

Community Engagement in U.S. Public Libraries: Definitions, Theory, and Practice

Introduction

Community engagement has emerged as a central theme in public librarianship, especially in recent years. Public libraries in the United States are increasingly expected to go beyond traditional services and actively **collaborate with their communities** to identify needs, co-create services, and foster social wellbeing. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, social justice movements, and ongoing digital divides, libraries have redoubled efforts to engage their communities in meaningful ways. This article provides a comprehensive overview of **community engagement in public libraries**, tailored for MLIS graduate students. It explores how the concept is defined and interpreted in library contexts, the theoretical foundations underlying it, and why it is critically important in a post-2021 environment. The discussion then turns to evidence-based best practices for implementation – from partnerships and outreach models to user-centered programming and co-creation – as well as common challenges such efforts face. Finally, we highlight several recent **case studies** (post-2021) illustrating innovative community engagement initiatives in U.S. public libraries. Throughout, we cite relevant scholarly literature, professional reports, and official library documentation to ground the discussion in evidence.

Defining “Community Engagement” in Public Libraries

What does “community engagement” mean in a library context? Definitions vary, but at its core the term implies a shift from transactional, one-way outreach toward **collaborative, reciprocal relationships** between libraries and their communities. The American Library Association (ALA) defines community engagement as *“the process of working collaboratively with community members — be they library customers, residents, faculty, students or partner organizations — to address issues for the betterment of the community.”*¹ This emphasizes joint effort and shared goals: libraries and community stakeholders co-identifying issues and co-creating solutions that improve community life.

Other interpretations stress the **empowerment** of community voices in library decision-making. For example, Goulding (2009) cites a public policy definition by Rogers and Robinson (2004) which frames community engagement as *“a variety of approaches whereby public service bodies empower citizens to consider and express their views on how their particular needs are best met,”* ranging from giving residents a say in setting service priorities to actually **sharing decision-making authority** with them². In this view, community engagement encompasses any mechanism that lets citizens influence or partner in the design of services that affect them. This might include participatory planning forums, community advisory boards, or inviting residents to help shape library policies.

It is useful to distinguish **“community engagement” from traditional “outreach.”** Outreach often implies one-way communication—libraries pushing out information or services to attract users—whereas engagement implies a **two-way dialogue and partnership**. A University of Illinois task force, for instance, described outreach as primarily focused on raising awareness and usage of library resources (often via one-

time events or promotions), whereas community engagement is defined by “*collaboration... in a context of partnership and reciprocity*” for the public good ³ ⁴ . In practice, this means that rather than simply delivering programs to the community, an engaged library works *with* the community: listening to residents’ aspirations and concerns, **co-planning programs**, and leveraging both library and community assets to meet shared goals.

Varying scope: Some libraries interpret community engagement broadly as any initiative that builds relationships outside the walls – from attending neighborhood events to partnering with local agencies. Others apply the term to deeper forms of involvement such as “**community-led librarianship**,” where services are driven by ongoing consultation with underrepresented groups. A 2006 study in the UK found that true community engagement was not yet commonplace in libraries and often relied on individual staff champions; it identified modes ranging from using the library as a space for community activities, to involving community members in governance, to co-delivering projects with volunteers ⁵ ⁶ . Over a decade later, many U.S. public libraries have embraced community engagement as a core value, but the **depth of engagement can range:** from surface-level public relations campaigns to robust models of community co-ownership of library services. This spectrum makes clear why a precise definition matters – genuine engagement generally implies **ongoing, institutional commitment** to community collaboration, not just isolated outreach events.

Theoretical Foundations of Community Engagement

Community engagement in libraries is underpinned by several academic and theoretical frameworks, which help explain *why* and *how* this work creates value. Key foundations include **civic engagement theory**, **social capital theory**, and principles of **participatory design and co-creation**:

- **Civic Engagement and Democratic Theory:** Public libraries have long been seen as civic institutions that support democracy and an informed citizenry. In civic engagement theory, the emphasis is on individuals participating in public life and collective problem-solving. Libraries are increasingly positioning themselves as **facilitators of civic engagement** – hosting community forums, voter education drives, and dialogue on local issues. In fact, libraries can be viewed as “*one of the most tangible manifestations of civic engagement, a place that represents a social and community investment in learning and shared culture.*” ⁷ By providing space for public dialogue and by championing intellectual freedom, libraries embody the democratic ideal of an informed, engaged populace. Civic engagement theory suggests that when people have avenues to discuss issues and contribute to solutions, **community trust and democratic participation** increase. This is closely tied to the library’s mission to enable an informed community and aligns with initiatives like ALA’s *Libraries Transforming Communities*, which train librarians to moderate community conversations and position libraries as “*civic hubs*” fostering equitable engagement among diverse populations ⁸ .
- **Social Capital Theory:** The concept of *social capital* – popularized by Robert Putnam – refers to the networks of trust and reciprocity that enable communities to function effectively. High social capital is associated with more resilient, healthy communities. Libraries are increasingly studied through this lens, as they bring people together across social divides and build trust. Research in the past decade confirms that **libraries contribute to social capital by “bridging” diverse groups** ⁷ . For example, library events like multicultural festivals, community reads, or history projects can connect individuals of different ages, races, and backgrounds who might not otherwise meet, thereby strengthening the fabric of community relationships. During crises, this social capital becomes

tangible: people often turn to libraries for help not just for information, but because libraries are trusted spaces embedded in local networks ⁹ ¹⁰ . By cultivating weak ties (casual, cross-cutting social connections) as well as stronger bonds among neighbors, engaged libraries help build the **community cohesion and trust** that underpin collective problem-solving ¹¹ . In social capital terms, an engaged library serves as a hub of **bridging capital** – “critical community hubs that provide ‘a bastion of hope against stagnation.’” ¹² .

