

AUDREY BARBAKOFF *and* NOAH LENSTRA

THE
— **12** —
STEPS TO A
**Community-Led
Library**

ALA
Editions
CHICAGO | 2024

available at alastore.ala.org

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ISBN: 978-0-8389-3612-2 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barbakoff, Audrey, author. | Lenstra, Noah, author.

Title: The 12 steps to a community-led library / Audrey Barbakoff and Noah Lenstra.

Other titles: Twelve steps to a community-led library

Description: Chicago : ALA Editions, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Community-led planning is a method for returning institutional power to communities that have experienced oppression. This book provides a unique evidence-based plan, consisting of three phases divided into twelve steps, that libraries can use to grow their capacity to engage in community-led work"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023027565 | ISBN 9780838936122 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Libraries and community. | Libraries and community—United States—Case studies.

Classification: LCC Z716.4 .B267 2023 | DDC 021.20973—dc23/eng20231013

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023027565>-

Book design by Alejandra Diaz in the Noto Serif, Noto Sans, Omnes and Cabrigo typefaces.

∞ This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

Printed in the United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 5 4 3 2 1

available at alastore.ala.org

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INTRODUCTION

The Community Is the Heart of the Library

The community is the heart of the library. We often hear that phrase the other way around—that the library is the heart of the community. Yet that can only be true when every person feels welcome and included, and sees themselves represented. To approach that lofty ideal, libraries must first center our most impacted and excluded communities, empowering them to build the library—and the world—they want to see. We need to transform our ways of working and thinking, returning power and resources to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and all systematically excluded communities. When the community is our heart—when we all are part of one larger body walking toward a more equitable future—libraries can live up to our promise to the world.

If such a transformation feels unattainable or overwhelming, remember that you are not alone. This book is your partner on the journey. Community-led planning offers one method for taking deeply meaningful steps forward. This book will provide concrete, practical actions library workers and leaders can take to shift our organizations, building our capacity to engage in community-led work in ways large and small.

In the first section, you will learn about the foundations of community-led planning—what it means, why it matters, and how to do it. But that understanding is just the beginning. To make community-led work sustainable, we need to transform our organizational cultures and structures to make it our default mode, our normal way of approaching library work. The rest of the book will take you through twelve steps, organized into three phases, to fundamentally shift your organization toward more equitable and community-centered ways of thinking. It will also give you tools to assess your organization's capacity and evaluate your progress.

The twelve-step CoLaB model can be adapted to libraries of any size or budget, serving any type of community. It can be applied as a single large change effort, as individual steps, or anything in between. Leaders, managers, and individual staff all can move the work forward, together or separately. In short, no matter what kind of library you are in or how much support you have around you, there is a way for you to have an impact. Now is the time to put the community at your library's heart.

How This Book Is Organized

Parts II through IV contain the steps of the CoLaB model, describing each one that libraries can take to increase their capacity to share power with systematically excluded communities. Though there is an order to the steps, capacity-building work is iterative rather than linear. You may find that your library is already strong in some areas and weak in others; there may be political reasons to begin at a particular place; or you may find yourself moving back and forth between steps as you go. Ideally, you would read through the steps in order the first time to understand each one in detail and the inter-relationships between them. As you work, though, you can go back to consult individual steps in any order. The steps have a standard format to make it simple to jump between them and find the information you need. For each step, you will find the following sections:

What It Means. This section describes the step in detail.

Exploring the Evidence. This is a brief summary of Dr. Barbakoff's original research findings that led to the formulation of that step.

Strategies for Success. This section contains practical tips for putting the step into action.

Addressing Pitfalls. Learn about common issues that may arise in implementing this step, and learn how to prevent, mitigate, or address them.

Case Study. This section provides a real-world example of the step in action, from original research conducted by Dr. Lenstra between

2020 and 2022. Case studies span a wide variety of library sizes, locations, and types of communities to help illustrate how these methods can be applied in any context.

Summary. Quickly refresh yourself on the key points from the step.

