Libraries In Community Systems
Project Abstract

The Northern New York Library Network proposes a 3-year national research in service to practice project, Libraries in Community Systems, to create a clearer understanding of the unique role of public and tribal libraries within community systems, and how this role can be optimized for improved social wellbeing outcomes. The research question driving this proposal asks **What is the tribal and public library's measurable value to their local community?** Librarians, administrators, and local decision-makers want outcomes-based programming, and they can articulate the outcomes they want to achieve, but they do not currently have tools that map relevant data and inputs to assess the impact of library services on those broad social outcomes.

Economic valuations of public libraries have historically focused on the exchange between the library and the local market economy—incomes and expenditures, cost savings to patrons through resource sharing, and so on—often ignoring non-monetized social goods. We propose, instead, an approach developed in economics which allows for the valuation of non-market services and plurality of community values. Building on previous research into the interrelated nature of community life, IMLS-funded development and social wellbeing frameworks, and many works on meaningful impact measures (within the library literature and further afield, in health and economics), librarian and economics PhD candidate Margo Gustina will work with 30 libraries in 4 states and 5 advisors from a range of disciplines to generate valuation models of library service in terms of social wellbeing outcomes, which we define as the capability to belong, to participate in networks of mutual aid, and to determine one's own future.

Wellbeing is a composite of many elements—physical and mental health, economic security, cultural engagement, political voice, etc.—and those elements can be connected to indicators captured in data. The first phase of this 3-year project will include research on data commonly used as wellness indices. The first year also represents a phase of conversations with practitioners to capture terms they use when describing the library and its role in the community. Phase 1 ends by mapping those library value definitions to a set of data indicators. Phase 2 will gather, clean and organize actual data into effective inputs for an initial valuation model, which will be produced near the beginning of the third and final year. Each part of that model will be reviewed, tested, and refined throughout the third phase of the project. By the time this project ends, every product will have been reviewed and tested by dozens of partners across disciplines.

Research findings will be shared as they are developed, at least once per phase from 9/2021-8/2024, combined with training events in our four partner states. The library field will have tools to measure what their libraries produce, and they can pursue partnerships with vision and confidence.