- **Participatory Design and Co-Creation:** Another theoretical influence is **participatory design**, an approach originating in design and urban planning but increasingly applied in LIS. Participatory design holds that services and systems are most effective when end-users (community members) are involved as active collaborators in the design process. In the library context, this translates to **co-creating library services with community input** rather than for the community in a top-down manner. Scholars argue this approach supports “co-creation, power sharing, and transformative relationships” between libraries and users ¹³ . By involving patrons in brainstorming and decision-making, libraries can generate “meaningful engagement that results in more inclusive services and deeply engaged relationships” with their community ¹⁴ . For instance, a library might convene teens to redesign a youth space (incorporating their ideas for decor, furniture, activities) or use community advisory committees to shape programming for different cultural groups. As library technologist Callan Bignoli notes, **participatory design implies shared ownership** of library innovations: it requires librarians to exercise humility and recognize patrons’ lived experiences as expertise, leading to services that truly reflect community needs and values ¹⁵ ¹⁶ . This approach aligns with emerging frameworks like *Design Justice*, which emphasize equitable participation in designing solutions, thereby directly tying engagement work to social justice and empowerment ¹⁷ .
- **Social Infrastructure and “Third Place” Theory:** Though not explicitly requested, it’s worth noting the broader sociological context. Libraries function as “third places” (Oldenburg’s term for informal public gathering spots aside from home or work) where community life flourishes. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg’s concept of **social infrastructure** similarly highlights libraries as critical physical spaces that foster social connections and resilience. These theories reinforce the importance of engagement: a library’s value is not just in its collections, but in its role as a social connector. Community engagement initiatives – from hosting local art nights to facilitating civil discourse – actively strengthen the library’s role as welcoming **public commons** where diverse people connect. This theoretical backdrop helps explain why libraries are expanding outreach and partnership roles: they are intentionally nurturing the social infrastructure of communities to combat isolation, distrust, and division.

In summary, theoretical frameworks from civics, sociology, and design converge to support community engagement as a practice that builds **empowered, connected communities**. Engaged libraries help develop civic agency among residents, build social trust across groups, and ensure services are equitable and user-informed. These concepts guide librarians in designing engagement strategies that are not only feel-good activities but are grounded in research about how democratic, healthy communities thrive.

Post-2021 Imperatives: Why Community Engagement Matters More Than Ever

Public libraries have always served their communities, but the period after 2021 has underscored the **urgent importance of genuine community engagement**. Several converging factors – the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, widening social inequalities, movements for racial justice, increasing political polarization, and the persistence of the digital divide – have all highlighted the library's crucial role in supporting and healing communities. Below, we discuss why community engagement has become a top priority in this context:

- **Bridging the Digital Divide:** The pandemic dramatically exposed gaps in digital access as work, schooling, and services moved online. Libraries emerged as key players in **digital equity efforts**, expanding Wi-Fi access, lending internet hotspots and devices, and teaching digital skills. An ALA report in 2022 documented that libraries “played an increasingly central role in expanding digital equity during the COVID-19 pandemic,” often through partnerships with local government and nonprofits ¹⁸. For example, in Tucson, Arizona, the public library teamed up with the city on “Tucson Connected,” providing internet service to families in need ¹⁹. Nationwide, 81% of public libraries already offered Wi-Fi outside their buildings pre-pandemic, but an additional 12% **extended Wi-Fi signals further or launched new access initiatives** in direct response to community need during COVID-19 ²⁰. Libraries also set up creative solutions like parking-lot Wi-Fi, “Wi-Fi on Wheels” bookmobiles broadcasting broadband, and even mesh networks reaching hundreds of homes ²⁰. This level of *engagement* – actively identifying who lacks access and partnering to deliver connectivity – goes well beyond passive service. It required libraries to **listen to their communities’ technology needs** and advocate for resources to meet them. Post-2021, with society’s digital reliance only growing, libraries continue to engage communities around **digital literacy** (e.g. helping seniors learn telehealth tools, teaching media literacy to all ages) and around **technology planning** (e.g. convening stakeholders to address local broadband gaps). In short, community engagement is crucial to ensure no one is left behind in the digital age – a mission starkly illuminated by the pandemic’s impacts ²¹.
- **Public Health and Crisis Response:** The pandemic also reinforced libraries’ roles as community anchors during crises. When COVID-19 hit, libraries rapidly pivoted to respond to urgent local needs. Many became “**vital lifelines to vulnerable community members, providing for immediate needs**” like distributing food, hygiene kits, or health information in addition to their usual services ²². For instance, some libraries served as COVID testing or vaccination sites; others delivered books and meals to homebound residents. This responsiveness is a form of engagement grounded in compassion and trust – libraries coordinated with public health agencies and mutual aid groups, leveraging their deep local connections. Even beyond COVID, libraries are increasingly active in addressing health and well-being. The U.S. Surgeon General’s 2023 advisory on the “*epidemic of loneliness*” resonates strongly with libraries’ mission ²³ ²⁴. Social isolation has severe health impacts, and libraries are explicitly working to combat it by creating opportunities for **social connection**. Whether it’s hosting community gardens, memory cafes for those with dementia, or intergenerational game nights, libraries are viewing such programs through a **public health lens** – as preventive measures to strengthen community social ties ²⁵ ¹¹. In one striking example, the Howard County Library System (MD) held a “Longest Table” event in 2023 where residents from all walks of life shared a meal at one massive table to spark conversations and new friendships ²⁶.

Such initiatives address loneliness and polarization simultaneously by physically bringing people together. Additionally, libraries have begun exploring **telehealth partnerships**, providing private spaces and connectivity for patrons to consult doctors remotely, recognizing that lack of internet or safe space can be a barrier to healthcare ²⁷ ²⁸ . All these efforts underscore that post-2021, libraries see community engagement as integral to community *resilience* – helping people weather not only pandemics, but also natural disasters, mental health crises, and other challenges. Engaging with local emergency planning, for example, or training staff in trauma-informed services, are new facets of a library's community engagement toolkit.

