

WHITE PAPER

Libraries and Economic Opportunity

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By John B. Horrigan, Ph.D., ULC Senior Research Advisor

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Methodological Note

This white paper brings together data from three separate sources on how libraries deliver a range of services to people in their communities. First, there is national survey data from the Pew Research Center on how Americans use and view libraries. Much of that data come from surveys on the public's views on libraries from 2015 and 2016, as well as surveys about people's attitudes about information and digital skills. Second, the Aspen Institute, International City/County Management Association and Public Library Association conducted a survey in 2016 of over 2,000 local government officials. That survey examined community priorities and where libraries fit in meeting them.

Finally, the ULC Edge data discussed in this report reflects the 81 ULC Edge Collaborative members who used Edge in 2017. Though these libraries are a small subset of total Edge users, they represent a diverse range of tech-forward communities from across the U.S. and Canada, offering a wide view of how today's public libraries are promoting digital inclusion, information literacy and engagement in their communities.

About the Urban Libraries Council

The Urban Libraries Council, founded in 1971, is the voice for public libraries and the force that inspires them to evolve. ULC creates the tools, techniques, and ideas to make ongoing improvements and upgrades in services and technology. ULC also speaks loudly and clearly about the value public libraries bring to communities, and secures funding for research that results in the development of new programs and services. And by serving as a forum for library leadership, ULC produces innovative ideas and best practices that ensure community impact.

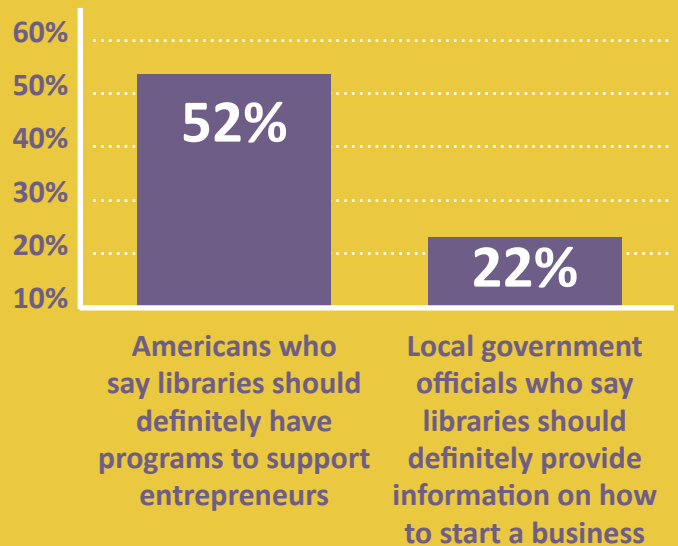
Executive Summary

In the face of rapid economic change, Americans are turning to libraries to help them adapt. People expect libraries to be there for them as they look for work, improve job skills or start a business. Americans' broad set of expectations about libraries and economic opportunity contrasts with a narrow vision about these issues held by local government officials. Local government officials, as they weigh economic priorities, view libraries as mainly places for job search. They are less likely than the general public to see libraries as places to help foster entrepreneurship and business development:

- Half (52 percent) of American adults say libraries should definitely offer programs to support local businesses and entrepreneurs, but just one-fifth (22 percent) of local government officials say libraries should definitely provide information on how to start a business.
- More than half of American adults (56 percent) say libraries contribute to helping people find jobs or pursue job training, but a smaller number (45 percent) of local government officials say libraries play an important role in training and workforce development.

These gaps — whereby the public expects more services from the library regarding economic advancement than local officials — present an opportunity for libraries. Libraries can conduct outreach to local officials and businesses to educate them on what the public wants from libraries in terms of employment and business development services from the public library.

Libraries and Economic Opportunity



This brief from the Urban Libraries Council analyzes data from surveys of the public (from the Pew Research Center), local government officials (from a survey sponsored by the Aspen Institute, Public Library Association and International City/County Management Association) and libraries (from ULC Edge Collaborative members).

Background

The nature of work in America is changing. Automation, globalization, gig-ification and other forces are pressuring workers to show they have the skills, smarts and creativity to adapt. No single institution will help people address the challenges of today's workforce environment. But one institution — the local public library — is part of the equation as people and communities respond to rapid economic change.

The Great Recession helped put libraries in the business of helping people address economic challenges. During the last decade's economic downturn, the library, for some, was a place to go during a period of unemployment. It was also place to search for jobs, particularly as local newspapers no longer served as the primary source for job ads in many communities. Others saw the library as a place to pick up a new skill for the job market. For many, it was all of the above.

