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Libraries as Sustainability Leaders: ALA’s Special Task Force

René Tanner, Rebekkah Smith Aldrich, Monika Antonelli, and Adrian K. Ho

abstract: This article discusses the work of the American Library Association (ALA) Special Task Force on Sustainability, which identified 52 recommendations, including the adoption of sustainability as a core value of librarianship, with the aim to promote libraries as catalysts, connectors, and conveners to promote sustainability, resilience, and regeneration. The Task Force is guided by the concept of the triple bottom line, which states that an organization’s practices must not only be economically feasible but also socially equitable and environmentally sound. The article also provides examples of how libraries engage in sustainable practices to support the cities and towns they serve.

Background

The American Library Association (ALA) identified sustainability as a major national trend in the “State of America’s Libraries Report” for 2018.¹ Sustainability is closely aligned with ALA’s mission of “providing leadership for the development, promotion and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.”² The formation of ALA’s Special Task Force on Sustainability was many years in the making. Its spark began with the passage of a 2015 resolution on the importance of sustainable libraries at the ALA Annual Conference in San Francisco.³ In response to this resolution, the Special Task Force on Sustainability began its work in 2017 under the direction of the ALA Executive Board.

With the help of the ALA executive director and the ALA president, the Task Force membership incorporated individuals from a variety of specialties, including public, academic,

and rural libraries, as well as an architect who specializes in libraries. The group aimed to explore and identify the ways libraries could engage in sustainability and so invigorate their communities. The early work of the Task Force focused on exploring a variety of definitions for sustainability to better frame its recommendations and to provide a common understanding for the sustainability themes. Through multiple brainstorming sessions, the Task Force identified three themes for the association and libraries: (1) as inspiration and catalyst; (2) as conveners and connectors; and (3) as contributors to community resilience.

Under the first theme, as inspiration and catalyst, the Task Force called for ALA and libraries to lead in four major directions: (1) modeling sustainable practices, from building designs and operations to equity and inclusion practices; (2) providing proactive education on topics related to the environment, economics, and social equity; (3) advocating for new policies and supporting grassroots organizing; and (4) innovating through the creation of tools, technologies, and programs that could help other organizations operate sustainably as well as expand the community's ability to share resources.

The second theme had the association and libraries serving as conveners and connectors to link up individuals, groups, and initiatives. Under this theme, libraries were charged with activating communities by collaboratively identifying shared solutions. As developed under the earlier ALA Libraries Transform Campaign, this role would encourage communities to move from debate to dialogue to deliberation. Under this theme, the association and libraries would energize communities to focus on achieving happiness and self-sufficiency, while also seeking to build visionary partnerships and collective impact teams.

The third and final theme, as contributors to community resilience, called for ALA and libraries to advance community resilience through their presence, engagement, and commitment

to a better future. This would be accomplished through two avenues. First, ALA and libraries would actively participate in library and community disaster preparedness planning and recovery efforts. Second, they would strengthen social cohesion by creating a community in which people respected, understood, and empathized with one another.

The Triple Bottom Line

Different professions have addressed sustainability in various ways. In librarianship, the discussion of sustainability is based on an accounting framework known as the triple bottom line (TBL).⁴ John Elkington, a British author and consultant, introduced the TBL framework in the 1990s to evaluate business performance in terms of sustainability, but the framework has since been adopted and customized by governments and nonprofit organizations to facilitate the assessment of sustainability.⁵

TBL is comprised of social, environmental, and economic dimensions, thus highlighting the need to go beyond financial considerations in the process of determining the sustainability of a business or other organization. In practice, only when an organization acts responsibly in all three aspects—social equity, environmental stewardship, and economic feasibility—will it be viewed as sustainable. An organization will run into problems if it makes economic gains at the expense of the social or environmental dimensions. TBL is often depicted as a “three-legged stool” of which the balance must be heeded in order for an organization to be sustainable.⁶

[Figure 1. A Venn diagram that shows the three overlapping dimensions of the triple bottom line, extracted from:

Rebekkah Smith Aldrich, *Sustainable Thinking: Ensuring Your Library's Future in an Uncertain World* (Chicago: ALA, 2018)]

Libraries and Sustainability

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals describe sustainability as a complex topic that covers 17 areas.⁷ Given the interconnections among the areas and the multitude of issues involved, no one organization can tackle sustainability alone. The work requires a holistic approach in which entities with distinct capabilities collaborate to accomplish common goals. The collaboration will enable the participants to address sustainability systemically and engender what John Kania and Mark Kramer call “collective impact.”⁸

As part of the social fabric, libraries can facilitate such collaboration by playing the roles Rebekkah Smith Aldrich, one of the authors of this article, refers to as catalyst, connector, and convener.⁹ For example, libraries can start a conversation about sustainability, connect with entities that recognize the significance of sustainability, and gather representatives to strategize for action. In other words, libraries can assume a leadership role if they step up and apply systems thinking to proactively coordinate what is required for the holistic collaboration.

