

Getting Consensus about Competencies: What's Needed for Effective Library Programs

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This paper presents a study of the specific disciplinary competencies required of library programming professionals and the training pathways where they develop those skills. Most existing competency frameworks focus on general library service or audience, rather than the specializations required for public programming. Reflecting the emerging importance of programming to libraries' service model, this US research study demonstrates that excellence in programming requires a unique set of competencies not found in other areas of library practice. The evidence shows that most public-programming competencies are learned outside of MLIS training but could be introduced as an MLIS concentration or learned as professional development.

Keywords: job skills, job training competencies, library programming, public programs

As US libraries transform to meet the needs of a changing nation, public programming is rising to the forefront of daily library work. While libraries have always had a broad educational mission, many people outside the library world still see libraries primarily as collection holders and lenders. Yet libraries are also centers for lifelong experiential learning, hubs for civic and cultural gatherings, and partners in community-wide innovation. Alongside this shift, there has been an ongoing refinement of what librarianship entails. Each generation has witnessed change in the types of competencies expected from library professionals (e.g. Ammons-Stephens, Cole, Jenkins-Gibbs, Riehle, & Weare, 2009;

Buttler & Du Mont, 1996; McNeil & Giesecke, 2001). Recently, the rise of social media and other internet tools has shifted the types of competencies that library professionals need (Huvila, Holmberg, Kronqvist-Berg, Nivakoski, & Widén, 2013; Koh & Abbas, 2015).

Scholars have argued for the importance of competencies in the development of accredited academic programs (Lester & Van Fleet, 2008; Rehman, 2003) and library management (McNeil & Giesecke, 2001; Middleton, 2003), with specific use in hiring, performance review, and professional development training (Yang, Zhang, Du, Bielefeld, & Liu, 2016). However, no research to date has focused on developing competencies specific to public programming, despite the rapid growth of this work (ALA, 2014). The lack of specific competencies for programming professionals may limit those working in library programming in their career development and in the management and oversight of this evolving area of library practice.

To fill the gap, we conducted three mixed-methods studies on programming-specific skills and training, asking the following two research questions:

1. What competencies are required for professionals working in library public programming today?
2. How should professionals working in library public programming receive training in those competencies?

In order to pursue this type of research, it was also important to recognize that developing common definitions requires embracing the scale and diversity of library programming across library types and the professionals who lead that work. Developing, implementing, and managing public programs may be one job responsibility among many, or it may be the core of a full-time position. An individual may be responsible for a single program or—particularly in larger library systems—they may supervise dozens of staff members who run thousands of programs.

KEY POINTS:

- This is a first-ever attempt to develop a set of competencies specific to library public programming, despite a growing need.
- Three interrelated studies attempt to fill that gap: a review of existing competencies, job listings, and ALA-accredited program requirements; an online survey of practitioners; and a series of discussion forums to validate initial findings.
- The resulting nine competency areas have immediate usability for those who currently design and run public programs at libraries, and those developing curriculum for future library professionals.

The National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment

This research is part of the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA),¹ an initiative of the American Library Association (ALA) to understand and document the characteristics, audiences, outcomes, and value of US library public programming. This work was prompted by a dearth of national data available to quantify the impact of public programming in libraries or in their communities.

An unpublished literature review done in the planning stages of NILPPA determined that while some information about library programs exists, adequate evaluative data on impact and research to describe effective practices across the field were lacking. The review revealed that the majority of publications on cultural programs in libraries stop at simply *describing* those programs, often using anecdotes rather than more systematic inquiry aimed at program evaluation (Benway, 2010; Harris, 2011; Hill, 2008; Sigala, 1990; Tidy, 2008). A thorough meta-analysis of the ALA archives of program evaluation validated these findings (Fraser, Sheppard, & Norlander, 2014). While these well-described studies demonstrate that programs achieve goals for target audiences, the results do not align to larger questions that can help shape the future of library programs as a whole.

In response, ALA brought together a network of researchers, practitioner-researchers, and advisors to design a comprehensive research strategy to better understand the shift to increased programming in libraries and to prepare library professionals to embrace their changing role (ALA, 2014). The findings related to competencies presented in this paper are part of the ongoing, multi-phase NILPPA initiative aimed at laying the groundwork needed to serve the emerging needs of library workers and provide a foundation for national metrics to assess how programming is affecting library services and users. This research is unique in its ability to link professional skills to program impact assessment, and to establish the training needs to support both.

Key terms

The effort hinged on developing a common understanding of terms that appear deceptively simple: *public program* and *competency*. Understanding of these terms may vary across library type, so it was imperative to identify definitions that could be widely agreed upon by members of the community.

For the purposes of this research, we define a public program as a service or event in a group setting developed to meet the needs or interests of an anticipated target audience. All libraries, regardless of type, have a public—the audiences to whom the library tailors its programs and the people the library serves. (Compare IMLS [n.d.] for another definition of *program*.)

We adopted the Library Leadership and Management Association's (LLAMA, n.d.) definition of competency: "Professional competencies comprise the knowledge, skills, and abilities which are teachable, measurable, and objective and which define and contribute to performance in

librarianship.” The words *teachable* and *measurable* require further specification: We recognize that many of the competencies in question are either not currently taught in formal educational settings or difficult to teach in those settings. We also recognize that a competency need not be fully quantifiable to be measurable; qualitative measures are also valid.

