



WHITE PAPER

Community Engagement Matters: Learnings from the Barbershop Books Pilot for Libraries

URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL
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Introduction

Long gone are the days of public libraries serving only those who walk through their doors. Today, libraries across the United States and Canada travel into neighborhoods to conduct direct outreach to community members who could benefit from access to library services. The COVID-19 pandemic brought greater attention to pre-existing social, economic, and racial disparities; now, community engagement is understood to be a key part of the work of public libraries to meet the needs of their communities.

With the support of the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) partnered with the nonprofit [Barbershop Books](#) to pilot an early literacy-focused family and community engagement model throughout 2023 and 2024. ULC and Barbershop Books supported a small cohort of four library systems as they sought to develop barbershop-based reading spaces and increase reading opportunities for boys of color in their local communities. Each library partner identified and recruited 10 local barbershops, set up and maintained a bookshelf of children's literature in each shop, and partnered with the barbershops to host community events. This report highlights lessons learned from the pilot and their application as library community engagement best practices.

Participating Libraries

- Charlotte Mecklenburg Library
- Cleveland Public Library
- Columbus Metropolitan Library
- Shreve Memorial Library



Charlotte Mecklenburg Library



Cleveland Public Library



Columbus Metropolitan Library



Shreve Memorial Library

Program Goals

Any effective library community engagement program should have clearly defined goals that are responsive to the needs of the community and align with the library's strategic goals. The Barbershop Books library pilot had several goals:

Goal #1: Provide access to child-approved literature.

Through in-person surveys, online recommendations, and data from its [Reading So Lit](#) program, Barbershop Books collects information about the reading preferences of Black boys ages 8 and under. This allows the organization to leverage curated lists of books based on recommendations from young boys themselves. Participating libraries were provided with Barbershop Books' curated list but were also invited to tailor the book offerings to their community.

Goal #2: Increase out-of-school time reading.

[According to The Afterschool Alliance](#), out-of-school time reading promotes skill acquisition, school performance and positive life outcomes, including increased income and better employment opportunities. By providing access to engaging books in a culturally meaningful space where boys often have unoccupied time, such as barbershops, the pilot's family and community engagement model strove to increase time spent reading in barbershops and beyond.

Goal #3: Support non-academic aspects of reading, such as identity and motivation.

The program also strives to support the reading identity development and self-efficacy of boys. Self-efficacy is a non-academic and [social-emotional learning-based competency](#) that has been defined as the belief in one's abilities to accomplish desired outcomes. Access to relevant and engaging reading experiences in a culturally meaningful space may increase the ability of boys to view themselves as successful readers.



"Barbershop books can be a catalyst for equipping libraries with new approaches that support culturally responsive and authentic ways to connect with communities and families."

- Alvin Irby, Founder and CEO, Barbershop Books

Insights for Libraries

The Barbershop Books pilot revealed new insights into effective community engagement strategies that may be transferable to other communities and programs for libraries. Takeaways from the pilot program include:

Partnering with barbershops can increase the reach of libraries.

Library cohort members expressed how the pilot program helped them create connections where they did not previously have them. In partnering with barbershops, participating libraries were able to connect with new audiences, businesses and organizations. Cohort members also acknowledged how partnering with barbershops led to new outreach events in previously untapped neighborhoods and increased visibility through co-branded media engagement.

Partnering with barbershops can open pathways to serve whole families.

Beyond the target audience — young boys getting haircuts — the library discovered that the program pilot allowed them to connect with parents and caregivers of children, who often were not aware of library resources and services. Library staff were able to use events and other programming opportunities to speak with caregivers about available resources and invite them to the library.

Partnering with barbershops can produce mission-aligned partnerships .

Library staff expressed that barbers were typically equally passionate as they were about literacy efforts and were eager to learn more about how to increase out-of-school reading time. Barbershop Books staff helped libraries explore new collection development strategies that included insights from barbers as well as boys and girls who frequented the shops.



