



WHITE PAPER

# Libraries as Spaces for Innovation and Productivity

URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL  
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# 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.

# Introduction

As we emerge from the pandemic, aftershocks that have possibly altered our way of life, structures of daily routines and use of space persist. The present reconfiguration of the amount of time we spend at home, at work, in transit or engaging in leisure activities is arguably the most monumental change of this period. As we adapt and try to understand the possibilities and opportunities ushered in by this new way of life, it is important to explore the role played by current structures, systems and institutions in ensuring positive outcomes.

The expectation is that existing structures and systems should play a role in safeguarding economic activity, maintaining innovation and productivity and advancing inclusive and equitable development. This paper explores the importance of congregation in a post-pandemic world, particularly the role of libraries as reliable structures, attractions and prime choices for visits even as we experience a great upheaval of spaces in which people prioritize spending time.

## A meeting space for people to return to

There are only a handful of places to which people conventionally return for intended actions. Some destinations are visited by people simply for performing individual actions with a slight possibility of interacting with others who are there to perform the same action e.g. grocery shopping, a train commute or a sporting arena. On the other hand, there are places where people go for the core purpose of interacting with others, building community or accomplishing a common task, e.g. offices, places of worship, member clubs, etc. The key element of the latter example is that these places present a defined physical space for people to return for participation as a group in an intended action.

The library is unique in the sense that it presents a space for individualized actions as well as group conventionalism. Eric Klinenberg, in his work titled "Palaces of the People," better captures the uniqueness of the library as a space that is free and open to all and a space that serves as an important pillar of social infrastructure with inimitable and essential societal functions.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, he emphasizes the societal importance and impact of the library on the quality of the users' lived experience through vivid and real user reflections. In one case, a user describes the library as "a space of permission, not encouragement that pushed you in a certain direction, where you feel like people are watching you and like giving their approval, but just freedom to pursue what you want."



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<sup>1</sup> Klinenberg, Eric, "Palaces for the people: why libraries are more than just books," *The Guardian*, September 24, 2018, <https://rb.gy/pmjiv>

With the pandemic leading to major shifts and in some cases, disruptions in our pre-pandemic work, live and play traditions, new trends in how people use space are beginning to emerge. Some of these trends include an increased preference for flexibility in the way work is carried out, a high demand for high-quality workspaces, as well as an increased desire for quality in-person interactions. While library visits in most cases are still below pre-pandemic levels, the new demand for flexible high-quality spaces presents libraries with an opportunity to engage new potential patrons by serving this current need. This is mainly because libraries are already designed and positioned as flexible, high-quality spaces that welcome all and that are free for all.

## The demand for flexible workspaces & libraries as providers.

As the need for quality interactions in the third-place increases, so does the premium put on the quality of such spaces. Flexibility, ease of access, comfortability and internet speed are a few elements expected in these third-places that aim to replicate the conveniences of the office and similar functional spaces, but in a more self-designed and more democratized manner. Coincidentally, libraries are naturally designed as flexible and equitable spaces equipped with the earlier-mentioned essentials and are usually housed in aesthetically pleasing buildings with the best architectural designs (some of which are only matched by class-A office buildings). This reality emphasizes the existing opportunity for libraries to engage people seeking flexible spaces in today's post-pandemic world.

Some of these personalities include the following:

### I. The Working Age Population

The post-pandemic world has ushered in widely accepted and practiced hybrid work designs where the traditional five-day work week is now split almost evenly between remote work and in-office work. In some cases, companies and organizations have gone fully remote with no requirement for in-office days. This new time away from the office doing remote work has democratized the employee's desired workspace or work style, adding flexibility to where work can be carried out. While the systematic switch to remote work has been swift, the transition of the physical space to one that promotes hybrid or fully remote work has been much slower.