The question of measurement helps us differentiate between a competency and a skill. A competency has two dimensions: (1) the knowledge, skill, or ability; and (2) the level of mastery of that knowledge, skill, or ability.

The present research: Competencies and training for public programming

The goal of this descriptive research effort was to reflect community-wide understandings both of core competencies needed in library public programming and of the types of training to support professionals in developing these competencies. We employed a mixed-methods approach, commencing with exploratory qualitative studies and followed by a field-wide survey of programming professionals and a series of discussion forums to assess the validity and inclusiveness of our recommendations. All research was undertaken with professionals working in academic settings, programming practitioners, library administrators, and an advisory group drawn from across the library programming field. We received additional feedback through a public blog site where we shared information as the project developed to ensure that members of the library programming community could follow our process and contribute their thoughts as our work developed.

In Study 1, we reviewed existing competency frameworks from across the library field and related fields. We then analyzed advertisements from library jobs and materials from ALA-accredited graduate programs from around the United States. In Study 2, we distributed an online survey on needed skills and training pathways to the American Library Association (ALA) Public Programs Office's (PPO) Programming Librarian email list. We reviewed preliminary results with an advisory panel and then redeployed that survey to ensure that our data contained enough responses from different library types to ensure inclusivity in our results. We concluded our work with Study 3, a validity assessment of our tentative findings through a series of live and online discussion forums.

Study 1: Identifying existing programming-related competencies

Methods

To develop our research strategy for later phases, we reviewed existing competency frameworks for the library field and related fields, competencies listed in advertisements for library jobs and library career websites, and websites from ALA-accredited master's degree programs² from around the United States.

The review of existing competency frameworks and associated documents included the ALA Core Competencies (ALA, 2009); the

WebJunction Competency Index for the Library Field (Gutsche & Hough, 2014); the American Dream Starts @ Your Library Evaluation Report (ALA, 2015b); the results of the skills and knowledge survey from Envisioning Our Information Future (Abels, Howarth, & Smith, 2017; Abels & Saunders, 2017; Simmons College SLIS, 2017); the Remake Learning competencies (Remake Learning, 2015); the Visitor Studies Association Evaluator Competencies (VSA, 2008); the Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2016); and the Young Adult Library Services Association Teen Services Competencies (YALSA, 2017). There was substantial overlap between these sources, but each helped to elaborate a detailed list of potential competencies that appeared to reference public programming for review by the field. In reviewing these existing competency frameworks, we did not limit ourselves to competencies that were explicitly identified as programming-related.

For comparison with this initial dataset, we reviewed approximately 50 listings posted on two major job sites: the ALA JobList and the Metropolitan New York Library Council jobs page. These encompassed both academic and public library positions. To assess these sources, we utilized key word searches for “outreach,” “programming,” and “instruction” and also reviewed responsibilities and qualifications for leadership positions like directors. Lastly, we examined the resources available on INALJ.com, including library job listings across the US, articles, and resources about finding a library job.

We also reviewed the programming components of 58 ALA-accredited programs.³ As information was not presented in a standardized way across degree programs, one researcher on our team navigated through each program website, which included reviewing as many of the following materials as were publicly available: program overview, curriculum, course listings and descriptions, specializations or foci within the program, and competencies expected of graduates.

Results

Existing competencies indexes

Of all the documents reviewed, three frameworks provided the core sources for potential public-programming competencies. While the ALA core competencies (ALA, 2009) were broad, five sets of competencies were identified as particularly relevant to public programming: Foundations of the Profession; Technological Knowledge & Skills: Reference & User Services; Continuing Education & Lifelong Learning; and Administration & Management. The 2014 update of WebJunction’s Competency Index (Gutsche & Hough, 2014) offered a compatible set of competencies, with their Public Services Competencies appearing most relevant to the delivery of public programming, and a number of other relevant specific competencies appearing in Essential Library Competencies and Library Management Competencies. Finally, the Young Adult Library Services

Association's (2017) framework, which was updated concurrently with the beginning of this research, explicitly identified programming as a focal point throughout, such that all of their core content areas were explicitly related to programming.

Other resources suggested additional specific skills. The IMLS-funded *Envisioning Our Information Future* report (Abels et al., 2017; Abels & Saunders, 2017; Simmons College SLIS, 2017) sought to identify the most-needed competencies for library professionals in the face of technological change. Among the skills identified, those that were most central to programming effectiveness were interpersonal communication, customer service, cultural competence, and interacting with diverse audiences. The American Dream Literacy Initiative, which supports programming for adult English Language Learners (ELLs), identified the importance of linguistic and intercultural skills for working with their particular populations. In addition to library-related resources, we also explored aligned organization frameworks related to job-specific skills. The Visitor Studies Association's evaluator competency framework (VSA, 2008) for informal learning settings identified specific skills related to learning theory, business practice, and social science research and evaluation methods.

Career resources and listings

Our review of career resources and online job listings further demonstrated that public programming requires a combination of skills that, taken together, are distinct from the other areas of library work. The listings we reviewed revealed the importance of communication skills, the ability to work as part of a team, adaptability, and knowledge of current trends in library work. Programming-specific skills and requirements most frequently listed in these ads included training or experience in teaching, presentation skills, customer service, diversity or inclusiveness, digital media or marketing, program promotions, information literacy, and social media.