- **Advancing Social Justice and Equity:** The period around 2020–2021, marked by nationwide protests against racial injustice and a broader reckoning with systemic inequalities, has deeply influenced public libraries. Libraries serve *all* members of the public, and in recent years many have made explicit commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Community engagement is the vehicle through which these values translate into action. This can mean **partnering with marginalized communities** to develop programs that reflect their needs and heritage, ensuring the library truly welcomes and represents them. For example, libraries have worked with immigrant communities to offer bilingual storytimes and citizenship classes co-taught by community volunteers, or collaborated with Indigenous groups to incorporate Native history and language in library collections and events. Engaging the community is also essential to avoid “one-size-fits-all” services that may unwittingly exclude minority voices. A 2021 Public Library Association survey found that **67% of libraries wanted to create new roles in community engagement, outreach, and public programming** to better reach underserved populations ²⁹ . We also see libraries stepping up as conveners on issues of **racial and social justice**: facilitating dialogues on race, hosting exhibits on local Black history, or providing meeting space for community organizing. Notably, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded a project “Civic Engagement for Racial Justice in Public Libraries” (RJ@PL) to build librarians’ capacity to lead dialogues and actions toward positive social change ³⁰ . All these examples show libraries embracing a more **activist engagement** stance – not political partisanship, but a proactive posture in empowering underrepresented voices and addressing community inequities. The danger of *performative* equity statements without follow-through is well recognized; thus, libraries strive to embed engagement with communities of color, LGBTQ+ youth, persons with disabilities, and others into ongoing service design and evaluation. The rise of the *fine-free library* movement since 2019–2021 is a concrete illustration: by listening to community feedback and equity research (which showed fines disproportionately hurt low-income patrons and deter library use), many public libraries abolished late fees as an engagement and inclusion strategy. **Community engagement, at its best, pushes libraries to identify and dismantle barriers to access** alongside the community, fostering a more just library service.

- **Combatting Misinformation and Polarization:** The post-2020 environment in the U.S. has been characterized by intense political polarization, rampant misinformation online, and even coordinated campaigns to challenge information access (e.g. waves of book challenges and “gag orders” in some states limiting discussion of certain topics in schools and libraries ³¹). In such a climate, public libraries face both external challenges and an internal calling: to be bulwarks of trustworthy information and **facilitators of civil discourse**. Engaging the community here means actively stepping into the role of *mediator* and *educator*. Many libraries have begun hosting **community conversations on difficult topics** – from local police reform to climate change to public health measures – positioning the library as a neutral ground where diverse viewpoints can be aired respectfully. Indeed, librarians trained through initiatives like Libraries Transforming Communities

report taking on the task of “*mediating dialogue*” to defuse community tensions and heal divides ³². Staff model civility and empathy, intervening to keep conversations productive, and providing fact-based information to counter rumors ³³. This is no small task amidst “deepening political polarization” and heightened anxieties, but it is one that engaged libraries are increasingly undertaking ³³. By doing so, libraries aim to rebuild **trust** – between citizens, and between the public and institutions. As one commentator noted, libraries can serve as “*islands of trust*” in an era of declining trust in many institutions ³⁴. Similarly, with the surge in book banning efforts, some libraries have engaged youth in advocating for intellectual freedom – for instance, Brooklyn Public Library’s *Books Unbanned* initiative (launched 2022) invites teens nationwide to obtain a free e-card to access challenged books, actively engaging young people in the fight against censorship ³⁵. This kind of engagement not only provides a service (access to books) but also creates a community of young activists around the library’s mission. In summary, post-2021, community engagement is vital for libraries to navigate and mitigate the **social fractures** of our time – strengthening community bonds, promoting informed dialogue, and positioning the library as a trusted civic actor.

In light of these factors, it’s evident that community engagement is not a luxury or add-on for public libraries – it is central to their ability to fulfill their mission in the current environment. Engaging with the community enables libraries to stay responsive and relevant amid rapid change, to help tackle local problems (from digital inequity to public health to social fragmentation), and to demonstrate their value as **community catalysts and partners**. Next, we turn to how libraries are doing this work: the best practices and strategies that have emerged for effective community engagement.

Best Practices and Strategies for Effective Community Engagement

Successfully engaging the community requires thoughtful strategies and a willingness to re-envision traditional library services. Research and field experience point to several **best practices** for libraries seeking to deepen their community engagement. These practices span the entire process – from understanding the community, to designing inclusive programs, to sustaining partnerships. Below we outline key strategies, with evidence and examples:

1. Proactively Identify Community Needs: Effective engagement starts with **listening to the community**. Rather than planning services based on assumptions, libraries are using various techniques to hear directly from residents about their needs, interests, and concerns. Traditional methods include surveys, focus groups, and public meetings, but libraries are also getting creative: going out “on the streets” to ask questions, embedding librarians in community events, and leveraging informal conversations as data. The Crittenden County Public Library in Marion, KY offers a compelling example. Library staff there began by convening a community focus group that drew a “*great cross-section of our community*” who were “*brutally honest*” about how the library could better serve them ³⁶. Realizing some voices were still missing (since not everyone would attend a focus group), staff then developed a short questionnaire and took advantage of a local holiday parade – they literally **worked the sidewalks**, asking parade-goers for input on how they wanted the library to grow ³⁷. They also posted an interactive whiteboard in the library lobby where visitors could leave sticky-note suggestions ³⁸. As a result of these combined efforts, the library gathered “*pages and pages of community feedback*” to inform a new strategic plan ³⁸. This illustrates the dedication to meeting people **where they are** – both physically and culturally – to solicit input. Similarly, San José Public Library (CA) initiated an ongoing listening campaign, dispatching staff quarterly to public gatherings across the city to chat with residents and then publishing “*What We’ve Learned From Listening to our Neighbors*” reports summarizing community feedback ³⁹. The lesson is clear: go beyond passive surveys; engage in

active listening through conversations, focus groups, town halls, suggestion boards, social media interactions, and more. In doing so, libraries not only obtain richer insight into community needs (including needs that might be latent or overlooked), but also signal to the community that their voices matter – which in itself builds trust and willingness to engage.