Aldrich emphasizes that resilience and regeneration are also important concepts for libraries to understand and put into practice.¹⁰ Communities constantly encounter change and disruption from economic, environmental, political, social, or technological forces. To be sustainable, communities must anticipate, prepare for, and recover from disruptions. The key to cultivating resiliency—the ability to bounce back—is to build social cohesion based on understanding, respect, and empathy.¹¹ Libraries can engage with people, empower them to resolve problems, and energize their communities. Thanks to these human-centered activities, libraries can amplify people’s collective impact on their community and strengthen social cohesion and resiliency. By adopting a human-centered and systems-minded framework, libraries will be able to generate significant insights from collected data and identify

opportunities to leverage the holistic collaboration and optimize the collective impact. This framework matches the forces and relationships in a system with the beliefs and behaviors of the people in the system, enabling people to tackle complex challenges.¹²

The ultimate goal of sustainable thinking is regeneration, which entails the ability to restore, renew, or revitalize what is required for the existence of a community.¹³ However, Traci Engel Lesneski, an architect and a member of the Task Force, points out that the term “generation” may be more appropriate for situations in which there is no need to fix something. Libraries can play an active role in contributing to (re)generation through such events as hackathons, in which coders collaborate intensively for software projects, and makerspace workshops, where people create with technology. To summarize sustainable thinking, Aldrich writes, “Part of being sustainable is lowering your level of consumption, part of being resilient is fixing your own stuff when it breaks, and part of being (re)generative can be inventing your own solution to meet your needs.”¹⁴

Fifty-Two Recommendations for Libraries

Within the TBL framework, the Special Task Force on Sustainability identified 52 recommendations in line with the charge. Each recommendation progressed from one to another with the goal of developing the necessary energy and support for transformational change. Twenty-four recommendations related to how ALA might provide leadership and serve as a model for sustainability practices broadly in the library profession. Fifteen recommendations involved how the association might promote the wise use of resources in libraries. Thirteen recommendations dealt with how libraries themselves might lead and act as models for sustainability in the communities they serve.¹⁵

The Task Force framed its report to identify the parties responsible for each action and to prioritize its recommendations. The Task Force selected as its top priority adding sustainability to the “Core Values of Librarianship,” ALA’s statement of principles for the library profession, because professional values form the basis for initiatives, mindset, and actions. The Task Force also believed that the core value of sustainability would influence new policies, foci, and job expectations for those in leadership roles in the association. The Task Force expected that sustainability goals and initiatives, which would stem from identifying sustainability as a core value, would naturally spread beyond ALA and its professional membership to touch the communities that libraries serve and to demonstrate the role of libraries as leaders and models for sustainability.

First Steps

The ALA Executive Board accepted the Final Report of the Special Task Force on Sustainability at the ALA 2018 Annual Conference in New Orleans. After acceptance, the Task Force worked with Mary Ghikas, executive director of ALA, to draft an implementation plan. The plan reviewed each recommendation and identified the party responsible for activation. For purposes of simplicity, the implementation plan grouped the 52 recommendations into two broad categories, based on their underlying intent.

In the implementation plan, the first category of recommendations related to building sustainability into the processes and structures of libraries, library associations, and similar institutions. In total, 24 recommendations fit under this category and covered a wide range of ideas, including embedding sustainability in assessment, planning, facilities, finance, business continuity, training, staff development, and job descriptions. This category also included amending the “Core Values of Librarianship” to add sustainability.

The remaining 28 recommendations fit into the second category, which examined the impact of the TBL framework on programmatic areas of the association and libraries in general. The suggestions covered a range of topics and aspirations, including advocacy, membership and marketing, professional development, certification programs, conference services, publishing, and programming.

The Task Force, with its earlier agreement on the top priority and with its plan in hand, transitioned into an implementation team and drafted a Resolution for the Adoption of Sustainability as a Core Value of Librarianship.¹⁶ The resolution, though a brief two pages, took a powerful step forward. A resolution to establish sustainability as a professional core value would provide the basis and impetus for policy changes within ALA and its member libraries. The modifications and updates to policy that would spring from this action would drive meaningful change. Sustainability is both a series of actions as well as a mindset. By articulating a new mindset for individuals who embark on this profession, we can embed sustainability into the association and libraries from the very beginning of an individual's career as well as provide a new touchstone for those established in their careers.

The Task Force shared the implementation plan with the Executive Board at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in 2019 in Seattle. The board accepted the plan and approved the addition of concern for sustainability to the job description for the hiring of a new executive director in 2020.

Adoption of Sustainability as a Core Value

The resolution to establish sustainability as a core value of librarianship was just one of many resolutions considered at the 2019 Midwinter Meeting. Since the resolution was the top priority of the Task Force, the group wanted to build as much support for the measure as it could before

the vote. The Task Force had a great deal of help from Sara Dallas, an implementation team member. With her efforts and those of others, the Task Force secured multiple seconders for the resolution as well as numerous endorsements, including those of the ALA Sustainability Round Table, New York Library Association, and the Virginia Library Association.