Review of ALA-accredited programs

The review of ALA-accredited degree program websites⁴ revealed considerable variability in emphasis across graduate degree programs. Based on our review, 41 of the 58 programs offered specializations or concentrations within the master's degree, many of which were potentially related to public programming. However, only four of them had a community engagement specialization, which was deemed most likely to be related to public programming. Fifty of the 58 programs offered courses that address programming. All of these courses were electives, and the most common foci were young adults, children, storytelling, and cultural diversity. However, the only information we had for many courses was the title. Less than half (27) of the 58 programs identified an explicit programming-related competency expected of graduating students.

Our review may not be exhaustive, since each program is structured differently, few offered publicly available course descriptions, and programs do not use terminology consistently. In particular, the lack of a standardized definition of *services* was a challenge. Some universities explicitly included programming activities under *services*, while others didn't, leading to some ambiguity in our results. For those reasons, we believe that our review may slightly underestimate the representation of programming in these degree programs.

Study 2: Field-wide survey about competencies and training Methods

In parallel to Study 1, we surveyed ALA PPO's current Programming Librarian opt-in mailing list to identify individual perspectives on priority skills, knowledge, and abilities. The survey solicited information on the following:

- skills needed to successfully run public programs;
- self-assessment of ability to run public programs;
- pathways to learning those skills (e.g., through a degree program, from colleagues, etc.);
- competencies that should be part of degree programs even if they currently are not; and
- institutional characteristics, such as type of library and size of community served.

We employed open-ended questions so we could triangulate bottom-up data from the survey with top-down data from the competency frameworks.

The survey was deployed in two waves: a first general wave, followed by an advisor workshop to discuss tentative findings and potential gaps in the data, and then a second wave to expand participation by underrepresented groups. Specifically, in the second wave of the study we sought additional representation of professionals working in rural libraries, tribal libraries, research and academic libraries, state libraries, special libraries, and K–12 school libraries, and academic instructors. Based on feedback from our advisors at the mid-point, we added a preamble to clarify definitional questions, similar to “key terms” above.

Comparison of results from both waves confirmed that there were no major differences in responses. However, the second wave led to some additional variation between and within groups underrepresented in the first wave. On this basis, we aggregated all responses for analysis.

Participants

Given that this study was designed to address the lack of a standardized understanding of library public programming, participant self-selection was an important part of the research design. Our goal was to reach those individuals who saw public programming as an important part of their work and were willing to offer their perspectives toward a shared definition.

In the first wave, the survey was distributed to the Programming Librarian email list, which included 5,321 email addresses, of which 92 were returned as unrecognized. To ensure inclusion in the second wave, the survey was distributed in collaboration with the Association for Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL); the American Indian Library Association (AILA); the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (ATALM); and the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA).⁵ We received a total of 1,249 responses across both waves (wave 1: $n = 791$; wave 2: $n = 458$).

Community demographics were roughly representative of the nation as a whole, and the combined data represented sufficient responses from US library workers in each key category of library type, as estimated by ALA (2015a), to explore variation for statistical significance. We targeted those who are shaping the field (academic instructors) and those who were more likely to participate in hiring or overseeing staff (directors and administrators). At the same time, we recognized the value of hearing from librarians, coordinators, and others who are engaged directly in programming work.

The majority of respondents identified their current position as either *Other library staff member* or *Other* (Figure 1). Common write-in answers included adult services, administration, children's/teen/youth coordinators, and public/reference/instructional librarians.

Results

Self-Reported Ability

Overall, respondents were positive about their ability to run public programs (Table 1).

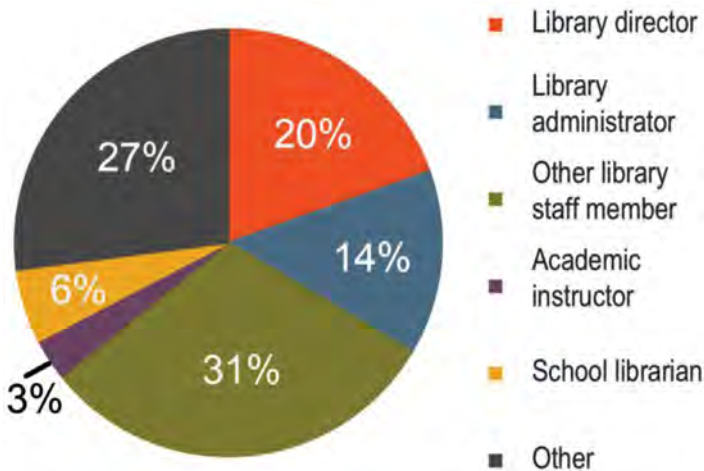


Figure 1: What is your current role?

Additional institutional characteristics of respondents can be seen in Supplement S1, Tables S1.1 and S1.2, available at <https://utpjournals.press/doi/suppl/10.3138/jelis.2019-0052>.

