

## LEADERSHIP BRIEF:

### Leading Social Impact:

### Reflections from the ULC CEO Roundtable 2025

As civic trust erodes and communities grow more divided, public libraries are increasingly stepping forward as both anchors of stability and catalysts for social progress. Understanding and leading on social impact has never been more essential. It allows libraries to design programs that address disparities in education, digital access, and health literacy—and to form strategic partnerships with sectors like health, education, and social services.

In June 2025, the Urban Libraries Council convened over 70 executive directors from public libraries across North America for an exclusive CEO Roundtable focused on advancing social impact through leadership and advocacy. Co-hosted by Toronto Public Library, the gathering created a trusted space for candid peer exchange, strategic reflection, and collaborative learning.

During the two days, the participants learned about Toronto Public Library's [social impact research](#), New York Public Library's ambitions around reading, [Dr Kate Mulligan](#)'s work on ways that [public spaces can reduce loneliness](#) and on [social prescribing](#), [OCLC](#)'s new insights on generational differences in using the library and how [Professor Randy Boyagoda](#) leads University of Toronto's work on civil discourse.

This Leadership Brief captures the key themes, reflections, and takeaways from those conversations—highlighting how library leaders are navigating complexity, refining their missions, and deepening impact at a time of unprecedented social need.

### Insights from the Field: What Library Leaders Are Saying

*"We may not be the answer to every challenge, but we are the place where real solutions begin."*

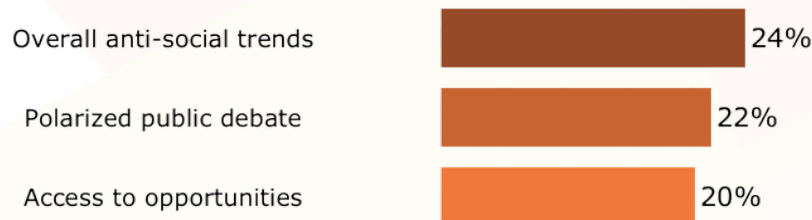
### WHAT LIBRARY LEADERS ARE SEEING & FEELING

In preparation for the CEO Roundtable, library executives from across North America were invited to reflect on the social challenges facing their communities and the evolving role of their institutions. Their responses [offered a powerful snapshot](#) of both the urgency and the opportunity: while most leaders report a clear grasp of the landscape—marked by isolation, division, and unmet needs—many are still seeking clarity on the specific strategies, partnerships, and capacities that will drive lasting impact.

**The challenges are clear; what's needed now are bold, actionable paths forward.** At the Roundtable, library leaders demonstrated a deep awareness of the shifting social landscape—particularly the rising pressures of disconnection, polarization, and inequity. Yet many are still working to define the specific roles their libraries should play, and to identify the steps, skills, and partnerships required to lead with greater impact.

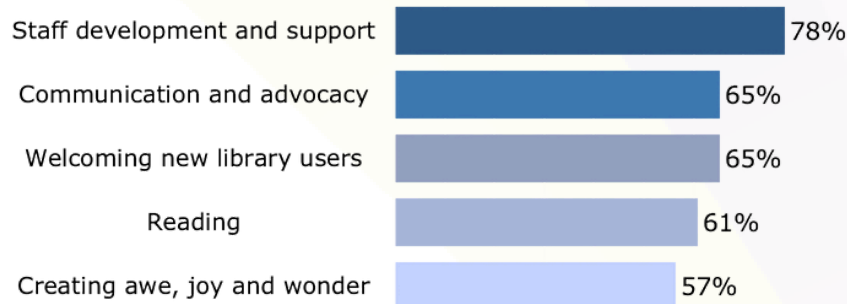
Leaders outlined several core challenges currently limiting deeper social connection in their communities:

**Top Obstacles to Social Connection:**



Despite these barriers, many libraries are already making meaningful progress—particularly in how they develop their teams, communicate their value, and welcome new users.

**Top Areas of Recent Progress:**



However, navigating today's complexity—from divisive political climates to the ethical use of AI—requires fresh strategies. Executives expressed a clear desire for new tools, frameworks, and peer learning opportunities to help them lead with greater confidence.

