



Public Library Association

Project Outcome

FINAL EVALUATION FINDINGS

Introduction

Evaluative evidence suggests that public libraries participating in Project Outcome are engaging in more outcome-based planning, decision-making, accountability, and community engagement; and their supports, processes, and cultures are evolving in ways that reflect and facilitate the institutionalization of such change. Evidence also suggests the initiative has played a significant role in these trends, by making accessible tools and resources many libraries find helpful for collecting and using outcome data.

Project Outcome's goal is to transform strategic decision making, planning, and advocacy efforts at public libraries by making accessible the tools and resources they need to collect and use outcome data. Project Outcome is led by the Public Library Association (PLA) and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

According to Project Outcome's Theory of Change, if PLA provides tools and resources to support the collection and use of library outcome data and engages the broader public library field to support outcome measurement, there will be increased belief in the importance of outcome measurement; increased engagement in outcome measurement; and increased use of outcome data for program improvement, planning and decision making, advocacy and community engagement, and partner engagement within public libraries. These increases will, in turn, result in increased library funding and library-community alignment, as well as positive changes for communities and increased local- and field-level support for outcome measurement.

This document summarizes 16 key findings related to outcome progress and implementation experiences.

Data were collected using the following methods:

- Online participant survey ($n=1,435$; 32% of all individuals registered with Project Outcome by October 2017)
- Interview with outcome data users ($n=8$)
- Interviews with state library agencies (SLAs) ($n=10$ interviews with 20 individuals)
- Administrative data provided by PLA
- Early survey data collected from participants throughout the launch period

The cornerstones of Project Outcome are:

- 1) a set of easily deployable patron surveys, corresponding to different types of library programs, that were developed and piloted by field experts comprising PLA's Performance Measurement Task Force
- 2) a web-based portal for data entry, automated analysis and reporting, and interactive data visualizations

An outcome refers to a specific benefit that results from a library program or service. Outcomes are often expressed as changes that individuals perceive in themselves—like new or improved knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, or status.

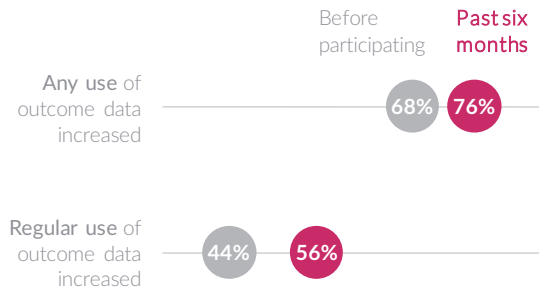
Outcome data refers to information that is collected in order to understand what changes are happening.

Participation Outcomes

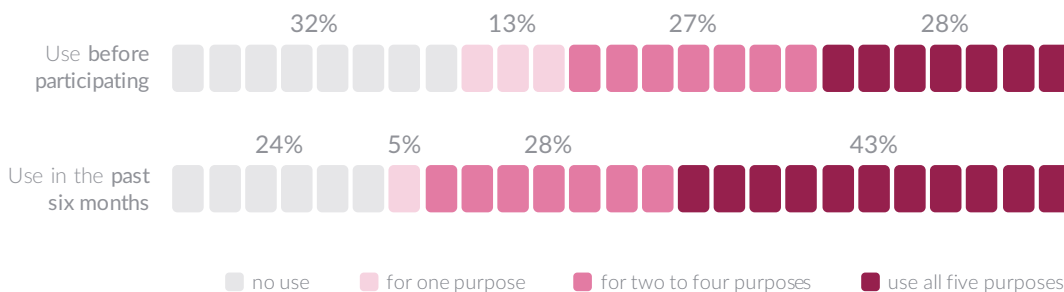
1. Project Outcome helps increase use of library outcome data and diversify the ways such data are used.

Among all responding libraries (n=760), there were gains in use of outcome data for any purpose—including program improvement, communicating the value of the library to funders or decision makers, communicating the value of the library to the public, informing or measuring progress on strategic plans, or supporting or engaging partners. More libraries reported use of outcome data in the past six months than they did before Project Outcome. “Any use” (using outcome data once or twice) increased from 68% to 76%, and “regular use” (more than twice or regularly) increased from 44% to 56%.

Libraries also made gains in the number of purposes for which they used outcome data—35% used outcome data for more purposes in the past six months than they did before participating in Project Outcome. Furthermore, use of outcome data for all five purposes increased from 28% to 43% of libraries, and use for one purpose decreased from 13% to 5%.



Among 760 responding libraries



KEY FINDINGS

Participation Outcomes

2. Project Outcome significantly contributes to how much participants value using outcome data.

Responding individuals (n=1,238) value using outcome data for the above purposes more after participating in Project Outcome compared to before participating, to a statistically significant degree. The observed increase in value was significantly larger among those who reported their library used a Project Outcome survey to collect outcome data in the past six months and those who reported their library used outcome data in the past six months.