Table 1: Responses to the question “Do you believe that you personally have the skills or abilities necessary to successfully run public programs at libraries?” (n = 1, 247)

	Frequency
Always	230
Almost always	519
Usually	337
Sometimes	138
Rarely	16
Almost never	5
Never	2

In an open-ended question, respondents explained their responses. The most common bigram⁶ (two-word phrase) among the responses, excluding both English stop words (see Lewis, Yang, Rose, & Li, 2004) and words found in the prompts, was *years experience* ($n = 23$), suggesting that comfort depends on time using the skills rather than training. At the single-word level, *work** was the most common single word ($n = 233$), while *year** was third ($n = 201$), and *experi** was thirteenth ($n = 118$), confirming our interpretation.⁷

Programming librarians reported that they are generally supported by their institutions and colleagues—as well as by local businesses, community members, and organizations. We learned that the social nature of the job leads many to call on colleagues for support or training. A few rare exceptions did not feel they received sufficient institutional support. Despite a general sense of confidence, many participants indicated less comfort leading programs in specific content areas such as technology, multilingual programs, or engagement with some cultural or age groups.

Degree status and training

Most respondents had completed a library degree (74%, $n = 919$). The remainder had not (20%, $n = 256$), were currently enrolled in an MLIS program (3.3%, $n = 42$), or had started but did not complete their degree (1.7%, $n = 22$), with nine individuals either unsure or choosing not to answer. For comparative analyses, we reduced degree status to a binomial variable by combining *No*, *Currently enrolled*, and *Some courses*. Those working in higher education were most likely to have graduate degrees, while those in public libraries were least likely (Table 2).

Using an ordinal logistic regression, we assessed the effect of degree status on self-reported ability, controlling for library type, community type (Urban, Suburban, Rural), and population size. Degree status did not have a statistically significant effect when these factors were held constant

Table 2: Number and proportion of MLIS degrees by library type.

	<i>n</i> MLIS	<i>p</i> MLIS
Higher Education or Research	279	0.89
Special	27	0.84
K–12	46	0.75
Other	22	0.73
Public	516	0.66

Note: *n* Higher Education = 312, *n* Special = 32, *n* K–12 = 61, *n* Other = 30, *n* Public = 776. We received too few responses from tribal and state libraries to report on them, since it would have limited statistical power.

(Figure 2). In fact, the only significant effects were for two library types: Respondents from K–12 and public libraries had higher confidence ratings than others.⁸

Nearly all respondents reported learning programming skills on the job, with many reporting informal training and other learning from colleagues, or some combination of these (Table 3).

Responses to an open-ended follow-up question about training experiences also revealed that hands-on learning was key to developing skills relevant to programming. Many reported feeling unprepared for public-program management at the start of their careers and becoming comfortable only after direct experience. For others, seemingly unrelated past experience—in fields including retail, teaching, and theater, as well as non-professional experience like party planning—helped with skill development.

Respondents who mentioned their graduate degree were mixed about its value relating to running library public programs: Of 874 respondents to this open-ended question, 119 mentioned that their degree experience had helped them in their role as a programming librarian, while 110 disagreed directly, citing irrelevant courses or outdated curricula. Some described their MLIS training as focused on theory that might not be applicable to real-life programming. Others noted that their theoretical training in graduate studies gave them a framework for understanding their role, their community, and what services they ought to offer. Those who described coursework as unhelpful often cited professors unfamiliar with day-to-day program management, changes since they had completed their degree, and a lack of coursework in marketing or budget management.

For the many survey respondents who attribute competency development primarily to time on the job, formal training may not be able to simulate the constraints that crop up in the real world. As one stated, “Formal training isn’t a requirement, but planners need to know their

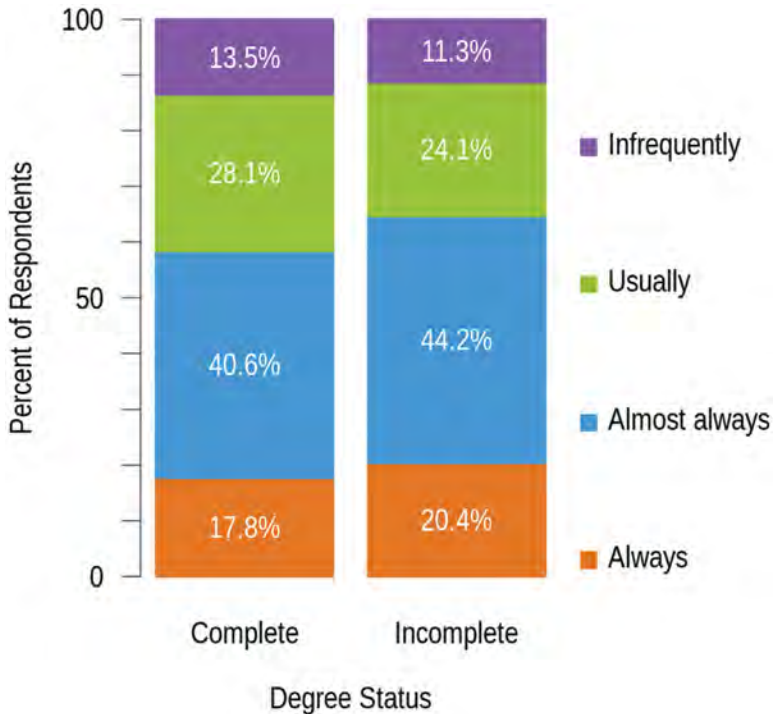


Figure 2: Beliefs about public programming skills plotted against completion of an MLIS degree.