In adjustment, people seek larger living spaces or converting sections of current living spaces for work, seek buildings with office-like amenities or search for a third-place in the form of a co-working space, coffee shop or perhaps a library.<sup>2,3</sup> One can argue that out of all these options, the library is not only the best designed to meet the needs of the post-pandemic working age population, but also the most cost-effective.

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<sup>2</sup> "How third places are becoming mainstream," *JLL*, June 13, 2022, <https://rb.gy/b2nu5>

<sup>3</sup> Kristen Senz, "Remote Workers Spend More On Housing. Do They Deserve Higher Pay?" *Forbes*, June 17, 2021, <https://rb.gy/b2nu5>



Simultaneously, the pandemic has ushered in various economic disruptions including job losses along with the reconfiguration of job roles as well as skills required for work. In other cases, various industries are witnessing high resignation rates as well as a rise in the “gig economy.”<sup>4</sup> As we enter an age that presents various opportunities for reinventing the nature of work and the identity of the worker, libraries remain the most empowering and the most accessible resource for those looking to design and create new post-pandemic pathways of work. In addition, the equitable distribution in terms of proximity to users, positions library locations as an essential tool for breaking down existing barriers to access to benefits of the post-pandemic economy.

## Richland Library, Columbia, South Carolina

The Richland Library Main located in Richland’s business district serves “a diverse population of college students, makers, bibliophiles, entrepreneurs, career seekers and more.” This location offers free access to flexible workspaces, creative spaces, meeting rooms and desk spaces to accommodate laptop users, students, job seekers, etc. This space also provides a range of multimedia services as well as access to a café.



Credit: Richland Library

## II. The Traveling Teleworker

Another trend ushered in by the pandemic is the growing number of people who travel while teleworking, thereby taking advantage of their remote days to visit various destinations with the intention of still being able to work the hours required during the week. According to a 2023 Deloitte report titled "The travel industry outlook," this group of people willing to mix work and personal travel (tagged the "Laptop loggers") were twice as likely to travel when compared to those who travel for regular vacations and are more likely to add extra time to their vacation.<sup>5</sup>

4 Gittleman, Maury, "The 'Great Resignation' in perspective," *Monthly Labor Review*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://rb.gy/6dxxf>

5 Eileen Crowley and Michael Daher, "Analysis: Deloitte 2023 Travel industry outlook," Deloitte.com, <https://rb.gy/bcqly>

**Figure 1: Travelers considering ability to work remotely in destination and lodging selection**

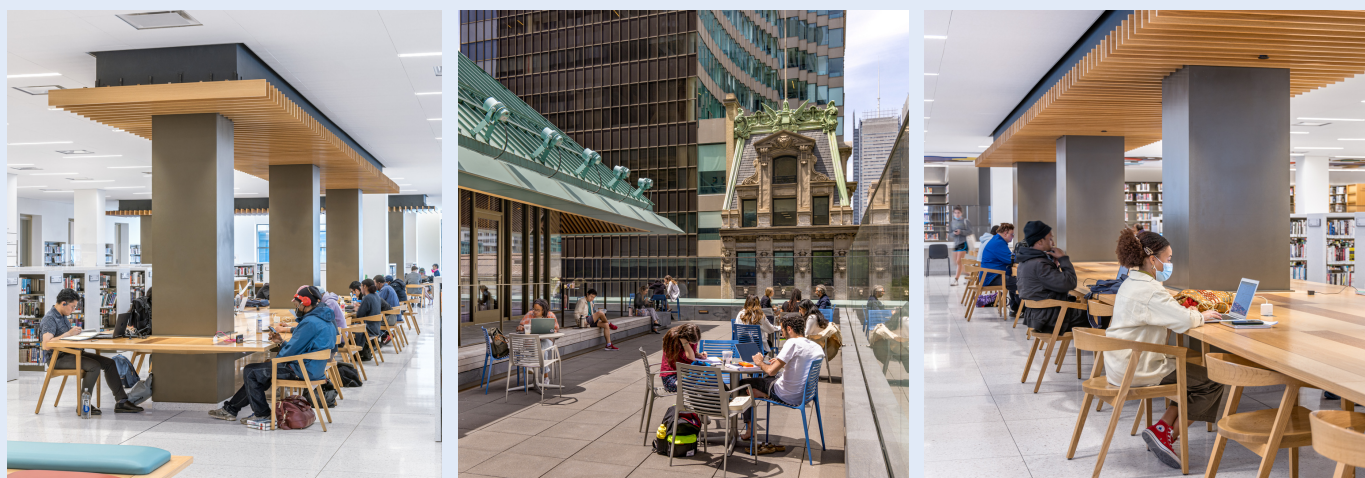
		Change in influence (vs. 2021)
<b>Destination selection</b>	37%	<b>+5%</b>
<b>Lodging selection</b>		
Hotels	51%	<b>+12%</b>
Private Rentals	54%	<b>+19%</b>