Libraries that experienced these impacts made up over half (60%) of those that used outcome data.

3. Most responding libraries that used outcome data report benefits from such use.

Among responding libraries that had used outcome data during the past six months for the purposes listed above (n=395), 60% believe such use helped them have a bigger impact on the people who used their programs or services, helped them reach more people with the same resources, or helped them acquire additional resources for the library (monetary or non-monetary).

Slightly more than half reported that using outcome data **helped the library have a bigger impact.**

Out of 395 libraries

53%

A little less than half reported it **helped the library reach more people with the same amount of resources**, possibly as a result of better marketing.

48%

More than one third of libraries reported it **led to the library either getting more funding or non-monetary resources** from a new or prior source.

45%

34% monetary

33% non-monetary

4. Project Outcome contributes to increased management supports for outcome measurement and use at participating libraries.

Among responding libraries that had used outcome data during the past six months (n=323), there was an increase in the number of libraries that allotted time on board and staff meeting agendas to discuss outcome-based results (32% before participating to 50% since), supported an opportunity for staff to come together and share experiences and ideas related to outcome measurement and use (37% to 47%), and assigned staff time to outcome measurement (52% to 56%).

Several responding libraries also cited incorporation of outcome measurement into the library's strategic plan or planning process as a form of institutional support for outcome measurement.

“ Outcome measurement is included as an objective in the Board's strategic plan. The Board views outcomes as an essential piece in measuring the success of the identified Strategic Priorities.

“ Measurement of impact is written into a number of our library goals.

5. Project Outcome contributes to significant increases in “culture of support for outcome measurement” and “orientation toward impact” among participating libraries.

There were statistically significant increases in responding libraries' “culture of support for outcome measurement” (n=810) and “orientation toward impact” (n=792) when comparing levels before and after participating in Project Outcome. The observed increase in these outcomes was significantly larger among libraries that measured outcomes in the past six months.



Increased culture of support for outcome measurement, as indicated by larger proportions of library staff who:

- Value outcome measurement
- Value outcome achievement over numbers of patrons who access services
- Know best practices for survey data collection
- Are aware of how outcomes are used at the library
- Talk with patrons about program/service outcomes



Increased orientation toward impact, as indicated by the extent that library staff:

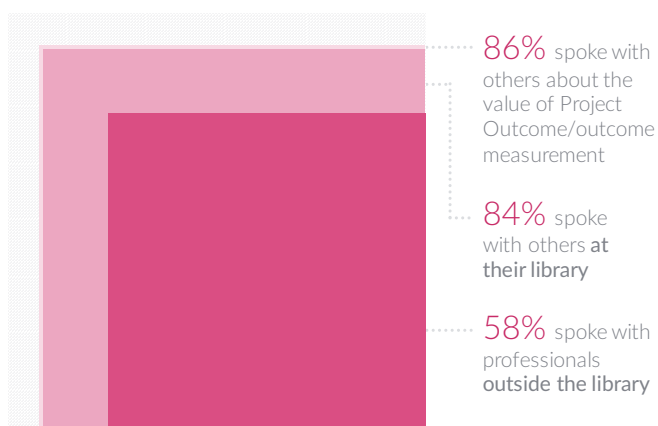
- Make program-related decisions based on intended or measured community impact
- Develop new programs based on intended patron outcomes
- Engage in partnerships aimed at community impact
- Have strategic planning or annual reporting that is oriented toward community impact

KEY FINDINGS

Participation Outcomes

6. A wide majority of participants in libraries that measure outcomes serve as champions of outcome measurement generally and/or Project Outcome specifically.

Among survey respondents in libraries that measured outcomes in the past six months (n=858), most (86%) reported they have talked with others about the value of outcome measurement generally or Project Outcome specifically; 84% spoke with others at their library and 58% spoke with professionals outside the library, including community leaders and other non-profit professionals. Most commonly, participants talked with others about the value of outcomes (versus outputs) for communicating a library's or organization's value; for planning, making program improvements, and making other decisions; and for attaining funding.



7. Participant experience with measuring and using outcome data is the primary driver of comfort in talking with others about the value of outcome measurement or Project Outcome.

Participants in libraries that had used Project Outcome were most comfortable speaking about the value of outcome measurement when it came up naturally during discussions, based on their own experience. When asked what resources PLA could provide to increase their comfort, most respondents mentioned needing more time, practice, or experience measuring outcomes. Some also mentioned resources that would help them convey aspects of library outcome measurement, such as talking points or case studies, particularly talking points describing the Project Outcome process.

“ I think just doing [outcome measurement] is what really made me feel more comfortable [talking with others about it]. . . It's when you start actually doing it and seeing what information it's giving you that outputs weren't giving you.