2. Build Authentic Partnerships: Community engagement is a team effort. Libraries maximize their impact by collaborating with a wide range of **partners** – local government agencies, schools, nonprofits, businesses, and community groups. Partnerships can extend a library's reach to new audiences and bring in complementary expertise. Best practice is to form partnerships that are **mutually beneficial** and rooted in shared goals for the community (embodying the reciprocity mentioned in the Carnegie definition ³). For example, many libraries partner with public school districts to align efforts around student success, or with parks and recreation departments to co-host events. During the pandemic, numerous libraries partnered with health departments to disseminate accurate information and even to host vaccination clinics in library meeting rooms. In one notable collaboration addressing digital equity, *Pima County Public Library (Tucson, AZ)* worked with the city government and internet providers to launch “Tucson Connected” – a program that identified households without broadband and connected them with free or low-cost service ¹⁹. The library's deep community knowledge and trust complemented the city's infrastructure resources. Another innovative example is libraries partnering with social service agencies: in Denver and other cities, public libraries have embedded social workers or public health nurses on staff through partnership arrangements, allowing libraries to better engage patrons experiencing homelessness, mental health issues, or other challenges by directly connecting them to services. **Joint programming** is a common and effective model – e.g., a library working with a local historical society to run a community oral history project (marrying the library's archival skills with the society's connections to elders), or with a farmer's market to offer “storytime at the market” (introducing library services to new families while supporting market attendance). The key to partnerships is clarity of roles and open communication. Libraries should approach potential partners by first understanding their mission and needs, and then identifying overlap with library goals. When done well, partnerships not only avoid duplication of effort in the community, they also **signal unity** – showing residents that community institutions are working together in their interest, which can boost public confidence and engagement.

3. Center the Community in Program Design (Co-Creation): A user-centered, co-creative approach to developing library services is a hallmark of deep engagement. Rather than designing programs in a vacuum, libraries invite community members to **shape programming and services together**. This participatory ethos can take many forms. One is establishing **advisory committees or focus groups** for key user segments – for instance, a Teen Advisory Board that not only gives input but actually plans and leads portions of teen programming, or a Spanish-speaking community advisory group that guides the library on improving outreach to Latinx residents. Another approach is conducting “*participatory design workshops*” – structured brainstorming sessions where library staff and patrons (or even non-users) jointly develop ideas. The literature emphasizes that participatory design requires sharing power: libraries must be willing to incorporate community ideas even if they challenge the status quo. A success story comes from a small library in New Hampshire: the James A. Tuttle Library in Antrim held focus groups early in the COVID pandemic to discuss what residents needed most; hearing that many seniors were struggling with food insecurity, the library **launched a program to deliver food to seniors**, with volunteers and patrons co-creating the logistics (one outcome: “more seniors are now coming to the library once a month to pick up sacks of food,” noted a librarian, highlighting that the library went beyond books to meet a community need) ¹² ⁴⁰. Co-created services often resonate more and have stronger community buy-in because they were *designed with the community's own ideas*. Even on a smaller scale, librarians are using human-centered

design methods like journey mapping and empathy interviews with patrons to tweak services for better experience. For example, **“community co-design”** principles have been used to redesign library spaces: in Contra Costa County (CA), librarians consulted teens in designing a new youth media lab, resulting in a space teens feel is truly theirs. The overarching best practice is to **involve the community as early as possible** – in planning and needs assessment – and to treat community members as collaborators with valuable expertise on their own lives. This not only leads to more responsive programs, but it transforms the relationship between library and community into one of shared ownership.

4. Prioritize Inclusion and Equity in Engagement: Engaging the *whole* community means paying special attention to who might be excluded or marginalized if we aren’t intentional. Best practices call for embedding equity and inclusion into every engagement effort. This involves both outreach and internal changes. On the outreach side, libraries are adapting strategies to reach those who typically do not or cannot use the library: for example, **offering programs in multiple languages**, conducting outreach at community centers, churches, or cultural festivals, and using diverse media channels (ethnic radio, neighborhood Facebook groups, etc.) to get the word out. It also means tailoring programs to different needs – e.g., ensuring that events are at accessible times and locations (a working parent may not attend a weekday morning program, so perhaps a weekend or evening community dialogue is needed). Another tactic is **bringing services to non-traditional venues**: some libraries have set up pop-up libraries in laundromats, barbershops, or apartment complexes, both to provide services and to spark conversations with people in those settings. On the internal side, inclusion means building a staff culture and competency for engaging with diverse communities. This can require training in cultural humility, hiring staff who reflect community demographics, and addressing any systemic barriers (like library policies that inadvertently deter some groups). For instance, **eliminating late fines**, as mentioned earlier, was partly driven by an inclusion goal – making families who feared fines feel welcome again. Engaged libraries also watch out for **“performative” engagement** or tokenism: it’s not enough to invite one person of color onto a committee or hold a single event for a minority group and declare success. Instead, the aim is sustained relationships and embedding inclusivity in all services. A recent ALA report on small/rural libraries identified *“promoting inclusion”* as a core step, noting that effective community engagement work means **removing barriers so that excluded populations can fully participate in civic life and feel a sense of belonging** ¹² . One example is the Tryon Public Library in Oklahoma: when staff learned through conversations that many local seniors felt isolated and had trouble accessing food, the library created a program specifically for older adults to pick up free food at the library or get it delivered – meeting a basic need and in turn bringing more seniors *into* the library community ¹² . By deliberately engaging an excluded group (low-income elderly residents), the library demonstrated inclusivity in action. In summary, inclusion-focused engagement requires **meeting people where they are, in their language, with respect for their culture and circumstances**, and designing services that lower barriers to participation.