Source: Deloitte's 2022 Summer Travel Survey

This has also translated to longer stays, with Airbnb reporting a 44% uptick in bookings in the third quarter of 2021 compared to 2019 (half of 2021 third quarter bookings were stays of at least 7 days). This trend is causing hotels and the travel industry, in general, to start including workspaces in their advertised accommodation to provide guests with the option of separating work from play — an offering libraries already provide in the form of higher quality flexible spaces.<sup>6</sup> One can argue that the flexibility and reliability libraries provide makes them a preferred location for this group when choosing where to perform the day’s work — all the while visiting a new location or city.

### Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library, Manhattan, New York

Located in the center of Manhattan, N.Y., the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library serves patrons from the Tri-State area and beyond. Its range of services, extended opening and closing hours, and ease of access make it a location designed and positioned to meet the needs of every type of patron. The ability for New York residents and visitors to instantly get a library card and gain access to resources such as virtual interview spaces and advanced computer workstations makes this location an example of a highly convenient working location choice for the traveling teleworker. This location also offers free access to flexible workspaces and internet, including access to a library business center and an outdoor space on the rooftop.



New York Public Library, Photos by Max Touhey

<sup>6</sup> Koss-Feder, Laura, "In-Room Work Spaces More Flexible and Accommodating Than Ever," CoStar, <https://rb.gy/bcqly>

### III. Children and Youth

The pandemic ushered in an unprecedented era of remote learning with far-reaching consequences on the performance of young adults and high schoolers — something school administration, teachers, and parents are dealing with as students return to in-person learning. Lower high school graduation rates and test scores are notable indications of the implications of extended remote learning combined with a lack of out-of-school learning activities.

According to a 1992 report by The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, young people have about 1,900 hours of time out of school every year.<sup>7</sup> Determining what percentage of this time is dedicated to out-of-school learning activities can be directly linked to improved performance. Given the events of the past few years and the adoption of remote learning in response to the pandemic, the amount of yearly out-of-school hours grew significantly, leading to growing reports of reduced performance in math and reading. Additional reports also highlight the fact that it could take up to three to five years for elementary and middle school students to fully recover the time lost during the pandemic.<sup>8</sup>



Libraries have long been known for providing young adults and high schoolers with out-of-school programming to help improve literacy rates, test scores and graduation rates. Examples of places like California show a positive correlation between the number of hours that the school library was open and test scores at the elementary, middle and high school levels.<sup>9</sup> Also, additional studies carried out by the National Institute of Health point to the fact that out-of-school-time academic (OSTA) programs are significantly effective in improving students' performance (especially the academic performance of at-risk students).<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, an analysis of high school graduation rate data from Opportunity Atlas, when paired with library locations across the US, shows that **counties that have more library locations are more likely to have higher high school graduation rates.**<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> "A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours," Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1992, <https://rb.gy/pz97y>

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Mervosh, "Students Are Learning Well Again. But Full Recovery? That's a Long Way Off," *New York Times*, July 19, 2022: <https://rb.gy/noujp>