So that's what got me excited about it and interested, and because I was interested I grew more confident [talking with others] about it. And I could see what it was saying about my library in a really tangible way. So we have to figure out how to get people to at least try it.

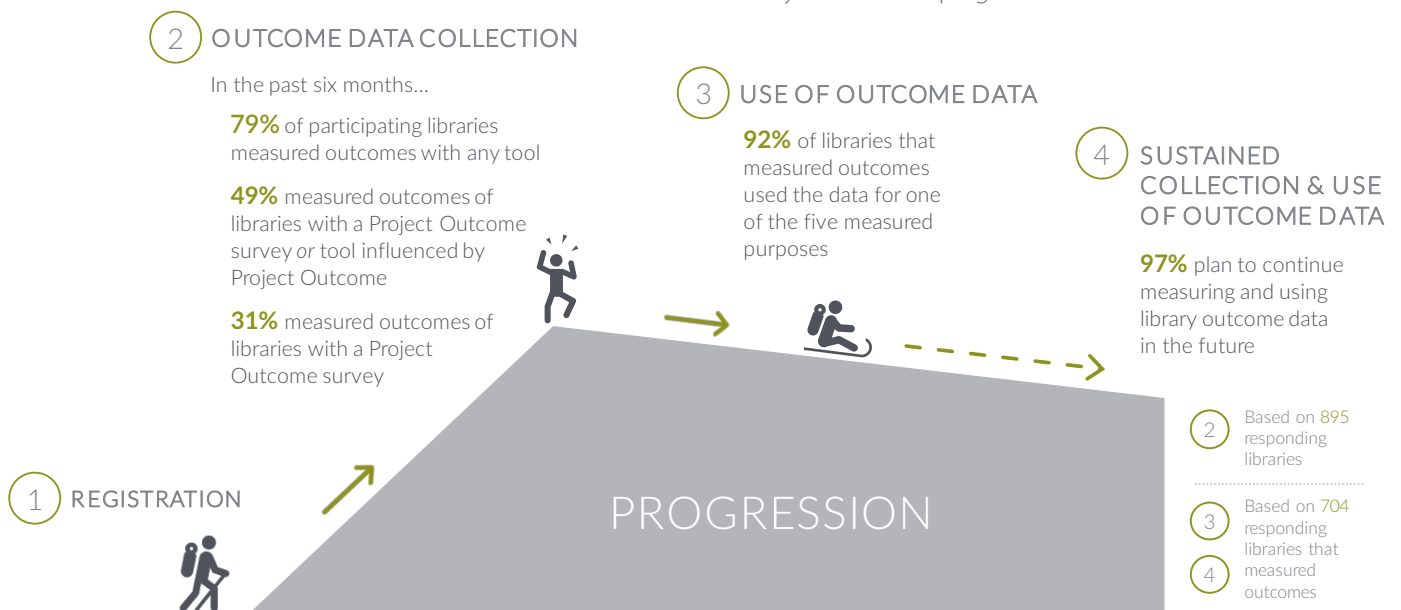
Implementation

8. Diffusion of Project Outcome throughout the public library field has far exceeded expectations for its three-year launch period.

As of October 2017, registered participants (4,496 individuals in 2,156 libraries) represent all 50 states plus Washington, DC, most Canadian provinces and territories, and 21% of all US libraries, including the majority of large libraries. Participants do, however, under-represent the smallest US libraries (those serving populations of 5,000 people or less), which are 42% of all US libraries but only 14% of libraries participating in Project Outcome.

9. Project Outcome is successfully supporting progression from registration to outcome data collection to use of outcome data, with evidence of momentum toward sustained data collection and use.

If we think about this progression in terms of an ascent, the most challenging part of the climb is moving from registration to data collection; however, among libraries with at least one responding participant, 79% collected outcome data in the past six months. Among those libraries, almost all have used those data for one of the measured purposes and plan to measure outcomes of library services and programs in the future.



KEY FINDINGS

Implementation

10. Participant issues with the Project Outcome surveys—experienced by many as a top barrier to data collection—are overcome by some by creating alternative outcome measurement tools; other top-cited barriers to outcome measurement and efforts to overcome them relate to staff capacity and buy-in.

Among libraries with at least one responding participant (n=896), close to one third measured outcomes without using a Project Outcome survey or a tool influenced by Project Outcome (30%), and close to one fifth measured library outcomes with a tool influenced by Project Outcome (18%). This is consistent with additional findings that (1) the most commonly cited barriers to measuring outcomes include perceived Project Outcome survey limitations (especially with survey content, including limited customizability and limited match between what the library offers and what the surveys ask), and (2) the most commonly cited action libraries took to overcome barriers is modifying the surveys or measuring outcomes with a different survey.