5. Facilitate Dialogue and Empower Community Voice: One of the most powerful roles an engaged library can play is that of a **facilitator of community conversation and action**. Rather than the library always being the “doer,” sometimes the library’s contribution is to convene residents, provide information resources, and let the community steer the dialogue. The ALA’s *Libraries Transforming Communities* program has trained hundreds of librarians in techniques of deliberative dialogue, forum facilitation, and conflict resolution. The rationale is that libraries, as trusted neutral spaces, are ideal places to tackle **sensitive or contentious issues** constructively. Best practices here include using established dialogue models (e.g., National Issues Forums, World Café, or Harwood Institute’s community conversation model), setting ground rules for respectful discussion, and often partnering with experienced facilitators or mediators when available. The example of Owls Head Village Library in Maine is instructive: this small library learned that a

planned airport expansion was generating tension in their town, so with grant support they **hired an external moderator and convened a public forum** with a panel of experts to ensure facts were presented and all sides heard ⁴¹ ⁴². Remarkably, *140 people (in a tiny town) showed up*, and the event not only provided information but *“cemented the library’s reputation as a reliable place to go for factual information and civil deliberation.”* ⁴³ This illustrates how a library can model productive civic engagement. Likewise, many libraries have launched **community reading programs (“One Book, One Community”) followed by town discussions** on themes like racial justice or immigration, giving neighbors a chance to learn and speak together. In these cases, the library isn’t advocating a position but advocating the *process* of informed dialogue. By doing so, libraries empower community members to voice their own opinions, learn from each other, and potentially find common ground or solutions. The best practice is thus to use the library’s reputation for trust and knowledge as a springboard for **community-led conversations and initiatives**. Some libraries even train community volunteers to lead discussion circles or serve as *Community Ambassadors* who gather input and share library information in their own social networks (a peer-to-peer engagement model). Overall, facilitating dialogue elevates the library from a content provider to a **civic facilitator** – which in turn strengthens the community’s capacity to address its own issues.

6. Ensure Accessibility and Remove Barriers: Engagement efforts must be accessible in the broadest sense. This means considering physical accessibility (ADA-compliant venues, virtual options for those who can’t attend in person), linguistic accessibility (translation, interpretation for non-English-speaking community members), and even informational accessibility (explaining library services or engagement opportunities in clear, jargon-free language). During the pandemic, libraries learned the importance of offering **hybrid programs** – e.g. a community forum both in-person and via Zoom – to include people who may lack transportation or have health concerns. Making engagement accessible also involves consistency and follow-through. If a library starts a series of neighborhood meetings, for example, they should be held at varied times and locations to allow different people to participate, and outcomes should be reported back to the community (closing the feedback loop). Additionally, offering **support services like childcare, transportation vouchers, or refreshments** at community meetings can significantly boost participation by reducing common barriers. Many libraries found success by bringing programming to **non-traditional locations** as noted, but also by adapting formats – for instance, turning an open-house into a drop-in format so that busy residents could stop by when convenient, or creating **interactive online surveys** for those who prefer digital engagement. The guiding principle is to **make it easy and inviting for people to engage**, whatever their circumstances. A practical example: when Seattle Public Library undertook a strategic planning engagement, they provided translated materials in several languages, ensured meetings were held in diverse neighborhoods (not just the central library), and partnered with community liaisons from immigrant communities to personally invite and encourage their constituents to join – resulting in far more inclusive input than a standard public meeting would have. By reducing barriers and actively welcoming all segments of the community, libraries demonstrate the sincerity of their engagement, which builds trust and richer participation.

7. Evaluate and Sustain Engagement Efforts: Finally, best practices involve treating community engagement as an **ongoing process** rather than a one-off project. This means libraries should evaluate their engagement activities and use what they learn to refine future efforts. Surveys or focus groups can assess whether participants felt heard and whether the library’s actions met their expectations. Outcome measures might include not just attendance numbers, but qualitative indicators like *“patrons report feeling more connected to their community after participating”* or instances of community-led initiatives emerging from library-facilitated meetings. Documenting success stories helps make the case to funders or governing boards that engagement has tangible benefits (such as new partnerships formed, increased library

membership in target groups, or community problems solved). Sustaining engagement also requires **institutional commitment**: allocating staff time (some libraries have created full-time Community Engagement Librarian positions), budgeting for engagement activities (which might involve travel, meeting supplies, etc.), and embedding engagement goals in the library's strategic plan and policies. Importantly, libraries must be prepared to show **responsiveness** – when community input is given, the library should, whenever feasible, act on it or explain transparently why it can or cannot do so. Nothing will shut down future engagement faster than a community feeling that their feedback went into a “black hole.” Conversely, when people see that their library *crafts services or makes changes based on their input*, their sense of ownership and loyalty to the library grows. Many libraries publish engagement reports or “You Said, We Did” summaries to illustrate this responsiveness. Over time, sustained engagement transforms the library's image in the community: it's no longer just a place to get books or free Wi-Fi, but a **partner in community life and problem-solving**. In the words of one rural librarian, through engagement their library went from being seen as “just a place for books” to being regarded as “*a critical community hub ... a bastion of hope against stagnation.*”¹² . That is the long-term payoff of best-practice community engagement.

These strategies – needs assessment, partnerships, co-creation, inclusion, dialogue facilitation, accessibility, and evaluation – often work in tandem. For instance, a library might identify a need (say, teen mental health support) by listening sessions, convene partners (schools, health clinics), co-design a program with teens (like a teen-led wellness book club), ensure inclusion (target outreach to marginalized youth, provide food and safe space), facilitate the sessions with open conversation, and then evaluate impacts (did participants report better coping or connection?). This holistic approach requires effort and flexibility, but numerous case studies show that when libraries implement these practices, the result is **stronger relationships and more relevant services**, ultimately advancing both the library's mission and the community's well-being.

Challenges and Pitfalls in Community Engagement

While the benefits of community engagement are clear, it is not without challenges. Libraries often encounter obstacles and must navigate pitfalls when pursuing deeper engagement. Recognizing these common issues can help practitioners plan for them and avoid discouragement. Here we discuss some of the major challenges and ways libraries address them:

- **Avoiding “Performative” Engagement:** A frequent pitfall is engagement that is *in name only*, lacking genuine follow-through or impact. For example, a library might hold a community input session because it's trendy to do so, but then shelve the suggestions and proceed with a predetermined plan. Such performative engagement can breed cynicism – community members may feel the library “checked the box” of asking for input but didn't truly listen. **Tokenism** is a related danger: inviting one or two representatives from a community group as a symbolic gesture rather than integrating their voices into decision-making in a meaningful way. To avoid this, libraries need to be transparent about how input will be used, and whenever possible, **show results** (even small wins) that came directly from community suggestions. It's also important to set realistic expectations: not every idea can be implemented, but acknowledging and responding to input (even with an explanation of constraints) shows respect. Building trust requires consistency; if people invest time to engage, the library must demonstrate it values that by taking action or at least having further dialogue. One recommended practice is to start with **small, pilot projects based on community input** – this creates early successes and proves the model, which can then justify scaling up engagement efforts.