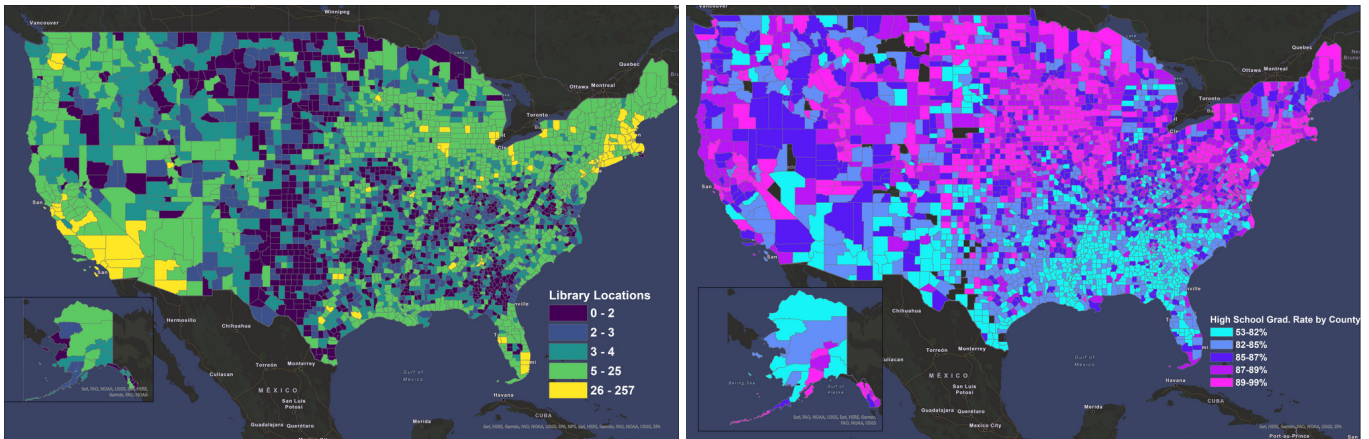
<sup>9</sup> Doug Achterman, "Haves, Halves, and Have-Nots: School Libraries and Student Achievement in California," Gavilan College, December 2008, <https://rb.gy/sidwn>

<sup>10</sup> Out-of-School-Time Academic Programs to Improve School Achievement: A Community Guide Health Equity Systematic Review. *Journal of public health management and practice: JPHMP*, 21(6), 594–608. <https://rb.gy/xyeol>

<sup>11</sup> The Opportunity Atlas: <https://www.opportunityatlas.org/>



Figure 2. Library locations and high school graduation rates by county.



Library locations represented are limited to the locations reported on the Institute of Library and Museum Services (IMLS) public library survey. High school graduation rates are pulled from The Opportunity Atlas — a collaboration between researchers at the Census Bureau, Harvard University and Brown University which shows children’s outcomes in adulthood of over 20 million Americans using anonymous data gathered from their childhood to their mid-30s.

This is highly significant since the wage gap in terms of median household income between high school degree holders and those without a degree was approximately \$10,000 in 2020.

