthinkingforlibraries.com](http://designthinkingforlibraries.com).)

Why



Who



What



How



WHAT WE HEARD

Training works better than downloading tool kits.  
— Maura Marx, IMLS

Design thinking is so iterative it has enough places where people can fail but gives enough opportunity for something to succeed.  
— Brian Bannon, Chicago PL

We're building an internal leadership training program that will take 20 to 30 people through a six-month program. We'll bring in speakers around leadership, and the trainees will go to other libraries to see what's going and then develop their own innovation programs.  
— John Szabo, Los Angeles PL

When I have a paradigm-shifting program, I need a dedicated staff member working with me directly to make sure our internal and external visions are the same.  
— Jill Bourne, San Jose PL

If the programs are boring, even if you're doing it well, it's not innovative. So we hired someone who has a background in curriculum development and experiential education to work with our staff on how to come up with ideas.  
— Story Bellows, Brooklyn PL

I'd like a lot more ideas to come from the staff. It's difficult for them because of the nature of their training as librarians. They like executing, not envisioning.  
— Felton Thomas Jr., Cleveland PL



INNOVATION AGENDA:  
WHERE?

Is everyone responsible and accountable for innovation? Or instead, do we rely upon a smaller number of people and processes to innovate on behalf of the organization? Effective outcomes are more likely with enabled and focused teams. Over time, opening the process through hands-on training helps to extend and build a culture of innovation.



Brooklyn Public Library's TeleStory: Library-Based Video Visitation for Children of Incarcerated Parents is a 2016 Knight News Challenge winner.

Why



Who



What



How



Where



WHAT WE HEARD

We are also always adding things but not removing anything. How can we provide a rubric for evaluating where we feel comfortable expanding our business, where we don't, and what we might stop doing? This is a downside to the distributed approach. Some people take more centralized approaches where it's easier to have visibility and control across the system.

— Story Bellows, Brooklyn PL

We're testing, piloting and figuring out what works and then figuring out how it can have minimal effort and the largest effect when it gets integrated into the whole system.

— Jill Bourne, San Jose PL

We ask: Is this something that is small, to do in a single neighborhood, or is it something that can scale to the scale of our library system?

— John Szabo, Los Angeles PL

We're probably more cautious than many of our peers when it comes to experimentation. We want to feel like we believe that pilot has a strong likelihood of success before we commit. But we will still pilot and then we'll look at rolling out.

— Cynthia Berner, Wichita PL

# **PART 4:**

# **INNOVATION ASSESSMENT**

- Capture your innovation agenda
- Assess your innovation capabilities

# CAPTURE YOUR INNOVATION AGENDA

Use the innovation agenda to help assess your system’s innovation strategy. Do you have alignment on your approach within library leadership? Do funders and staff understand your agenda? Who are the patrons you are trying to help, when, why and how? What type of offering are you developing? How will you develop it? Who will be responsible for it?

Why

ACCESS TO EDUCATION, KNOWLEDGE AND LITERACY

CIVIC PROBLEMS

Who

PATRON FOCUS  
(NEW OR EXISTING PATRONS; BEHAVIORS, MOTIVATIONS, DEMOGRAPHICS, CONTEXT, “JOBS TO BE DONE”)

What

SERVICES

PARTNERSHIPS

TECHNOLOGY AND PLATFORMS

How

MOTIVATED STAFF

PROCESS

Where

CENTRALIZED

DISTRIBUTED

## CAPTURE YOUR TOP INNOVATION STORIES

Title:

Description:

Title:

Description:



# ASSESS YOUR INNOVATION CAPABILITIES

Capabilities	Level of proficiency	Ways to improve
<b>Clearly framed innovation problems</b> We know why we're innovating.	12345	
<b>Patron focus</b> We identify priority patrons for innovation.	12345	
<b>An identified innovation process</b> We know how we do the work of innovation and who is involved.	12345	
<b>Experienced innovation project leadership</b> We have people who have the mandate, time and skills to lead the process.	12345	
<b>Technical proficiency and resource availability</b> We can build and integrate technology and digital solutions into our offerings.	12345	
<b>Deliberate storytelling and marketing</b> We get people excited by the stories of what we're doing and how we work.	12345	
<b>Manage a strategic portfolio</b> We have multiple, complementary projects happening.	12345	

# 10 STORIES OF LIBRARY INNOVATION

**1. COMMITTING AT THE LAST MOMENT**

**Dokk1**

**Aarhus, Denmark**

Throughout the process of designing Dokk1, library and culture center, the design team adhered to a rule of “deciding at the last possible minute” to learn as much from the prototyping they were doing. They remained flexible, and learned how to work with architects and designers to maintain that flexibility.

**2. PROTOTYPING EVERYTHING**

**Richland Public Library**

**Columbia, South Carolina**

When the library underwent a recent renovation, officials wrote into the contract with furniture suppliers that certain furniture and fixtures needed to be prototyped and evaluated in a working library before the order was placed. That allowed officials to learn what worked well in the library.

**3. ADDRESSING THE WHOLE PERSON**

**Los Angeles Public Library**

**Los Angeles**

As part of its efforts to help reduce health disparities in the city’s at-need areas and create a “whole child” approach to services, library officials have brought the Vision to Learn program and the University of California, Los Angeles Mobile Eye Clinic to libraries. The

program provides free eye exams and eyeglasses to low-income children and their families. The program leverages the library as a trusted community resource to produce a significant impact: Children with corrected vision have more confidence, participate more in class and experience a rise in their grades and test scores.