- **Reaching the Unengaged and Underrepresented:** By nature, voluntary engagement efforts risk hearing mostly from the most active library users or those with time and confidence to participate. A major challenge is how to **engage the voices of those who are typically absent** – e.g., low-income families juggling multiple jobs, teens or immigrants who may feel the library isn't for them, people with disabilities who face logistical hurdles, or those who simply aren't aware of opportunities to engage. If a library only listens to its existing patrons or vocal community leaders, it can perpetuate inequities by ignoring quieter or disenfranchised groups. To tackle this, libraries employ targeted outreach and relationship-building. This could involve working with community organizers or cultural brokers who have trust in specific communities to invite their participation. It might mean hosting engagement events in alternative venues as described, or providing incentives (a meal, childcare, or even library fine forgiveness) to encourage attendance. In some cases, libraries might gather input through intermediaries – for instance, surveying social service clients via a partner agency to hear from people who don't visit the library. **Language and cultural barriers** need careful attention: offering interpretation at forums or translating surveys can significantly broaden who engages. Patience is key; trust with historically marginalized communities must be earned over time. The "Working Together" project (a community-led libraries initiative in Canada in the 2000s) found that librarians first had to spend considerable time simply being present in community spaces and listening informally before attempting any formal programs – a reminder that engagement is a gradual relationship-building process. In short, libraries must go the extra mile to **include the excluded**, or else community engagement efforts risk reinforcing the status quo. When done right, however, engagement can empower those very groups – giving them a platform to influence library services so that they better meet their needs.
- **Institutional Culture and Resistance:** Not all librarians or library boards immediately embrace community engagement, especially if it calls for doing things very differently. Common internal challenges include staff resistance (*"that's not what I was trained for; I'm here to manage the collection, not facilitate town halls"*), fear of controversy (*"if we host that program, it might upset some patrons or officials"*), and uncertainty about new roles. Traditional library performance metrics (circulation, gate count) may not capture the value of a community conversation or a partnership meeting, leading some to question whether engagement is "real work." Overcoming this requires **leadership and training**. Library leaders need to clearly articulate why engagement aligns with the library's mission and strategic goals, and they should celebrate engagement successes as equally important as circulation stats. Training and professional development can equip staff with new skills in facilitation, outreach, or cross-cultural communication – increasing confidence. Moreover, libraries can start by **building on staff strengths and passions**: for instance, a children's librarian who loves storytelling might excel at doing storytimes in the farmers market (outreach), while a reference librarian with a sociology background might become the point person for community needs research. By distributing engagement responsibilities according to interest, and showing staff the positive feedback from community interactions, resistance often decreases. It's also important to adjust workloads – engagement takes time, so something might need to come off a staff member's plate. Hiring practices are starting to value "community experience" and language skills, which brings in new staff more naturally oriented to engagement. For governing boards or city officials worried about libraries getting "too involved" in community issues, it can help to share data and stories from other libraries demonstrating community engagement's payoff (e.g., improved public support for the library, higher program attendance after engagement-informed changes, etc.). In summary, shifting institutional culture to one of proactive engagement is a challenge that requires change management, but many libraries have navigated it by building internal buy-in step by step.

- **Resource Constraints:** Community engagement is **resource-intensive**. It demands staff time, often outside the building; it may require funds for meeting supplies, translation services, outreach materials, or hiring facilitators; and it involves sustained effort (not just one event). Small and rural libraries in particular might worry they don't have enough staff or budget to undertake large engagement initiatives. This is a legitimate challenge – however, creative approaches and external support can help. The case of the small libraries in the ALA's LTC project shows that even libraries with 1-2 staff leveraged **grant funding** and free training to kickstart engagement projects ⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ . Consortiums and state libraries often offer shared resources, such as template surveys or facilitation training, to lower the cost for individual libraries. Volunteers and Friends of the Library groups can also support engagement events (e.g., volunteering at community fairs or helping organize a forum). The key is to integrate engagement into normal operations so it doesn't feel entirely "additive." For example, instead of seeing outreach as extra work, a library might schedule each staff member to spend two hours a week outside the building (at a community center or just walking the neighborhood) and treat that as part of their service desk rotation. Technology can also ease some burdens: social media engagement, if used well, allows libraries to interact with community members broadly at little cost – though it should complement, not replace, face-to-face engagement. Another resource consideration is **space**: hosting big community events may strain library facilities, so libraries have to either adapt their space (flexible furniture, etc.) or partner with other venues. Despite tight resources, many libraries find that engagement work, once started, attracts **new resources** in the long run – for instance, positive community engagement can lead to increased funding support from municipal governments or grants, as the library is seen as addressing critical community needs. Managing scope and expectations is crucial: start small and scale up as capacity allows.