Note: *Infrequently* summarizes *Sometimes – Never* from Table 1.

Question text: *Do you believe that you personally have the skills or abilities necessary to successfully run public programs at libraries? and Have you completed a MLS / MLIS degree?*

Table 3: Responses to the question “How did you acquire relevant skills or abilities?” (n = 1,247)

	Frequency
On the job	1,161
Informal training	919
From colleagues	775
MLIS program	506
Other formal academic training	325
Other	323
N/A (I do not believe I have necessary programming skills)	14

Note: Most respondents selected multiple answers. The median respondent selected 3 different answers. Only 129 respondents selected a single answer, including 11 of the 14 who did not believe they had programming skills.

personal and institutional constraints. If at a university, when are midterm exams offered, what competing events are already calendared, what time of day is best.”

Competencies

Two open-ended questions requesting clarification on (1) skills and abilities necessary to programming and (2) core knowledge and skills that should be part of a library degree offered a valuable perspective. An emergent coding of all responses was compared to the results of an automated quantitative analysis;⁹ these produced similar results. The quantitative analysis of the full data set revealed the top 20 bigrams (two-word phrases) for each question, which were summarized into the following nine key competency categories identified in the emergent coding:

- knowledge of the community, including open-mindedness and listening skills, intercultural and diversity skills, and group-specific competencies such as language skills or knowledge of child development;
- interpersonal skills, including customer service, communication, networking, public speaking, facilitation, and “people skills”;
- creativity, including the keywords *flexibility* and *problem-solving*;
- organizational skills, including project management and time management;
- event planning;
- outreach and marketing;
- content knowledge;
- financial skills, including budgeting, grants, and fundraising; and
- evaluation, including knowledge of statistics and benchmarking.

While an organizational competency was the most frequent bigram in responses to both questions, the way in which it was framed differed substantially. For the question about necessary skills, respondents answered *organizational skills* with highest frequency, while *project management* topped the list of core knowledge in MLIS programs. Overall, competencies framed as less teachable personal characteristics were far more common as responses to the first question, yet these were predominantly expressed as teachable skills in response to the second question. For example, compare *people skills* (personal characteristic) with *customer service* (teachable skill). The same can be said for *knowledge [of the] community* versus *community needs*. Similarly, the creativity category appears only on the list of skills needed in practice (*skills creativity*) while financial skills (*grant writing*) appears only on the list of desired MLIS program content.

We produced a visualization to illustrate the comparative hierarchy within each question (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Top 20 bigrams for “What skills are necessary?” (L) and “What skills should be part of MLIS degree?” (R).

Note: The relative size of each bigram represents its frequency. Note that stripped-out stop words are often clearly reconstructable, e.g., `attention_detail`.

Variation in responses

Using logistic regression analysis, we also examined variation in the three most frequent responses by training status (informal only vs. both formal and informal), degree status, library role, library type, and library population. There were no statistically significant differences between those who mentioned *organizational skills* and those who did not, nor did we find any for *communication skills*. However, library professionals with an MLIS degree were almost four times more likely to list *project management* as a needed skill than those without a degree. Similarly, they were also more than twice as likely to mention *project management* as something that should be taught in academia. We did not see significant results for *grant writing* or *event planning*. Those who mentioned *project management* in either question were more likely to mention it in the other one.

Partnerships

Based on our project advisors’ experience and expertise, we explored how respondents discussed partnerships in our data set. More than 120 respondents mentioned partnerships or relationships in at least one response, and they described both institutional and individual relationships. These words appeared most frequently in questions about needed skills ($n = 74$) and core MLIS skills ($n = 56$), while also arising in their self-assessment and personal learning pathways. Partnerships with other organizations were seen as important for providing materials and expertise for programs, understanding community needs and desires, raising awareness of library programs, and library staff professional development.

Summary of Study 2

The results of Study 2 largely corroborated Study 1 in terms of both training and competencies. Library professionals did not uniformly

agree that library degree programs taught them necessary skills for programming. The range of competencies we developed by synthesizing responses was intended to reflect the maximum variation within the data set, rather than a consolidated single set of competencies. We felt confident that our tentative range of competencies broadly represented the voices of the field; this synthesis laid the foundations for Study 3.

Study 3: Validity to the field

To finalize a recommended set of public programming competencies, our third study set out to test the validity of the themes that emerged in Study 2. We sought to understand both preferences in types of training, particularly which competencies *might be* better suited to formal learning opportunities, and how a competencies framework might reflect the increasing emphasis on social learning noted by our expert advisory committee.¹⁰

Methods

To pursue this validity study, we organized a series of discussion forums that could be structured according to library type or program audience, with questions used to determine the best ways to develop necessary skills. We felt that a maximum variation qualitative study could best represent the broad range of library settings and the range of skill requirements.

We held five 90-minute discussion forums, three in person (with emerging library leaders, academic librarians, and rural librarians) at the 2018 ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans. The other two were convened virtually (K–12 librarians and professionals from across library types). To accommodate schedule conflicts, we also conducted three separate 30-minute interviews with tribal librarians.