What Libraries Added

Library systems bring capacity and vast expertise to community-based programs. The participation of library staff enabled the Barbershop Books program in each of the four pilot cities to have widespread impact. The libraries' contributions include:

Staff and Program Capacity

Prior to the pilot, most Barbershop Books programs were volunteer-driven. By introducing library staff into the program model, regular visits were made to the participating barbershops. (Two to five times over the pilot program, but up to six to 10 times in some cases.) These visits allowed library staff to get updates from barbers regarding the status of the program, check the condition of the shelving and books, determine what books were most interacted with or read, and add any needed materials.

Library staff also contributed their event planning, community engagement, and collection development expertise to the programs. Some libraries adjusted the recommended book list based on ongoing feedback, as well as existing library collections practices.



Program Evaluation Data

Library staff executed interviews with barbers, through which they were able to gain valuable data such as the estimated number of children served by the program. (See the “Program Impact” section for more details.) Getting this information proved to be challenging at times; barbers were often busy with clients and hard to reach. In some cases, library staff had to make multiple attempts at speaking with barbers and used innovative strategies to collect information. Often, library staff spoke with barbers while they were working with a client.

Connection to the Library and its Facilities, Events and Community Reach

The library brings to the table social capital and the respect of the community. Partners may find that it is easier to get interest or investment in a program when the library is listed as a main player.

Some barbers had mobile barbershops, and the library proved to be a wonderful venue for hosting them. Across half of the participating library systems, having barbers onsite during other community-focused events proved to be a winning combination. Impatience that could have been produced by a long line of kids waiting to get haircuts was offset by the variety of resources and activities (story times, book displays, etc.) offered by the library.



“Don’t give up! We initially faced challenges getting barbers to fill out surveys. While there was initial excitement, it was sometimes challenging to get the information that we needed from the barbers. We had to keep in mind their business; their shop is a priority. We had to find a way to make it work and meet the shop owner where they are.”

*- Meryle A. Leonard, Assistant Director of Outreach,
Charlotte Mecklenburg Library*

What Libraries Gained

Libraries benefit and enhance their own organizational missions by engaging in community-based programming. Barbershop Books enhanced the mission of libraries participating in the pilot in several ways, including:

Partnerships

Partnerships are key for enhancing the scope and reach of library programs and services. Barbers in some instances serve as community leaders and trusted messengers, or community members who have gained respect based on their ongoing role within the community as someone who can be trusted. Partnering with trusted messengers ensures that programs reach their intended audience and incorporate community voice in ways that would not be possible through the work of library staff alone. Some libraries also reported that barbershops facilitated even further community partnerships for the library.

Visibility and Reach

In the Barbershop Books program, the work is almost exclusively on-site in barbershops and at community events. This opens a window for libraries to leverage the program as a key component of their community engagement strategy. Bringing the program into the community, it both reaches the target audience of school-aged children and brings greater visibility about the library among difficult-to-reach members of the community who may not otherwise walk through the doors of the library. Charlotte Mecklenburg Library used their Barbershop Books kickoff event to sign barbershop customers up for library cards and their annual summer reading program.

Pilot libraries were encouraged to research local barbershops and select locations based on target communities and local economic and social indicator data. Community-based programs provide an opportunity to target communities the library wants to reach down to the neighborhood.

Staff Training and Skills Enhancement

Library staff received formal and informal training as part of the Barbershop Books program. Staff gained expertise in several topics, including culturally appropriate community engagement and effective collaboration. Staff also developed an understanding of the role of the barber and barbershop in communities and how to effectively partner with them.

Those who participated in the pilot also learned to be flexible; the program can look different in different communities and with different local partners. Each barbershop's level of engagement also impacted the programs that libraries were able to provide and the capacity that they needed to take on. This experience allowed library staff to implement the program model in a variety of ways and learn skills related to tailoring programming to community needs and interests.



“This created opportunities for partnerships even beyond the barbershops. They tell us about the organizations they work with and what is going on in the community they serve. It helps us keep a pulse on what’s going on in the community.”

- DiFranco Barnes, Outreach Program and Services Project Coordinator, Cleveland Public Library



Questions for Libraries to Consider

The pilot illuminated several key considerations for libraries looking into or launching community engagement programming. Library leaders and staff should consider the following questions:

“What is the value-add of this work for our library? Why is it important to us?”