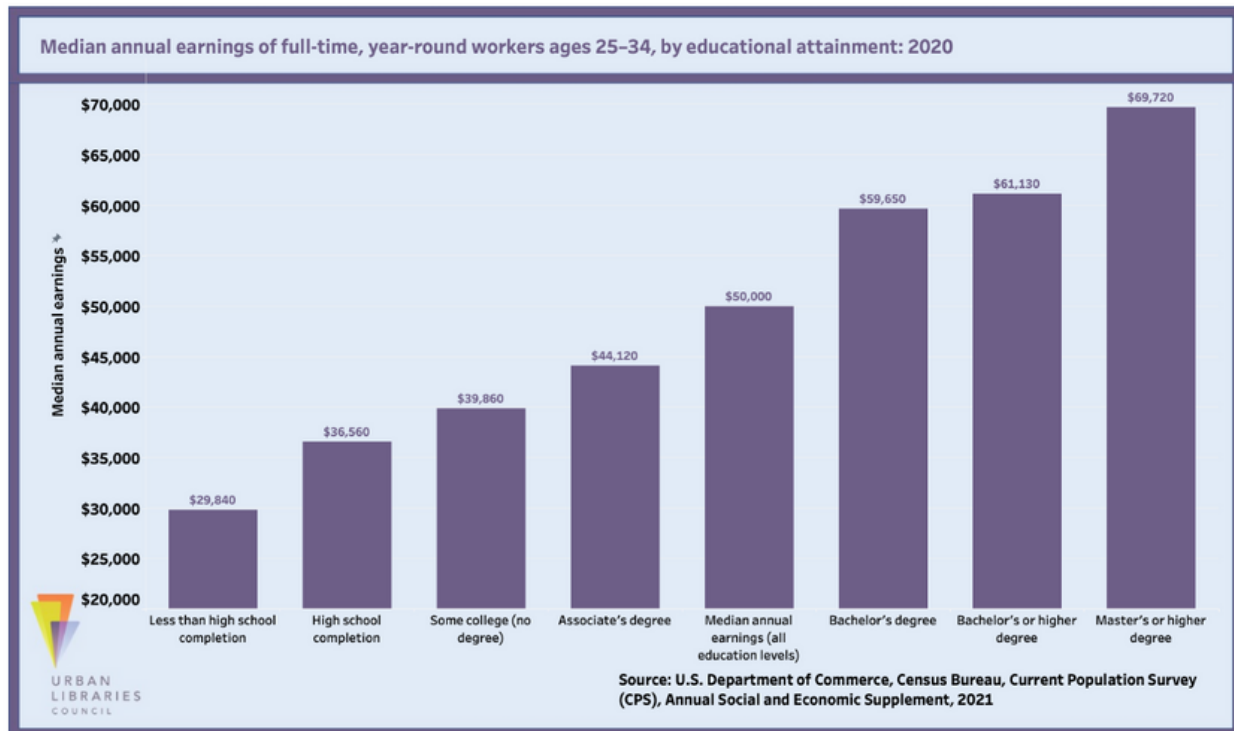
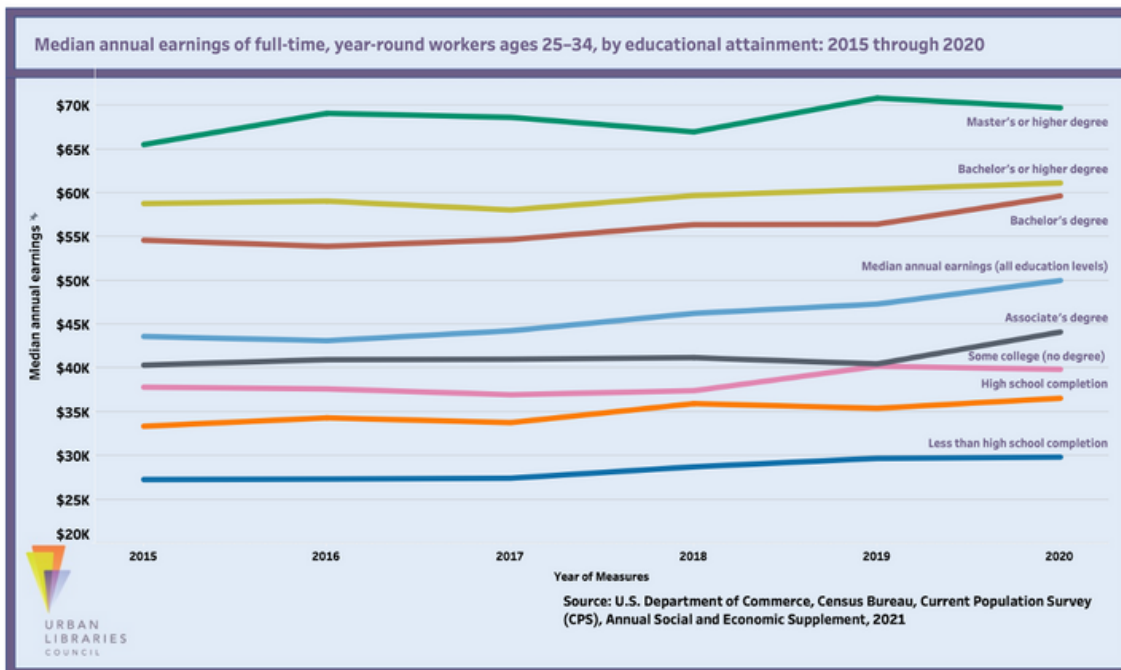