**Top Areas Where New Ideas Are Needed:**



## CEO ROUNDTABLE THEMES & REFLECTIONS

### *Advocacy for Libraries*

Libraries in North America operate in widely varying political and civic landscapes. While some communities are rallying behind their libraries in response to censorship efforts and public pressure, others are confronting resistance to their mission and values.

One of the most consistent themes shared by CEOs was **the need to broaden public understanding of the library's role in society**. While libraries remain trusted centers for learning and access to information, their contributions now span far wider—from driving workforce development and digital inclusion to fostering civic engagement and public health partnerships. Yet, despite these expanding roles, many community members and elected officials remain largely unaware of the scope and scale of this work.

To close this gap, CEOs are moving beyond one-way messaging and prioritizing meaningful, immersive experiences that allow stakeholders to feel the library's impact. Through **powerful storytelling, cross-sector collaborations, and programs rooted in lived experience**, libraries are helping their communities better understand and champion their evolving mission.

Several directors also shared effective strategies for activating community members and partners as passionate library advocates. In this effort, library foundations are emerging as key allies—amplifying messaging, building political support, and attracting new champions.

#### **KEY REFLECTION:**

*How can we ensure our communities and elected officials understand the full value of the public library?*

### *Managing Staff Expectations*

Library CEOs acknowledged that **internal culture is inseparable from external impact**. In today's polarized environment, guiding staff through evolving expectations around public service, safety, and inclusion is both urgent and complex. Political division, generational shifts, and post-pandemic burnout have blurred the lines between discomfort and harm—raising the stakes for leaders navigating staff morale, accountability, and public-facing roles.

In response, many directors are reframing staff engagement as a strategic leadership practice. Rather than relying on top-down directives, they are co-creating new frameworks with staff that emphasize transparency, shared values, and mission alignment.

**Emerging strategies include:**

- Clearly articulating the library's civic role and institutional identity
- Co-designing staff expectations to build buy-in and consistency
- Introducing new roles that empower staff to lead from within
- Facilitating structured conversations around public service, inclusion, and professional resilience

**KEY REFLECTION:**

*How can we cultivate a staff culture that embraces complexity while staying grounded in our public mission?*

## **Designing for Social Connection**

As community trust and cohesion decline, library leaders are intentionally designing for connection—not just access. Across the Roundtable, directors shared how **small physical changes, human-centered programs, and joy-driven experiences** can create powerful spaces for belonging.

From public art installations to flexible seating that sparks conversation, libraries are incorporating social architecture into their everyday design. These interventions, though often modest, are creating ripple effects—building relationships, reducing isolation, and anchoring communities in shared experiences.

In places facing loneliness, addiction, or division, libraries are offering something rare: consistent, public opportunities for awe, reflection, and joy. Leaders emphasized that fostering connection is not just an amenity—it's a civic responsibility.

**KEY REFLECTION:**

*How can your library become a stage for shared humanity, where connection is designed into every experience?*

## Avoiding Mission Creep Through Partnerships

Libraries are often praised—and stretched—because they can respond to nearly any societal challenge. Yet today's complex urban issues—homelessness, substance use, polarization, mental health—are placing unprecedented demands on library systems and their staff. Across North America, **library workers are asking important questions about the boundaries of their role and the future of the profession.**

To avoid mission drift, leaders must make intentional, strategic choices rooted in the library's core mission, local government priorities, stakeholder relationships, and internal capacity. Before expanding services or launching new initiatives, invest in well-facilitated convenings with staff and partners. These dialogues can prevent duplication of efforts, reveal collaboration opportunities, and create shared ownership of your strategy.

**Effective partnerships start with mutual understanding.** Offer space for partners to learn about the library's unique competencies—and to share their own. Invite critical feedback, listen actively, and clearly define roles to avoid confusion or scope creep.

Build your partnerships on the recognition and validation of differences in capacities and interests as a foundation for partnerships. Seek alignment with local businesses, nonprofits, philanthropic organizations, and public agencies to extend the library's platform while maintaining mission clarity. Consider adopting flexible, system-wide partnership guidelines that empower staff to pursue collaboration at both the system and branch level. Finally, evaluate your partnerships regularly to ensure they are meeting both your community's needs and the library's strategic goals.