The library has become a hub for economic opportunity as a place to:

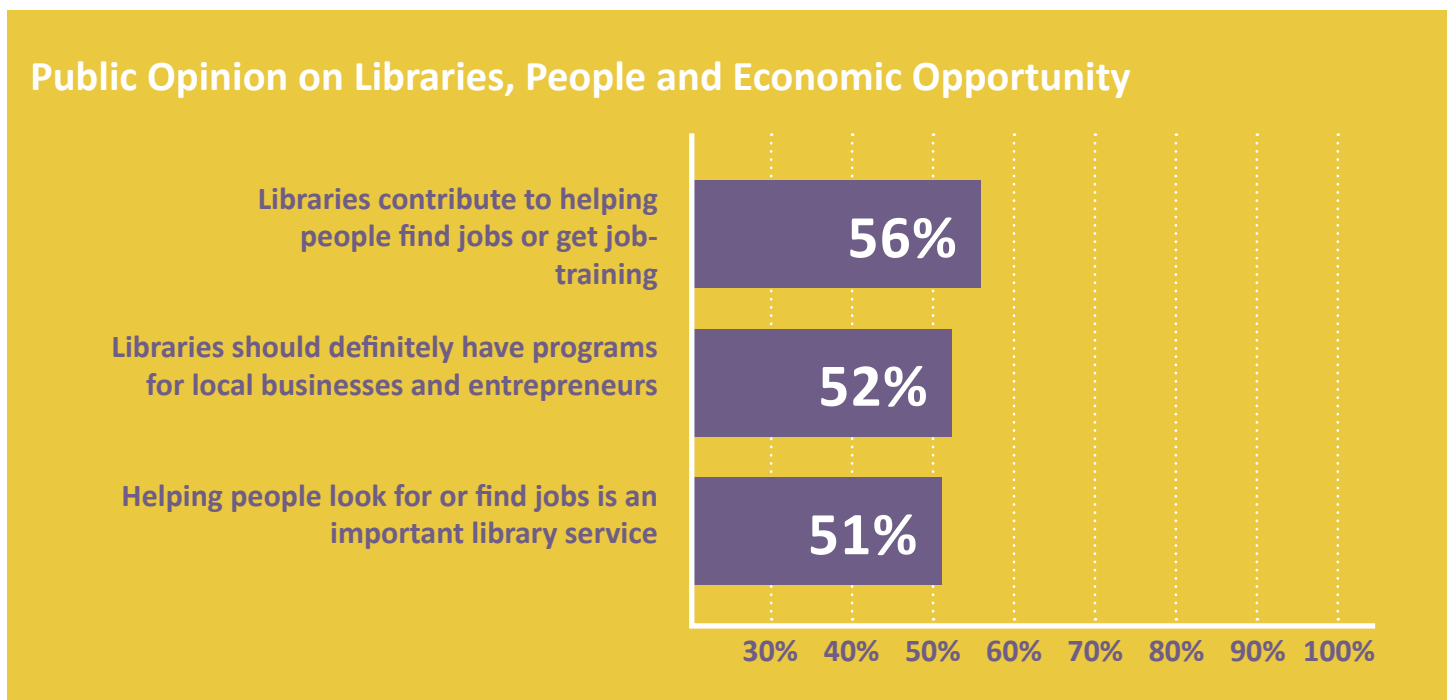
- Search for jobs
- Upgrade job skills
- Learn how to start a business

Data shows that the public expects the full menu of resources to be available at libraries — tools

for job search as well as resources on how to start a business or acquire job skills. In contrast, local government officials see libraries mainly as places for people to look for work. Business development and entrepreneurship, from the perspective of local government officials, are not highly likely to be seen as part of libraries' missions.

Libraries, People and Economic Opportunity

Survey data demonstrates how economic opportunity has become a library priority. A 2013 Pew Research Center survey found that half (51 percent) of people who use public libraries say that help looking for or applying for a job is an important or somewhat important service that the library offers. Among all



Americans, 56 percent in 2016 say libraries contribute a lot or somewhat to helping people find jobs or pursue job training.