Figure 3. Median annual earnings of full-time, year-round workers ages 25–34, by educational attainment: 2020.





**Figure 4. Median annual earnings of full-time, year-round workers ages 25–34, by educational attainment: 2015 through 2020**

This, coupled with the pandemic disproportionately affecting low-income and minority families, means that they are more at risk of being impacted by a dip in performance and a delayed or longer recovery. According to a Harvard report, there was a higher incidence of remote schooling for Black and Hispanic students during the pandemic due to an increased possibility of schools in low-income areas having longer remote learning (at least 5.5 weeks longer during 2020-2021) when compared to schools in higher income areas.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, longer remote learning is largely attributable to lower performance in math and reading according to the analysis of pre and post-pandemic MAP test scores. Increased and targeted out-of-school learning programs and interventions can help offset some of the time lost and help speed up the recovery process (improved test scores and higher graduation rates). As suggested by the Harvard study, the intensity of interventions should be proportionate to the amount of remote learning observed. With an increased allocation of resources, libraries can become highly impactful agents in ensuring above-average out-of-school learning interventions and programming to help bridge the gap and speed up recovery.



### Free Library of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Free Library of Philadelphia offers a very successful and long-running out-of-school program for K-12 youth called the Literacy Enhancement Out of School Program (LEAP). This program runs during the school year at no cost and it provides youth with access to homework assistance, an online learning database, connection to programs at their local libraries, and many more resources.

Credit: The Free Library of Philadelphia

<sup>12</sup> Goldhaber, D., Kane, T., McEachin, A., Morton E., Patterson, T., Staiger, D., (2022) *The Consequences of Remote and Hybrid Instruction During the Pandemic*. Research Report. Cambridge, MA: Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University, <https://rb.gy/zvYvOu>

# Recommendations

Libraries historically have a reputation for contributing to the building and sustenance of community fabrics as well as being essential resources helping communities access socio-economic growth and well-being. In multiple ways, these attributes make the library an important structure ensuring reliable service, and the promise of value accessible to all, even in an era of multiple changes, disruptions and uncertainty.

In order to preserve, ensure and enhance this innate value, the most impactful attributes of library systems need to be continually emphasized to showcase their continued relevance, worth and importance in contemporary society – a post-pandemic world. Here are a few ways the value of libraries as spaces for innovation and productivity can be emphasized:

## 1 Promote libraries as hubs for congregation, trip attractors and inceptors of economic activity.

As cities in major metropolitan areas across America continue to struggle with low office usage (just about 50% of pre-pandemic levels, according to Kastle Systems), the daytime population, including residents and commuters, remains below pre-pandemic levels.<sup>13</sup> This has significant implications for the vibrancy and levels of economic activity in cities and urban areas. As a result, urban areas would need to develop innovative ways to engage residents and attract commuters and visitors to regain pre-pandemic levels of vibrancy and economic activity.