- **Handling Controversy and Conflict:** Engaging with real community issues means sometimes wading into controversy. Libraries may face backlash for programs on divisive topics or for taking inclusive stances (as seen in recent protests over drag queen storytimes or racial equity trainings). It can indeed be a fine line for a public library to walk: how to be bold in fostering dialogue and inclusion without alienating portions of the community or jeopardizing political support. The **risk of conflict** is a challenge that must be anticipated. Best practices here include having strong **policies and communication plans**. For example, a library should have clear behavior and meeting room policies to handle contentious public meetings (like what happens if someone disrupts a community forum). Staff should be trained in de-escalation techniques. When planning an event on a sensitive issue, many libraries quietly coordinate with local law enforcement or community mediators as a precaution, and ensure that the event format is structured to prevent shouting matches (e.g., use of trained facilitators, breakouts, or having attendees write questions on cards). Another tactic is to frame the library's role carefully: *the library is not endorsing a position, but providing a space for education and discussion*. Emphasizing the library's **core values (intellectual freedom, access to information, serving all people)** can help communicate why the library might host a LGBTQ+ pride event or a Black Lives Matter book circle – it's about serving those community members and enabling free expression, which are within the library's mandate. Even so, some controversies may arise, and libraries need to be prepared to weather them with backing from their boards and allies. Engaging community partners can also distribute the perceived ownership of an event (for instance, co-sponsoring with the League of Women Voters a forum on voting rights might attract less ire than if the library did it alone). Despite these challenges, libraries that have stood firm in their engagement initiatives often earn **deep respect from the community** segments they supported, and in time, even skeptics may come around as they see the library managing these issues

professionally. Nonetheless, conflict management is an inherent part of community engagement in a polarized era – it requires courage, tact, and a clear grounding in the library’s mission.

- **Measuring Impact and Communicating Success:** A subtle challenge is capturing the outcomes of community engagement. Traditional metrics (attendance, circulation) may not fully reflect the value of a new partnership or a community conversation series. Libraries sometimes struggle to articulate success stories beyond anecdotes. It’s important to develop some **qualitative and quantitative indicators** for engagement. Qualitatively, collecting personal stories or testimonials can illustrate impact – e.g., a patron might write, “After the library’s town hall, I met neighbors I never knew and we started a community garden together,” which shows community-building at work. Quantitatively, libraries can track things like the number of new library cards issued in an outreach drive, diversity of program participants (are we engaging new demographics?), or follow-on community actions (did that civic forum lead to a task force or new volunteers?). Communicating these successes to stakeholders (funders, city officials, the general public) is key to sustaining support. The challenge is that engagement outcomes (like increased social capital or civic confidence) are harder to measure than outputs. Libraries are addressing this by using tools like the **PLA’s Project Outcome surveys**, customizing them to measure things like “I feel more connected to my community after this program” or “I learned about local resources I didn’t know before.” Some academic-library collaborations are also looking at *social impact metrics* for libraries. While still evolving, the profession is increasingly focused on capturing the difference engagement makes. In the meantime, one practical approach is to produce **annual community impact reports** that weave statistics with narrative – highlighting, for instance, that “X number of community members contributed to our strategic plan via forums and surveys, leading to these 3 new services...,” or “Our partnership with the health clinic reached 200 families with critical health information.” Such reporting keeps engagement accountable and visible.

In navigating these challenges, libraries should remember that **incremental progress is still progress**. Community engagement is complex human work; setbacks or slow response are normal. What matters is to remain committed, reflect on lessons learned, and adapt. Often, overcoming one challenge (say, getting reluctant staff on board) makes the next engagement effort easier. Over time, a library that weaves community engagement into its DNA will find that many initial challenges diminish – the community grows to expect and appreciate the library’s engagement, more partners volunteer help, and staff see it as a rewarding part of their job. As with any relationship-driven work, trust and success accrue gradually.

Recent Case Studies and Initiatives (Post-2021)

To illustrate how U.S. public libraries are putting these principles into practice, we present a selection of **recent community engagement initiatives** launched or enhanced after 2021. These case examples – drawn from library press releases, blogs, and reports – demonstrate the diversity of approaches and the tangible outcomes of engagement work:

- **San José Public Library (California) – Community Listening Initiative (2022–Present):** SJPL has implemented an ongoing program where library staff **regularly attend neighborhood events** (street fairs, cultural festivals, school events) to engage residents in casual conversation and gather feedback. Each quarter, the library publishes a blog post titled “*Community Engagement: What We’ve Learned From Listening to our Neighbors and Communities*,” summarizing key themes heard across the city ³⁹. For example, in Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 reports, SJPL noted residents’ desires for more

after-school activities for teens and expanded tech classes for seniors, which informed the library's program planning. This initiative exemplifies continuous engagement as a *mindset*: "Always be listening" is the motto. It has helped the library identify emerging issues in different zip codes and tailor services accordingly, while also raising the library's visibility by showing up wherever the community gathers.

- **Crittenden County Public Library (Kentucky) – Crowdsourcing a Strategic Plan (2021):** As described earlier, this small rural library in Marion, KY took a **multi-pronged approach to gather community input** on its future direction. Starting in 2021, they held a focus group representing various community sectors, followed by deploying surveys during a town parade and in-library feedback stations ⁴⁶ ⁴⁷. The community's "brutally honest" feedback (including critiques of library services and suggestions for new ones) led to hundreds of comments – literally "*pages and pages of community feedback*" – which the library and its board used to craft a new strategic plan aligned with local needs ³⁸. This plan has since guided the library in launching new programs (such as career workshops and a local history digitization project) that directly respond to citizen input. The case shows how even libraries with limited resources can genuinely empower their community to shape library priorities.
- **Howard County Library System (Maryland) – "The Longest Table" (2023):** In September 2023, HCLS organized an ambitious community dining event called **The Longest Table**, where over 300 residents sat at one continuous table for a meal and conversation. The library partnered with local businesses and nonprofits to host the dinner in a public space, with facilitation prompts to guide people to discuss community aspirations and challenges with someone new. As pictured in *Library Journal*, the event brought together guests of diverse ages and backgrounds, literally "*bringing people together*" over a meal ²⁶. Evaluations indicated many participants made new social connections and learned about library resources during the event. The success of Longest Table led the library to plan follow-up "table talk" programs in branches. This case highlights an innovative format for community engagement – using food and dialogue to combat social isolation (a pressing health issue) and strengthen social cohesion in the county.
- **Brooklyn Public Library (New York) – Books Unbanned (2022):** In response to the surge in book bans and challenges nationwide, BPL launched **Books Unbanned** in April 2022, an initiative granting any U.S. teen (ages 13–21) a free BPL e-card to access the library's entire electronic collection, including frequently challenged titles ³⁵. Beyond the service itself, BPL assembled a Teen Intellectual Freedom Council – a group of young people from Brooklyn and around the country – to advise and advocate on the issue of censorship. This council has hosted virtual town halls for peers and even appeared in media to speak about the right to read. The initiative represents community engagement on a broad scale: engaging youth *beyond* the local community as partners in addressing a national issue. As of early 2025, BPL reported nearly 10,000 teens had obtained Unbanned library cards and accessed over 330,000 books through the program ⁴⁸. While not a traditional local program, Books Unbanned illustrates how a library can engage a community of interest (young readers and free-speech advocates) to stand up for shared values, thereby extending the library's impact and building a community of supporters well outside city limits.
- **Pima County Public Library (Arizona) – Tucson Connected Digital Equity Initiative (2021):** Pima County Public Library played a key role in **Tucson Connected**, a city-led initiative in 2021–22 to expand internet access in underserved neighborhoods. The library's existing knowledge of areas