### KEY REFLECTION:

*What does your library lead, support, or step back from? Who else can help?*

## A New Era of Reading

Of all the themes explored during the CEO Roundtable, one stood out with striking clarity: reading. While libraries have led innovation in areas like digital access, workforce development, and social services, many directors agreed that reading has not received the same strategic investment—despite its enduring relevance.

Across the board, leaders expressed concern over **declining literacy, shortened attention spans, and the erosion of reading for pleasure.** In many systems, stagnant collection budgets have compounded the challenge. But what emerged was not despair—rather, a collective resolve to reignite a culture of reading.

CEOs discussed bold ideas for re-centering reading as a civic priority—from dynamic literacy campaigns and intergenerational book programs to new ways of designing collections for discovery and engagement. The message was clear: reading is not just foundational to libraries—it’s fundamental to democracy, imagination, and lifelong well-being.

### **KEY REFLECTION:**

*What steps can your library take to make reading a powerful part of your community’s growth and well-being?*

## **NEXT STEPS: ACTIONS FOR LIBRARY LEADERS**

### **1. Audit Your Advocacy Strategy Map**

- Who is telling your library’s story. Are you using stories, data, and partnerships to their full potential?

### **2. Evaluate Staff Engagement**

- What are your staff expectations around public service and safety? How do you communicate those?

### **3. Rethink Your Space for Connection**

- Are there underused areas that could become platforms for belonging, civil discourse, or joy?

### **4. Clarify Your Mission Boundaries**

- What is your library uniquely equipped to do? Where do you need partners to step in?

### **5. Recommit to Reading**

- How can you make reading visible, innovative, and central again?

## **CONCLUSION**

Libraries across North America are facing complex challenges—but they are also leading with purpose, courage, and creativity. In a time when people need connection, clarity, and community more than ever, libraries are delivering spaces of belonging and hope.

Start with what works. Build on your strengths. And turn to the wisdom of your peers. The best practices shared by CEOs at the Roundtable remind us that greater social impact is not only possible—it’s already underway in ULC libraries.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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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.



## KEY RESEARCH INSIGHTS

- 1. Terminology.** Social Impact refers to the benefits that libraries provide to individuals and their communities. Social Connection refers to the ways in which individuals come together to share, engage, and build relationships within their communities. Civil discourse refers to respectful and constructive conversation or debate, especially when discussing opposing viewpoints or highly different experiences.
- 2. Proven Connection Between Libraries and Wellbeing.** [Toronto Public Library's study](#) highlights how the library's broad resources help users move from uncertainty to capability, unemployment to new pursuits, and isolation to connection. [University of Pennsylvania's research with New York Public Library](#) found that users report that the library positively contributes to their well-being—especially those living in lower-income zip codes. [A study on British libraries](#) found a strong correlation between library use and higher levels of mental well-being, social connection, and health-promoting behaviors.
- 3. Most People Want and Value Connection.** [New U.S. research](#) demonstrates that while Americans have fewer friends and spend less time with others, a clear majority (70%) feels that connecting with other people across differences is a civic responsibility. The researchers found that two-thirds (66%) agree that engagement across differences can teach you a lot, and more than half (59%) agree that mixing creates better places to live.
- 4. Public Spaces Need to Offer Connection.** According to [a study on Toronto's The Bentway park](#), public spaces are critical health tools that reduce feelings of loneliness and promote well-being. According to the research team, public spaces need to offer invitations that encourage people to linger and enjoy each other's company in order to foster a sense of sociability.
- 5. Reading Is Good for You.** [Neuroscientific findings](#) reveal that deep, focused reading activates brain regions involved in movement, touch, and executive function. [A longitudinal study](#) showed that regular reading was linked to reduced psychological distress in young adults. According to a [2021 study](#), older adults who read fiction experienced heightened positive affect, empathy, and personal growth. Bibliotherapy [has shown effectiveness](#) in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety.



## RECOMMENDED READING BY MEMBERS

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- Kaplan, Seth (2025). [Growing Community Together.](#) Stanford Social Innovation Review.
- Laitio, Tommi: [Policies for Convivencia Newsletter](#)
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- Reimagining the Civic Commons (2024). [Why America Needs a Strong Civic Commons.](#)
- [Richards, Shola.](#)
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