In addition to a handful of public spaces, libraries are one of the few locations that contribute a significant amount of steady foot traffic and daytime population and serve as trip attractions based on the number of daily, weekly and monthly users. Additionally, libraries have proven to be hubs of entrepreneurship and incubators providing new businesses with resources, training and the support needed for growth and success. This coupled with the fact that North America witnessed a historic rise in the number of new businesses started since the onset of the pandemic (July 2020 applications for new businesses were 95% above 2019 levels in the U.S.) presents a renewed opportunity for libraries to re-emphasize the value of services provided as well as the resulting impacts on local economic development.<sup>14</sup>



<sup>13</sup> Kastle, "Getting America Back to Work," <https://www.kastle.com/safety-wellness/getting-america-back-to-work/>

<sup>14</sup> In 2018, ULC launched the Strengthening Libraries as Entrepreneurial Hubs initiative. The results from this work show that new businesses significantly value and utilize the resources provided to them by libraries and in some cases requested better awareness of existing tools and resources associated with new business success and entrepreneurship. <https://tinyurl.com/n82abb3x>

In terms of local economic impact, some of the resources and services hosted by libraries are known to ease business processes and serve as cost savings for new businesses and startups yet to acquire funding. One approach for measuring and communicating the impact of these services on the local business economy is through tools that quantify, estimate, and summarize the actual value of business services rendered. One example of such a tool is the Business Value Calculator launched by the Urban Libraries Council in January 2022. With a newer version currently in development, the current version of the BVC has helped 30 U.S. and Canadian ULC libraries to quantify and calculate the value of their library's services to small business owners and entrepreneurs since its launch.<sup>15</sup>

## 2 Emphasize libraries as flexible workspaces.

As flexible work structures and telework become more entrenched in the design of the post-pandemic workforce, libraries should emphasize the already existing resources they have to meet the increased demand for flexible workspaces and third-places. Anchoring on the idea of creating spaces for innovation and productivity, libraries can seek to upgrade spaces to better satisfy the demand of the current workforce where necessary. This could be in the form of design-based improvements or policy-focused adjustments aimed at promoting greater flexibility e.g. adjusting time limits for booking rooms, more flexible food and drink policies and options, creating common areas for conversations, phone calls, etc.



## 3 Position libraries as reliable amenities for the traveling teleworker.

The rise in the volume of people working while they travel presents an opportunity for libraries to collaborate with the travel and tourism industry in order to present themselves as essential amenities to travelers and tourists. This could be in the form of partnerships with larger regional organizations charged with promoting their jurisdictions to travelers, or hospitality groups (e.g. hotels) looking to communicate the presence of flexible workspaces in close proximity to their locations.

<sup>15</sup> "New Data: Urban Libraries Council (ULC) Libraries Calculate \$200 Million in Business Value to Local Economy," Urban Libraries Council, September 23, 2022, <https://rb.gy/mr18e>



## 4

### Make the case for increased funding of library after-school programs.

While libraries have historically played a significant role in providing after-school programs with tremendous benefits contributing to better school performance for children, the effects of remote schooling adopted during the pandemic present a significant risk to past progress achieved. To bridge the gap widened by remote schooling and to quicken recovery, a commensurate response to the amount of out-of-school learning time lost during the pandemic is needed. This would require adequate funding from federal, state, county and city governments to scale up already existing after-school programs and establish new programs where necessary.

## Conclusion: Pathways to the Future

Over the last few years, we have witnessed various disruptions ushered in by a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. These changes have significantly altered the way we live life, but more importantly, where and how we spend most of our time. Some systems, institutions and spaces have had to significantly alter their core designs in order to adapt to this change.

The library on the other hand, already designed to accommodate a multiplicity of functions, services and uses, is well positioned to meet the rising demand for the new needs of a post-pandemic world (including flexible spaces for work and play). At the same time, the library has historically provided invaluable resources to help serve as a bridge, connecting communities to opportunities and free services that otherwise would prove to be significantly expensive and most times unaffordable. This function alone makes libraries and the services they render invaluable in bridging the learning, wage and income gaps, as well as the digital divide exacerbated by the pandemic.

Rather than create new structures for adapting to current challenges, we must enhance those current structures that are already well-positioned to meet the demands of contemporary society in a post-pandemic world.