Forums and interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol, with questions focusing on programming experience, necessary skills for programming, and pathways to learning those skills. Multiple researchers reviewed notes from each forum to elicit key findings and emergent themes; a single researcher synthesized notes from interviews with tribal librarians. Quotations from forums were checked against recordings; quotations from interviews were confirmed with interviewees.

Participants

We spoke with a total of 41 practitioners across the six groups (Table 4). Members of the ALA Emerging Leaders program worked in suburban public libraries, urban library systems, academic libraries, and K–12 libraries, while the mixed group included public, state, specialty, and academic library professionals. All three tribal librarians worked at tribal colleges or universities on Native American reservations. Respondents worked in a range of roles, at varying levels of seniority.

Table 4: Number of librarians in each discussion forum.

Group	Format	<i>n</i>
K–12 libraries	Digital forum	7
Academic libraries	Live forum	8
Rural libraries	Live forum	9
Emerging library leaders	Live forum	8
Mixed library types	Digital forum	6
Tribal libraries	Interviews	3

Results

Although each library type had some unique affordances, most topics seemed to be represented across library type.¹¹ Frequently mentioned competencies generally fell into two main categories—*interpersonal skills* and *organizational skills*¹²—with a subcategory of *managerial skills* mentioned by those who oversaw programming. *Interpersonal skills* included social and emotional skills, necessary for maintaining good relationships, while *organizational skills* were more internal and operational. Those in supervisory roles were more likely to mention *organizational skills*. Resource management—both time and money—was considered a high-priority management skill, but participants noted that the specific skills were context-dependent. In general, they saw volunteer and partnership management as part of this resource management competency.

Irrespective of role, a number of participants also mentioned *meta-cognitive skills*—including flexibility, collaboration, and learning how to learn—that are present throughout the proposed framework, in particular at the mastery level, but do not map directly onto single content areas.

For the remainder of this section, we focus on variation in the specific competencies.

Assessing community needs and desires

Across library types, participants focused on assessing community needs in order to prioritize programming that would be most valuable to their service public. Related skills included designing programs with all ages and abilities in mind, being aware of cultural backgrounds and languages, and interpersonal skills. Staff in supervisory roles, particularly in larger library systems, were especially likely to note the need to develop skills needed to serve diverse communities.

When discussing community-responsive programming, variation between groups suggested that there is no consensus on the best approach, with participants commenting on the limits of both formal and informal needs assessment. *Community needs* was also an all-encompassing category, incorporating access accommodations, parking and transportation, broad

community interest, and fit with curriculum in academic and school libraries. Academic library workers conceived of their publics as consisting primarily of students and faculty. The tribal librarians did not describe their needs-assessment process explicitly but noted that they prioritize youth programming. These librarians also noted a shift away from information literacy to programming that is driven by the interests and needs of young people.

Evaluation

In addition to assessing community needs, all participants agreed that evaluation and impact measurement competencies were central to the work. Academic library staff defined impact more narrowly as grades, while K–12 schools focused on overall student performance, and special libraries were more concerned with measuring community benefits. Professionals working in rural and tribal libraries were more likely to focus assessment on improving program development techniques, rather than identifying change in participants.

Marketing and outreach

Librarians across types highlighted generating awareness of programs as a time-consuming and critical skill, whether they referred to it as *communication*, *marketing*, or *outreach*.

As with other competencies, the details varied by library type. School librarians were focused on graphics skills for social media, while academic librarians emphasized the need to attract students away from competing events. Meanwhile, participants in the mixed-type group noted the need to craft effective messages to generate awareness that libraries are not limited to books: “Just getting the word out about our programs is the biggest struggle we have.” Tribal librarians, on the other hand, concentrated on connecting with people face-to-face, through social media, and radio: “[Radio] is the tribe’s sovereign communication method.”

Outreach was essential not only for program audiences but also for generating buy-in from stakeholders. Academic library staff highlighted the need for buy-in because their bureaucratic hierarchy can be time-consuming, but the model remained the same across all participants. We noted that emerging leaders at all levels were more likely to talk about “managing up” and advocating for their programs with supervisors. For school librarians, these skills were more focused on selling programs laterally, to their teacher colleagues.

Summary of Study 3

The discussion forums further validated the findings from the community survey, and in some cases they provided additional context about the unique affordances and challenges of each library type. For example, academic librarians placed stronger emphasis on subject-area expertise than did professionals in other types of libraries, and tribal librarians focused

heavily on the skills to reflect, represent, and support tribal identities and values. Respondents with and without library degrees noted that many important skills were transferable from other fields, suggesting that there are multiple effective pathways to a career in library programming.

Discussion and proposed competency framework

ALA's Core Competencies of Librarianship (2009) include knowledge, skills, and abilities that are necessary for programming professionals, but the relationship, hierarchy, and specific demands of the work suggest that programming professionals require additional competencies, many of which are currently learned outside libraries and library degree programs.

Proposed library programming competency areas

Many of the skills identified in these studies were similar to those found in other competency indexes. However, the proposed prioritization, hierarchy of need for mastery, and specific work with group dynamics and community organizations are unique to library public-programming professionals.