Cleveland Public Library was able to tie their Barbershop Books efforts to a larger initiative called [Cleveland Reads](#), a city-wide reading campaign — encouraged by the mayor — to increase the city’s literacy levels. The Charlotte Mecklenburg Library integrated the program into a system-wide goal of ensuring libraries services were within one mile of all community residents.

“How much staff time and other resources will go into this? How much can we give to this project, and for how long?”

One of the library cohort members reported having nine active barbershop locations, with six different staff members, all of whom made upwards of five site visits to gather data and check in with the barbers. Libraries should think through a resource and staffing model that makes sense for their library and community.

“What are our indicators of success?”

Cohort members expressed a variety of markers that made the program successful, such as:

- “This initiative offered new ways for us to reach beyond our normal target areas.”
- “Working with Barbershop Books has helped us reach communities where a library branch is not in the immediate vicinity.”
- “This is the first time we’ve partnered with barbers. We’re working to see how this model might also work at local hair salons.”

“How will we sustain the work?”

Sustainability is a key consideration. For the pilot, libraries had to consider the yearly cost of licensing the program from Barbershop Books, program materials including books for each location, and any supplemental programming that might occur alongside the initiative (e.g., pop-up engagement events in conjunction with local barbers). Engaging in co-fundraising efforts with Barbershop Books and other community partners is a possible solution. The Las Vegas-Clark County Library District and Barbershop Books recently [partnered](#) with the National Football League to implement the program in 10 Las Vegas barbershops and to host a local event during Super Bowl Week in Winter 2024.

Program Impact

As outlined above, it is critical to develop a strategy for measuring program impact. This can be especially challenging in community engagement programming that is drop-in and non-rostered because data may be inconsistent, and staff may not interact with the same participant more than once. Creativity in data collection allowed the following estimates to be made about the impact of the Barbershop Books Program Pilot across the four library system partners:

- The pilot improved access to books for an estimated 15,113 Black and African American males aged 5-9 by locating books in barbershops within a one-mile proximity radius of their households.¹ 9,682 of these young people lived in low-income or high-poverty areas.²
- There were an estimated 470 combined daily visits from children aged 8 and under to the 38 participating barbershops. The estimated annual sum of these visits was 137,748.
- There were an estimated 288 combined daily interactions with books from children aged 8 and under to the 38 participating barbershops. The estimated annual sum of these interactions was 81,016.



Conclusion

The Barbershop Books Pilot of Libraries serves as a key example of how community engagement programs offer rich opportunities for public libraries to expand their reach and support their communities. In the process, they can expand community partnerships, increase awareness of in-house library services, and further the library's organizational priorities including family and community engagement goals. To ensure program effectiveness and mutually beneficial partnerships, libraries should plan strategically around key components including capacity, sustainability, funding, and measuring impact.

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Methodology

To quantify the impact and reach of the Barbershop Books Pilot for Libraries, a geospatial approach was employed to achieve the following:

1. A measure of visits by Black and African American males aged 5-9 to each participating location.
2. A proximity measure for establishing the ability of participating locations to extend access to Black and African American males aged 5-9 in surrounding communities (especially those in low-income communities) using a 1-mile proximity radius.

The process involved the following:

1. Geocoding addresses of all participating barbershops as point locations.
2. Identifying all census tracts within a 1-mile radius of participating barbershops and calculating the sum of all Black and African American males aged 5-9 residing in identified census tracts to arrive at program reach and access estimates.
3. Identifying all qualified Census Tracts for the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program for 2024 within a 1-mile radius of participating barbershops and calculating the sum of all Black and African American males aged 5-9 residing in identified census tracts to arrive at program reach and access estimates of low-income households.



The Urban Libraries Council is an innovation and action tank of North America's leading public library systems. We drive cutting-edge research and strategic partnerships to elevate the power of libraries as essential, transformative institutions. We identify significant challenges facing today's communities and develop new tools and techniques to help libraries achieve stronger outcomes in education, workforce and economic development, digital equity and race and social equity.