with high Wi-Fi usage and unmet needs informed where to target efforts. Through this partnership, a wide-area mesh Wi-Fi network was created that brought free internet to around 200 households in one pilot neighborhood ²⁰. The library also loaned out hundreds of hotspots and increased outreach via its bookmobile (equipped with satellite internet) to rural areas. By engaging with city officials and tech partners, the library ensured community voices were included in digital equity planning – for instance, hosting community meetings where residents without internet could describe the impact on their lives, which helped secure additional funding. This case underscores how libraries can convene and lead on bridging the digital divide, leveraging both anecdotal evidence and data to drive community-focused solutions.

- **W.J. Niederkorn Library (Wisconsin) – Dialogues on Racial Equity (2021–22):** The public library in Port Washington, WI, embraced the role of dialogue facilitator on sensitive community issues. In late 2021, amid national conversations about race, the library hosted a series of **community conversations on racial justice and implicit bias**, moderated by trained facilitators. These events were part of the library's grant-funded project via the LTC initiative. As noted in a project report, *“staff at small and rural libraries are showing how their institutions can help defuse community tensions, heal community wounds, and strengthen community bonds”* by *“mediating dialogue and serving as sites of conflict prevention and resolution.”* ³² At Niederkorn Library, turnout was modest but included people of differing viewpoints who rarely spoke to each other elsewhere. Post-dialogue surveys showed participants felt the library provided a safe space for hard conversations and were interested in more forums on other divisive topics. The library's visibility as a community problem-solver rose, and it has since partnered with a local interfaith group to continue dialogues on other subjects (like community policing). This example illustrates a library stepping directly into the **civic arena to foster understanding**, with careful planning to navigate controversy.

Each of these cases demonstrates a different facet of community engagement: listening and information-gathering (San José), participatory planning (Crittenden County), social cohesion events (Howard County), advocacy and youth engagement (Brooklyn), digital partnership (Pima County), and civic dialogue (Port Washington). What they share is a commitment to **meeting community needs through collaboration and innovation**, and a willingness to expand the library's role beyond traditional boundaries. They also all began or evolved after 2021, showing how libraries are responding to contemporary challenges with fresh approaches.

For readers interested in further examples, resources like the Public Library Association's awards and the programming guides on [ProgrammingLibrarian.org](https://www.programminglibrarian.org) regularly highlight innovative community engagement projects nationwide. From libraries hosting “repair cafes” (engaging the community in sustainability) to those embedding librarians in city halls (bringing library values into local governance), the possibilities for engagement are vast. The cases above provide inspiration and real-world evidence that **community engagement, when done thoughtfully, can transform both the library and the community for the better**.

Conclusion

“Community engagement” in public libraries is far more than a buzzword – it encapsulates a fundamental evolution in how libraries relate to the public. As we have seen, it involves a shift from passive service provision to active partnership, rooted in definitions that stress collaboration, empowerment, and mutual benefit. The theoretical foundations from civic engagement, social capital, and participatory design provide

a rationale for why this approach is effective: it builds trust, social cohesion, and ensures library services are attuned to real community needs.

Post-2021, the stakes for community engagement are especially high. Libraries are helping communities recover from a global pandemic, adapt to rapid technological change, confront social injustices, and bridge deep societal divides. In this context, engagement is not optional – it is central to libraries remaining relevant and resilient. By stepping up as **community educators, connectors, and facilitators**, libraries have proven they can address issues as varied as digital exclusion, public health misinformation, and neighborhood polarization. The best practices outlined – from listening and co-creating to partnering and including – serve as a roadmap for libraries to follow, though each library must tailor strategies to its unique community context.

The path is not without challenges. It requires continuous effort, cultural shifts within institutions, and sometimes the courage to face controversy. However, the case studies presented show that even modest steps can yield significant dividends: stronger strategic plans, new community relationships, heightened public trust, and tangible improvements in people's lives. When a library patron says, "I now see the library as the heart of our community," or a local leader remarks that the library is "*a bastion of hope*" in the town ¹², these are testaments to the power of true community engagement.

For MLIS students and emerging professionals, the implications are clear. The skill set of librarianship now extends beyond information expertise to include **community development skills**: facilitation, outreach, cross-cultural communication, advocacy, and collaborative leadership. Libraries are learning organizations embedded in their communities, and librarians are becoming conveners and co-creators alongside citizens. By understanding the principles and practices discussed, future library leaders can champion engagement initiatives that keep libraries at the forefront of positive community change.

In sum, community engagement reaffirms the public library's historic mission – to be "**democratic institutions**" serving the common good – while reinventing the methods to fulfill that mission in the 21st century ⁸. It transforms libraries from passive cultural repositories into **active civic platforms** where knowledge is not just consumed, but created and applied to improve community life. As public libraries continue to evolve, their success will increasingly be measured not only by books lent or computers provided, but by the strength of the relationships and outcomes they cultivate in their communities. The examples and analysis provided here should equip graduate students and practitioners to critically engage with this concept and, ultimately, to put it into action in their own library environments.

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