On January 27, 2019, the resolution passed with an almost unanimous vote of support by the ALA Council, the association's governing body. Adopting sustainability as a core value of librarianship is an important step and will help shape the future of our profession for a better world.¹⁷ This step acknowledges libraries' role in serving, supporting, nurturing, and growing our dynamic and diverse communities. Librarians are trusted partners locally and nationally, and we will continue to look for hope, inspiration, and ways to empower our association, colleagues, and communities in the effort to ensure a sustainable future.

Libraries as Leaders and Models of Sustainability

With the inclusion of sustainability as a core value of librarianship, libraries can look for opportunities to collaborate with grassroots organizations. One such group is Transition US, a nonprofit that seeks to build communities resilient enough to withstand energy, climate, and economic challenges.¹⁸ Transition US declares

- If we wait for the government, it'll be too little, too late.
- If we act as individuals, it'll be too little.
- But if we act as communities, it might just be enough, just in time.¹⁸

Incorporating sustainability into the fabric and organizational actions of libraries, as well as into library school curricula, will create a platform for regenerative change in cities and towns throughout the United States. Examples of this work can already be observed through such programs as the "Plant a Seed" initiative at the Rochester Public Library in Minnesota.

Volunteers divided “50,000 bulk-purchased seeds into 6,000 individual packets, representing more than 40 varieties of vegetables, fruits and herbs.”¹⁹ The goal of the project is to give food back to the community with the hope that some gardeners will save seeds for the library to create a circle of giving and receiving.²⁰ Another example is the “New York Reads: Drawdown” project, a statewide library effort to bring people together to read and discuss the 2017 book edited by Paul Hawken, *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*. A related program called EcoChallenge aims to empower communities to build on scientific solutions to take measurable action on climate change.²¹

In Santa Rosa, California, the Northwest Regional Library hosts a series of bimonthly presentations on how to create resilient communities and ecosystems. The spring 2019 series is titled the “Planted People Project.” Each month, the library posts for its Discussion Circle a list of reading materials on a specific sustainability topic. The discussions are followed by a presentation given by a local expert. The topics include “alternative economies, ecosystem restoration, food systems, grassroots community and more.”²²

One of the ways that libraries can support people in adapting to a lower energy future is to offer classes that teach ancestral life skills, such as “how to cook, sew, knit, repair things, grow food, build soil and live thriftily.”²³ Many libraries have already begun offering these types of programs. An example of this type of programming took place in 2019 at Washington County Library’s Fix-It Clinic in Woodbury, Minnesota. Patrons were encouraged to bring in small electrical appliances that had broken. Volunteers worked with attendees on diagnostics, disassembling, and repair of the devices. The goal of the program was for attendees to walk away with repaired items and also to have gained new knowledge of various repair techniques.²⁴

Academic libraries have led by example over the years and demonstrated their support for sustainability. Oregon State University Libraries and Press in Corvallis, for instance, has implemented a compost collection program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions caused by burying food waste in landfills.²⁵ In China, the University Library of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology implemented multiple sustainability efforts on both a small and a large scale. Large-scale efforts involved building design and resource conservation, while smaller projects included installing a hot water dispenser, recycling worn carpeting, and empowering the staff to take ownership of sustainability priorities and solutions.²⁶ The Chinese University of Hong Kong Library committed to leadership in environmental responsibility as a way to provide a beacon of hope in a city that is highly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. Some of its efforts included the reduction of energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, as well as a campaign for behavior modification.²⁷

Academic libraries may also find promising collaborators in the larger community. For example, two librarians at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania worked with a colleague at the Scranton Public Library to organize a six-week summer program to educate teenagers about sustainability topics.²⁸ Ohio University Libraries in Athens collaborated with campus units and a local cinema to host an annual Sustainability Film Series, featuring short films and documentaries about environmental issues. Admission was free and open to the public. Each screening was followed by a panel discussion to encourage participants to think critically about local and global issues affecting the environment.²⁹

Meanwhile, some academic institutions have already actively engaged in championing sustainability. For instance, the Julie Ann Wrigley Global Institute of Sustainability at Arizona State University conducts research and offers degree programs to address social, economic, and

environmental challenges with an emphasis on urban environments.³⁰ The Office of Sustainability at the University of Kentucky provides resources to heighten campus community's awareness of various sustainability-related topics such as food, water, energy, and transportation. Through its Recycling Office, the University of Kentucky participates in the RecycleMania competition to highlight the benefits of recycling and encourage members of the campus community to stop wasting throughout February and March 2019.³¹ Similar campus units and their activities present numerous opportunities for academic libraries to pitch in and support sustainability education and outreach.

With so many ideas, projects, aspirations, and collaborators, libraries have already proved themselves engaged and reliable agents of change in the arena of sustainability and are sure to rise further as leaders in this area. Our connection to our surrounding campuses and communities makes us particularly suited for the leadership role. As a result, libraries' contributions to sustainability are limited only by our imagination and our will to act.

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