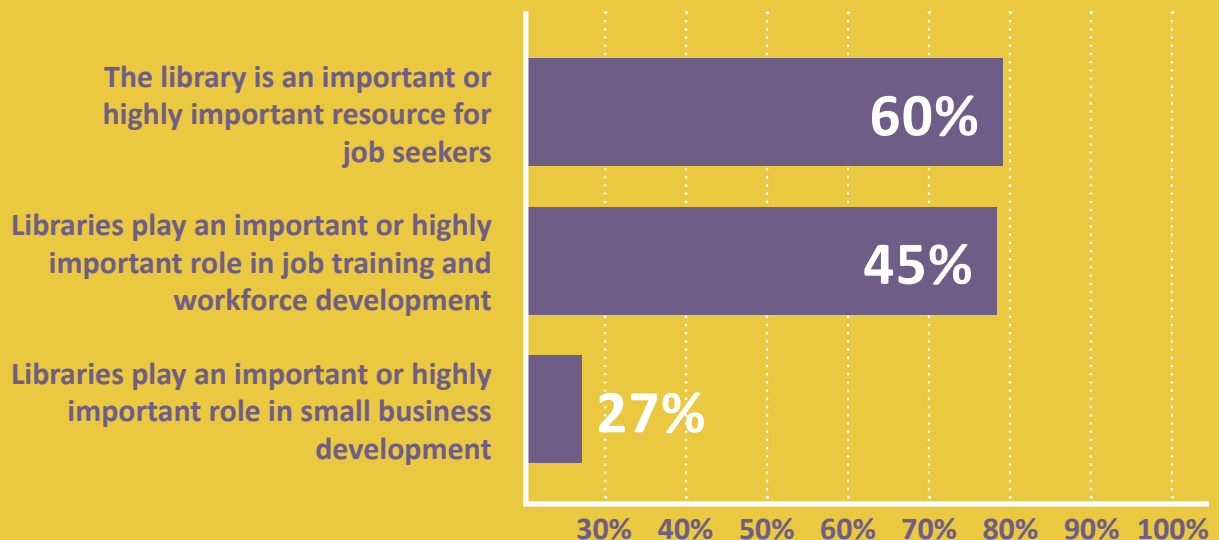
It is not only about job search or applications when people think about the library and economic opportunity; they also think about starting new businesses or getting exposure to new technologies that may help them in the workplace. Just over half (52 percent) of all Americans say that libraries should definitely create services or programs for local businesses and entrepreneurs. A similar share (50 percent) said in 2016 that libraries should definitely buy 3-D printers and other digital tools to allow people to learn how to use them — and that figure was an increase from the 45 percent figure recorded the prior year for the same question. Learning about these new digital tools may be of interest to tech hobbyists, but

may also appeal to those who want to turn hobbies into careers or just expose themselves to new tech tools that may help them in the workforce.

Local Government Officials' Views on Libraries and Economic Opportunity

Like the public, local government officials place a lot of importance on economic issues. Some 57 percent say job training and workforce development are high or very high priorities for their communities and 50 percent say the same thing about small business development.

Local Government Officials' Priorities for Libraries and Economic Opportunity



As far as libraries are concerned, local officials see libraries as having a role in job training and workforce development, but a lesser one in small business development:

- Sixty percent say the library is an important or highly important resource for job seekers.
- Forty-five percent of local government officials say libraries play an important or highly important role in job training and workforce development.
- Twenty-seven percent say libraries play an important or highly important role in small business development.

As to libraries' programs and services, a minority of local government officials think libraries should take on job training and job matching services. When asked what libraries should definitely do:

- One-third (32 percent) of local government officials say libraries should definitely provide training, technology and resources to develop job-related skills.
- Thirty-one percent say libraries should definitely coordinate with local employers to connect community residents to training that meets local employers' needs.

The picture is similar when local officials reflect on libraries' role in economic or business development, with fewer local officials seeing these as priorities:

- Twenty-seven percent say libraries should definitely provide business support services, such as access to databases, market analysis or sample business plans.
- Twenty-two percent say libraries should definitely provide information on how to start a business.

- Nineteen percent say libraries should definitely provide opportunities to connect with mentors and small business assistance counselors.

To put those numbers into context, there are a number of areas in which local officials have very strong notions on what libraries should definitely do. For instance, 84 percent say libraries should definitely provide free access to high-speed broadband and Wi-Fi, 73 percent say libraries should definitely coordinate with local schools and 57 percent say libraries should definitely provide online learning experiences for the public. For local government officials, the library as a place for economic development is for the most part a lesser priority.

ULC Edge Collaborative members provide the full range of resources for economic advancement.

Examining ULC Edge Collaborative member data shows that they devote a great deal of energy to helping people find jobs or pursue business opportunities. Among these libraries:

- Ninety-three percent select or organize online resources for job-seeking.
- Eighty-five percent engage in resource-sharing partnerships with local workforce development organizations.
- Eighty-four percent select or organize online resources for small business development.
- Seventy-nine percent say staff has the opportunity to annually attend a training session from experts in workforce development.

These data clearly indicate that ULC Edge Collaborative member libraries are clearly responding to public demands for services at the library to help patrons pursue economic opportunity.

Conclusion

It should not be a big surprise that people see libraries as full-service entities for pursuing economic opportunity. They are highly trusted institutions that give people a large degree of autonomy on how to pursue their needs — whether that might involve printed materials, online resources or objects the

library has available. If someone hits a bump in the road in using library materials to find work or develop a business plan, someone is nearby to help.

Government officials, with a generally lower probability of seeing libraries as full-service economic opportunity centers, may simply have a view of libraries of yesteryear. It was only a decade ago when the economic crisis helped to turn libraries into job search centers. The public wants that today — but also want more. The data from this report shows that local government officials have a chance to update their views of how people see libraries and economic opportunity.

ULC Edge Collaborative Members Prioritize Digital Inclusion

