



CONVERSATION GUIDE

Beyond Books

A conversation guide for library professionals to engage with the community about the changing role of public libraries

MARCH 2024



Introduction: Why Start a Dialogue?

The library's role in communities has become vastly different in the 21st century than originally conceived. Libraries serve as a public commons and a social innovator. They support digital literacy, food access, entrepreneurship and inclusion, and can serve as a policy lever to promote economic mobility. Libraries are essential to equity goals and the civic health of democracy in the United States. However, community members and stakeholders such as government leaders do not always know the extent of the work that libraries do and how they serve social and policy goals.

This guide for library professionals is intended to support hosting community conversations about the changing role of libraries, highlighting community impacts and building local support.

Stay In Touch!

We would love to hear if this guide helps you host an event or any other type of discussion in your community about the important role the library plays. Email the Urban Libraries Council at info@urbanlibraries.org.

1. Develop a Plan to Host a Community Conversation

Hosting a community event at the library can be a powerful way to build support. This section provides suggestions on how you may bring an event about the library to life. Make sure you know ahead of time what your goals are and who your target audience is for the event. Use this [brainstorming worksheet](#) as a place to get started.

Ask yourself: What messages do I want to get across about the library? With whom do I need to build support?

Learn about stakeholder interests.

For example, if your target audience is local government leaders, research their policy priorities and identify connections with the library's work. These could be your event's main themes and/or help you with talking points when you invite stakeholders.

Design your event.

Once you have established your goals, audience and themes, it will be easier to identify what type of event best serves these priorities. Is it a reception? Panel event? Community roundtable? Or perhaps a film screening, like the upcoming [Free For All documentary](#) about the changing role of libraries.

Prepare your resources.

You will need invitation language, an outreach plan and a run of show. See the “Downloadable Templates and Resources” section at the end of this guide for helpful tools.

Advertise the conversation.

Ensure your event is well advertised and accessible to all community members (click here to view a [Library Accessibility Toolkit](#)). Collaborate with any internal communications staff on outreach.



Integrate the Community into the Heart of the Event

Research the history of your community and the library system itself. Being prepared to tell the story of your library in the community will help attendees feel engaged and considered. As longstanding public institutions, many U.S. library systems carry discrimination and segregation as a part of their past; do not shy away from addressing this history. Also, consider if this component is integrated into your event as a presentation or more of a discussion.

Invite members of the community to tell their stories. Engage trusted leaders and other members of the community who have personal experience with the library. Consider shining the light on them rather than library staff.

Be sure to research your speakers well before inviting them. What is their history, and what are their community priorities?

Additional Resources:

- EveryLibrary: [Libraries, Segregation, and Civil Rights](#)
- The Culture Crush: [Bodies of Knowledge](#)
- Ad Council Research Institute: [2022 Trusted Messengers Study](#)

2. Invite Community Stakeholders

If one of your goals is to build support with community leaders, local government or other stakeholders, personally invite these leaders to your event. Introduce your library and the work you do. State the issues at hand and why you want to include them. If you are asking these community leaders to speak at the event, be sure to set up a pre-event call in which you clearly communicate expectations for their role at the event.

Partnerships to consider:

- Local government leaders (mayors, county or city council members, etc.)
- Local government departments (parks, economic development, planning, social services, schools, etc.)
- Chamber of Commerce
- Social services nonprofits
- Faith-based organizations (Churches, synagogues, mosques, inter-faith groups, etc.)
- Local chapters or equivalents of PFLAGG, NAACP, and other organizations promoting the rights of marginalized populations.
- Local journalists
- Legal advocacy organizations
- Professors and other educators

Additional Resources:

- Center for Care Innovations: [10 Ways to Create Effective Community Partnerships](#)

***Watch a National Town Hall on the Critical Role of Libraries***

ULC held a conversation about the critical and evolving role of the library. This event was targeted to both libraries and local government leaders and highlighted what these shifts mean for the field itself, strategies for communicating this to stakeholders and the local community and how the library connects with local policy goals.

This virtual town hall conversation may serve as an example of the type of dialogue you can look to have in your own community. [View the recording on Vimeo.](#)

3. Stay Connected with Local Community and Government Leaders

Following the event, take steps to measure the impact of the conversation you held.

 Collect attendee feedback.

Design a feedback survey for distribution at the end of the event or shortly thereafter. Keep the survey short; five questions or fewer should give you the information you need to improve for the future without deterring responses. Use ULC's [event feedback survey template](#) and distribute it to event attendees.

Thank speakers and connect with influential attendees.

After the event, follow up with important attendees and speakers to schedule a debrief conversation. Use this time to hear their reflections about the event and engage them in a formal conversation about partnership moving forward.

Brainstorm ways to keep local leaders involved consistently.

Are there certain meetings or events you can consistently invite them to attend? Are there other events at which you can invite them to speak? Elected officials will be interested in opportunities to speak publicly about the connection between the library and their policy goals.



Engage with Local Government Peers

Building partnerships with local government is critical for libraries. The time you spend building relationships with your peers across the municipality – from law enforcement to social services to human resources – and including elected officials will be well spent. Set up meetings to introduce your library and the work you do, including stating the issues at hand and why you want to include them. Get to know their priorities. Invite them to read at your children’s library story times or participate in your programs and consider offering “get to know your local leaders” panel discussions.

Ways to stay connected:

Invite one or two other department heads to participate in the library strategic planning process.

If you’re working on internal cash handling policies, include their finance department along the way. Your staff will get to know theirs, and neither department will be left with any surprises toward the end.

Invite departments to get involved in library programming. You may invite them to lead programming, to use library space for meetings, etc.

- Partner with the Economic Development Department on your workforce and economic development programming
- Partner with Parks and Recreation on your health and wellness programming
- Partner with Police on programming on the safe handling of firearms
- Partner with the Fire Department on fire prevention

☑ Celebrate the library.

If you don't already, ask to present regularly to your local board members and get celebratory days on their agenda so the library can be recognized. Be sure to highlight literacy and economic development programming; these are always going to be popular library services with local officials. As you build trust among these leaders, you will have more of a voice when controversy arises.

☑ Acknowledge the challenges.

Should tension arise, work closely with your city and county administration to craft messaging. Have your communications departments collaborate with the city and county communications staffs. Research the policy priorities of elected leaders and tailor messaging for your audience. If you've built relationships with other department heads who have a perspective like your elected officials, talk to them and seek their input. Practice your messaging with them.

Additional Resources:

- Urban Libraries Council: [Engaging Local Officials on Democracy](#)

Appendix:

Downloadable Templates and Resources

- [Event Brainstorming Worksheet](#)
- [Printable Discussion Guide](#)
- Outreach Materials:
 - [Sample Community Leader Invitation](#)
 - [Sample Public Announcement](#)
 - [Press Release Template](#)
 - [Sample Social Media Language](#)



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