1. Organizational skills. *Works toward managing time and projects efficiently and effectively at multiple levels: individually, institutionally, and in collaboration with outside organizations and agencies.*

Organizational competencies are represented in the general ALA competencies described as Administration and Management. One distinction emerged in this research: Collaborative management with outside organizations and agencies relies on diplomacy skills that are not highlighted in other sources.

2. Knowledge of the community. *Works toward understanding the communities for which programs are developed, including their particular needs and interests; building respectful, reciprocal relationships with community members and organizations; and ensuring access to a wide variety of programs for all community members, especially those who have historically been underserved or face other challenges to access.*

This area of competencies includes open-mindedness and listening skills, intercultural and diversity skills, and group-specific competencies such as language skills or knowledge of child development. Compare YALSA's (2017) community and family engagement and equity of access content areas, which served as the basis for the language used in our definition.

3. Event planning. *Works toward planning, managing, and implementing events that are both developmentally and culturally appropriate for their intended audiences.*

Note that event planning includes two types of skills: logistical skills and the ability to create appropriate environments for different audiences.

Logistical skills include managing scheduling and logistics for multiple programs occurring in parallel, resource management at the event

level, and fundraising at the event level. While the logistical aspects of this competency are present to some degree in other frameworks, our research confirmed that the scale and complexity of managing multiple events—often on the same day—elevated this competency beyond basic skills.

Environment-building skills include “[cultivating] high-quality, developmentally appropriate, flexible learning environments that support service populations individually and in group experiences” (YALSA, 2017) and scaffolding age-appropriate “peer-to-peer knowledge sharing” (Gutsche & Hough, 2014, p.40). This subset of event planning includes the ability to organize frequent reconfigurations of event spaces while ensuring safety, accessibility, and navigability; and the ability to create flexible and modular spaces that can be used for an increasing range of programs. Part of the latter subcategory includes the ability to “[design] flexible and multi-use spaces to accommodate a variety of programs and services” (Gutsche & Hough, 2014, p. 26).

4. Financial skills. *Works toward budgeting, seeking funding for, and managing the finances of a program or suite of programs, often in collaboration with external partners.*

While we noted resource management as part of event-planning competencies, this competency addresses financial management, particularly beyond the level of the single program. Our results suggest that the pressure to secure grant funding, negotiate sponsorship, and manage budgets collaboratively with external partners were necessary programming competencies. At higher levels of management, we expect that programming professionals will increasingly be involved in budgets related to space use, rental, and construction or renovation.¹³

5. Evaluation. *Works toward using statistical and qualitative tools to measure program effectiveness and impact on all community audiences, including those that have historically been un- and underserved; and using this information to iteratively improve the development and delivery of programs.*

Our results suggest that public-programming professionals have more need of culturally responsive evaluation and tools for addressing variation in relatively small populations, rather than large-scale survey tools. These competencies also include knowledge of how to understand un- and underserved audiences within the service population.

6. Outreach and marketing. *Works toward communicating information about programs to all community members who could potentially attend or benefit, using a variety of digital and analog channels in ways that are culturally and developmentally appropriate.*

These competencies emphasize communicating about programs in ways that meet the service community's interest and needs; collaborating with individuals and organizations; and using a variety of digital and analog channels, including graphic design of marketing materials. Ethically sharing results of evaluations and other assessments falls into this content area, as do building support, maintaining good public relations

through communication, and building effective relationships to support programming.

7. Content knowledge. *Works toward sufficient knowledge of program content to deliver, manage, or evaluate programs, according to role.*

Our research showed that those directly involved in program implementation as teachers or facilitators had different content knowledge needs than those involved in management or oversight. These competencies are likely specific to job, library, and community culture.

8. Interpersonal skills. ¹⁴ *Works toward communicating effectively and appropriately with all stakeholders and audiences to provide consultation, mediation, and guidance during programs and in other contexts relating to programs.*

These competencies—based on ALA core competency 5C (ALA, 2009)—include customer service, communication, networking, public speaking, facilitation, and general “people skills.” We note that this content area often intersected with knowledge of the community in that appropriate engagement often required knowledge of community norms; however, this competency highlights the programming professional’s performance rather than their knowledge.

9. Creativity. *Responds to challenges and problems with inventiveness, flexibility, and creativity to resolve them.*

Respondents to our survey also described this competency described as having highly developed “flexibility” to manage change and refined “problem-solving” skills. This competency included everything from visual creativity—such as the ability to design communications materials—to inventiveness with program topics and methods to meet service community needs. It also included the ability to “roll with the punches” and find last-minute solutions to everything from absent volunteers to equipment issues.

Training in library programming competencies

More than 25% of survey respondents had not completed a library master’s degree, and more than 20% had no library coursework at all. Even for those with a degree, most attributed many of their programming-specific skills to on-the-job experience or training outside their degree program. Examination of academic curricula affirmed these results: While no school explicitly offered a concentration in public programming, most offered some coursework, and the potential to offer this type of concentration seems possible.

Many of the competencies in the framework we propose above are currently taught in MLIS training programs at the entry level. An explicit programming competency framework would support LIS educators in developing tracks or concentrations that aggregate these skills in a clear learning progression. At the same time, other skills may be more suited to lateral transfer from other academic programs or professional development targeting those with specific interest in programming. Because many

of these content areas will require professionals to learn continuously over the length of their careers, teaching metacognitive skills and dispositions will also be important for any academic concentration in programming.