In addition to individual steps, the chapters in part I support your understanding of the core concepts underpinning community-led planning and your library's individual context. A concluding chapter focuses on evaluating your progress and making adjustments to your process.

Research Underlying the Twelve-Step Model

The purpose of Dr. Barbakoff's research was to increase public librarians' capacity for improving equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice (EDISJ) in public library planning by exploring innovations in implementing community-led processes and initiatives. For practical purposes, the scope was narrowly focused on public librarians who provide programs for adults. The participants were a purposeful sample of ten librarians, library workers, and library leaders with information-rich cases, maximized for heterogeneity by library size and location. In data analysis, Dr. Barbakoff interrogated the knowledge, motivation, and organizational influences that affected a library's capacity to engage in community-led planning. Four questions guided this study:

1. How are public librarians currently implementing community-led practices with the goal of increasing equity, diversity, and inclusion in public programs?
2. What are the knowledge and motivation influences affecting librarians' capacity for community-led programming practices?
3. What is the interaction between organizational culture and context for public librarians' knowledge and motivation as it relates to increasing EDISJ through community-led programming?

4. What are the recommendations for organizational innovations in the areas of knowledge, motivation, and organizational resources to favorably impact public librarians' capacity to implement community-led practices to increase EDISJ?

The study design used methods and principles adapted from critical participatory action research. The defining value of this research is that practitioners can collectively conduct research on their own work to make their practices more reasonable, sustainable, and just.¹ Study participants joined virtual focus groups followed by reflective journaling on findings.

Research behind the Case Studies

The research undergirding the case studies is informed and shaped by a critical strand in the intellectual history of library and information science (LIS)—namely, that public librarians work differently when they work with communities. An excellent overview of this approach can be found in the 1976 article “Community Development as a Mode of Community Analysis” in which University of Wisconsin–Madison LIS professor (and former public librarian) Margaret E. Monroe examines a national sample of what she calls “community-aware public libraries,” concluding that in communities “the versatile librarian may exercise leadership and bring library resources and services to bear in a variety of ways.”²

In 2020, Dr. Noah Lenstra applied for and received an early career grant from the US Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to understand how and why versatile librarians in eighteen communities across America work in collaboration with communities to support public health in the form of access to food and physical activities, and related culinary and physical literacies.³ In total, 129 interviews were conducted, including with sixty-nine library workers (forty-four frontline staff and twenty-five library leaders) and sixty community partners (representing sectors as heterogeneous as hospitals, parks and recreation departments, and community health coalitions). Analysis focused on deeply understanding how

and why public library staff became deeply involved in efforts in their communities focused on increasing public health, with the idea being that if we could understand library work around this particular topic, we could understand and support library participation and leadership in a range of community issues, including everything from early childhood development to digital inclusion. This study was also notable for being one of very few that have ever sought to understand how library workers are perceived from the perspective of those community partners with whom they collaborate.⁴

A Note on Terminology

This book will refer to several key ideas for which there are multiple terms in popular use. These terms will be used interchangeably. Although each variation does offer nuance in meaning, in the context of this work, the terms should be considered to have the same meaning that encompasses the broad principles behind them all.

Equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice (EDISJ). This concept may be found represented throughout the library field as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI); inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility (IDEA); diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and anti-racism (DEIA+AR); equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB); or justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI). It is closely related to the concepts of social exclusion, anti-racism, disability justice, and collective liberation.

Community-led planning. Similar concepts and terms from the literature include design thinking, or community-centered, human-centered, or patron-centered design. This idea also is closely related to the Aspen Institute's definition of library-as-platform.⁵ It has substantial overlap with asset-based community development, community engagement, participatory design, and co-design. Community-led planning differs from marketing and promotion and is more specific than outreach. It stands in contrast to library-led or traditional planning.

Librarian. The term *librarian* will be used in this book to refer to all library workers who engage in community-led planning. It is inclusive regardless of MLIS degree status or job title. When a point

relates specifically to someone with a management or senior leadership role, this will be indicated; otherwise, the term *librarian* includes those with and without supervisory duties.

NOTES

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