**4. THE PEOPLE’S UNIVERSITY**

**Cleveland Public Library**

**Cleveland, Ohio**

A patron recently shared on a job application that he had graduated from “The People’s University,” which is the Cleveland Public Library’s tagline. The library is working to help patrons track their library-based coursework and learning. Next up, library officials plan to work with community colleges as a bridge to accreditation.

**5. FRAMING AND SELLING IMPACT**

**San Jose Public Library**

**San Jose, California**

San Jose designed and ran an eight-week “Reading Rockets” pilot program that raised the third-grade reading level skills of participating students from 20 percent to 80 percent. The pilot was designed with the outcomes and metrics in mind and helped garner additional support from local government.

**6. REACHING UNDERSERVED**

**AUDIENCES**

**Charlotte Mecklenburg Library**

**Charlotte, North Carolina**

Library officials initiated a program that loads all the student ID numbers from the local public school system (150,000) into the library system to provide library cards. They worked with the technical staff at the board of education to align databases and implement the program. This approach has spread to libraries throughout the country.

**7. REFRAMING FAMILIAR CHALLENGES**

**Chicago Public Library**

**Chicago**

After exploring the causes for the “summer slide,” library officials redesigned the familiar summer reading program to make it so “all learning counts.” The Summer Learning Challenge invites children to engage in many forms of hands-on learning to complement their reading.

**8. INTEGRATING SERVICES TO**

**ACHIEVE OUTCOMES**

**Akron-Summit County Public Library**

**Akron, Ohio**

At the Akron-Summit Microbusiness Center at the library, entrepreneurs receive guidance from a specialist, access co-working space, tap into useful

databases and connect to service organizations that can help them create products and businesses. It also sits across from a makerspace so people can use the equipment in the technology zone to help them with their microbusiness idea.

**9. TURNING THE LIBRARY INSIDE OUT**

**Madison Public Library Foundation**

**Madison, Wisconsin**

Madison puts on “Library Takeover” boot camps where the patrons are trained to plan and run events at the library. Library officials provide “space, time and resources for community members to host their own events, helping to set the stage for future library programming that involves and reflects all of Madison.”

**10. TAPPING INTO PARTNER ASSETS**

**Richland, Madison and San Jose public libraries**

Richland holds a hybrid farmer’s market / library that uses local school spaces to offer library services and programming as well as fresh produce to underserved, rural communities. Madison conducts a two-pronged program that takes advantage of a large community kitchen to hold cooking classes that lead to free meals. In San Jose, the library is working with the city’s building department to create micro-libraries in vacant buildings in underserved communities.

# MORE ON THE FIELD OF INNOVATION

# MORE ON THE FIELD OF INNOVATION

What's different about innovation in urban libraries? To answer that question it's helpful to say what innovation means generally.

## LEADS TO GROWTH

Innovation can come from many sources, but in the end it should help organizations to grow and evolve. Innovation should grow overall engagement with offerings, improve the bottom line and help organizations learn about their patrons while building capabilities to serve them better.

## IMPLIES NEW

"New" can take many forms: new experiences, new combinations, new products and new ways of experiencing our institutions. "New" could mean adapting a solution from another city, industry or context. "New" doesn't imply novelty. Innovation creates sustained impact and value for patrons and organizations, whereas novel solutions might create only temporary excitement.

## DRIVES RESULTS WHILE ENGAGING STAFF

Organizations that systematically and repeatedly produce innovative outcomes do so by working toward the outcomes, first, and engaging employees and partners in the process.

## REQUIRES CHANGE

Most organizations are designed for execution and scale. The paradox of innovation is that organizations often have to overcome their strengths in order to envision, design and build new products, services and technologies. Innovation requires a deliberate focus to overcome natural organizational tendencies.

## HAS EVOLVED AS A DISCIPLINE

A great deal of work and research has been done into what approaches and strategies lead to innovative outcomes. There are more sophisticated tools (such as agile development, lean startup methodologies and remote research) and more pervasive talent to uncover latent needs, articulate insights and opportunities, and develop world-class solutions.

More reading:

1. "Seven Sources of Innovation" by Peter F. Drucker, Harvard Business Review. A classic look at where innovation opportunities arise.
2. "Design Thinking" by Tim Brown or "Lean Startup" by Eric Ries. Two accepted approaches to developing new offerings.
3. "The Ambidextrous Organization" by Charles A. O'Reilly III and Michael L. Tushman, HBR. Balancing execution and experimentation.
4. "How to Kill Creativity" by Theresa Amabile, HBR. The personal side of leading innovation.
5. "The 12 Different Ways for Companies to Innovate" by Mohanbir Sawhney, Robert C. Wolcott and Inigo Arroniz, HBR. Getting beyond new offerings to consider different types of innovation including operations and business models.

## URBAN LIBRARIES: POINTS OF COMPARISON

What's different about the context in which urban libraries innovate? How do those differences align with other industries?

A proud tradition of staff whose ethos has been one of "preservation" rather than "discovery."

Like: Primary education

An extremely diverse "customer base" and a responsibility to serve all types of patrons.

Like: Social media platforms or big-box and online retail

Distributed network of access points.

Like: Physical retail stores with flagships

Operating in a regional, non-competitive environment with other libraries but being pressured by other technological advancements and changes in user behavior.

Like: Cable systems circa early 2000s

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