Conclusion

The nine public-programming competency areas identified in this research appear to reflect a unique, interdependent set of skills. While individual skills within this set are relevant to other areas of librarianship, taken as a whole they characterize the unique field of programming. Developing and implementing time-dependent events while managing the needs and expectations of diverse stakeholders, including both attendees and partner organizations, distinguish these skills from those needed to work primarily through one-on-one interactions.

As a next step, these competency areas can also be disaggregated to indicate levels of mastery. Following this process, we envision practitioners determining what these programming competencies look like according to context. This will be dependent on the exact library environment and workplace conditions for each professional—for example, specific outreach and marketing competencies will look very different for someone who works primarily with new arrivals to an area and someone who works with established library users. Clearly, library organizations and agencies such as ALA, OCLC, state libraries, and state and regional cooperatives have a role to play in helping library professionals become more proficient in these competencies. This may occur through national, state, or regional conferences that offer professional development or other training opportunities and can occur virtually as well to reach a larger subset of professionals, especially those working in rural or underserved areas. ALA is currently seeking grant funding to develop the nine NILPPA programming competency areas into a pilot curriculum for beginner programming librarians.

The results about learning pathways suggest that administrators for MLIS programs could develop a concentration in public programming, but we note that these courses would likely develop skills primarily at the entry level, which can also emerge through other paths. Independent of a professional's path to entering the library public programming field, we believe that focus on these competency areas can support a life-long professional development path and build depth as they move up the management hierarchy.

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Acknowledgments

This research was undertaken as part of the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA): Phase I, with funding support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services Grant # LG-96-17-0048-17. The authors thank Nezam Ardan, Colleen Barbus, Michele Besant, Joanna Laursen Brucker, Terrilyn Chun, Jen Dixon, Kate Flinner, Janine Golden, Kathryn Nock, and Beverly Sheppard for helping shape the research and for their participation in data collection, analysis, and report development. We would also like to acknowledge the full staff of the American Library Association (ALA) Public Programs Office (PPO), who helped manage this project, the many library professionals who participated generously with their time and opinions in the studies described in this paper, the members of the Programming Librarian online community whose feedback was essential to the work, and the ongoing support of the Public Library Association’s Project Outcome team for their constructive input.

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Endnotes

1. See <https://nilppa.org/> for more information about the history and findings of the broader initiative.
2. We use “MLIS” throughout this article as an umbrella term for library master’s degrees, although we recognize that these degrees go by many different names. See also note 4 below.
3. Of the 60 programs listed by the ALA at the time of research (<http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/accreditedprograms/directory>), 58 had English-language websites. We excluded the two that did not: at the University of Puerto Rico and the University of Montreal.
4. Programs reviewed included those described as Master of Arts (MA), Master of Arts in Library and Information Science (MALIS), Master of Arts in Library Science or Master of Library Science (MLS), Master of Library and Information Science or Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS), Master of Information Studies (MIS), Master of Information in Library & Information Science (MILIS), Master of Information (MI), Master of Science in Library and Information Science (MSLIS), Master of Science in Library Science (MSLS), Master of Science in Information (MSI), and Master of Science in Information Science (MSIS). One of the programs reviewed for this study offered a Master of Management degree. Of the 58 programs surveyed, 38 offered combined degree programs, including both bachelor’s/master’s programs (e.g., BSIS/MSIS) and joint master’s programs (e.g., MLIS/MBA, MA/MS, etc.). A handful of the programs also offered bachelor’s degrees in information or library studies.
5. Because individuals may appear on multiple mailing lists, we are unable to provide the exact number of individuals to whom the link was distributed.
6. Bigrams are commonly used in computational text analysis to capture topics (Mitkov, 2003). After a text is stripped of stop words (e.g., articles, prepositions, and pronouns), bigrams tend to capture the

combinations of keywords in a phrase. In turn, phrases (especially noun phrases) tend to refer to entities and concepts—the topics of the text responses. We used bigrams because we sought to capture phrases in the text responses that might help us enumerate the range of topics related to public programming.

7. Of the 18 word stems appearing in more than 100 responses, the others were common words that were difficult to interpret out of context.
8. We reached most of our public library respondents ($n = 691$ out of 776) through Programming Librarian, indicating that these respondents self-identified with programming. Meanwhile, most other respondents ($n = 371$ out of 470) were reached through other channels and may have identified less strongly with programming.
9. After stripping English stop words (see [Lewis et al., 2004](#)) and prompt words (librar*, public, program*, and success*).
10. In the past, libraries have focused on individualized models of informal learning.
11. Some skills that were not programming-specific, such as those related to the use of technology, were also frequently mentioned.
12. For brevity and clarity, we use the final names of each content area here.
13. As part of “Community Relations,” WebJunction ([Gutsche & Hough, 2014](#)) highlights that library professionals must not only determine the needs of their particular community and context but also shape programs to be responsive to those needs, communicate clearly about their work, and collaborate with other organizations and individuals who are trying to satisfy those needs. The next two competencies focus on this set of skills.
14. The remaining two competency categories were described as both habits of professional practice and, to some degree, behavioral strivings that reflect aptitude of those most likely to succeed in programming. While many of these skills can be taught, most were reported to be honed over time on the job.