Other barriers to outcome measurement include limited staff time; technical challenges using Project Outcome, particularly related to survey formatting, but to data and report structure as well; and low response rates, which several respondents attribute to survey fatigue.

Other actions libraries take to overcome barriers include actively promoting the survey to patrons, primarily through explaining the value to the library and raising awareness via social media, library website, or emails; building staff buy-in, through conveying the importance of outcome measurement and incorporating it into overall library planning processes; and building staff capacity through hiring, training, and assigning staff time to outcome measurement.

Several SLA staff shared that many library staff still seem to benefit from foundational training on the difference between outputs and outcomes.

“ We are continuing to use surveys that have elements of the ones designed by Project Outcome. We’re just doing them in SurveyMonkey.

“ I’ve encouraged staff to consider what makes a successful program while they’re still in the planning stages. If you know what you’re trying to achieve, it’s much easier to find a tool to measure that success.

Also, keep surveys short so people will complete them. Or even survey people orally so they don’t feel the burden of having to fill out yet another survey. We’re also looking at better training for staff to help them understand the concepts of outcome-based measurement.

11. Library progression from registration to data collection has gotten better over time, with some evidence the survey management tool transition supported this improvement.

Currently, 20% of all libraries with at least one person registered for Project Outcome have entered data collected with a Project Outcome survey into the survey management tool, versus 14% at the time of the Year 1 Follow-up. Among responding libraries (n=895), those that had any staff member who signed up after the survey management tool transition were more likely to implement a Project Outcome survey, implement a survey influenced by Project Outcome, and use outcome data for any purpose. However, these libraries were also more likely to have implemented a survey not influenced by Project Outcome, suggesting these effects may at least in part be due to recency of “activation” or an overall trend of increasing outcome measurement in the library field.

12. Relatively few libraries have implemented Project Outcome Follow-up Surveys, but most are aware of them and hope to use them in the future.

Among responding participants (n=1,335), 7% reported that someone at their library had implemented a Project Outcome Follow-up Survey (representing 8% of libraries with at least one survey respondent; n=895). Among responding participants in libraries that measured outcomes in the past six months (n=468), only 13% reported they were not aware of the tools. Among those who did not use a Project Outcome Follow-up Survey at their libraries (n=363), 44% indicated they would like to eventually use them to collect data on long-term impact, 48% reported they maybe would, and only 8% reported they would not. The most commonly cited and anticipated challenge was related to limited response or limited access to participants after a program or service had been used.

“ We use Follow-up Surveys for our ‘1,000 Books Before Kindergarten’ program, they are a great way of capturing if ‘parents reading with their kids on a regular basis’ has changed the culture at their homes into one of reading. We do an Immediate Survey at the ‘500 of 1000 books read’ milestone, and the Follow-up Survey is given when the kids pick up their prize at the end at ‘1,000 books read.’ We explain to the families how important it is to get their feedback so we can keep improving our programs and to see what impact the library is making on their lives.

Crosscutting

13. It is harder for smaller libraries to progress from registration to data collection, but if they do, they are more likely to increase regular use of outcome data, and they experience most of the same benefits—and in some cases bigger benefits—compared to larger libraries.

Although smaller libraries are significantly less likely to progress from having a registered staff member to outcome data collection, once they do measure outcomes, they are just as likely as their larger counterparts to use outcome data. Indeed, they are more likely to increase their regular use of outcome data for different purposes. It is also notable that smaller libraries that measured outcomes in the past six months enjoy significantly larger increases in a culture of support for outcome measurement, even though they are significantly less likely to make four of the six measured changes indicating support for outcome measurement by management. However, staff in these libraries are less comfortable talking about the value of outcome measurement with others.

14. Investment in Project Outcome by library leadership and SLAs matters for libraries' outcome measurement success.

Libraries with a management-level participant who is registered with Project Outcome were more likely to measure outcomes in the past six months and report increased culture of support for outcome measurement, orientation toward program and service impact, and organizational support for outcome measurement since participating in Project Outcome (e.g., assigning staff time to engage in outcome-based planning, program improvement, and/or advocacy; and providing or supporting an opportunity for staff discussion of outcome measurement within the library).

Similarly, libraries in states that offered a Project Outcome Regional Training (PORT) were more likely to measure outcomes in the past six months and report use and regular use of outcome data in the past six months (for any purpose, but particularly for informing or measuring progress on a strategic plan and communicating the value of the library to funding authorities or decision makers). They were also more likely to report management having provided or supported an opportunity for staff discussion of outcome measurement with staff in other libraries since participating in Project Outcome (consistent with the nature of the PORT); and increased culture of support for outcome measurement.

15. Overall, SLA staff appreciate the value of Project Outcome for public libraries and are engaging in varied efforts to advance outcome measurement in their states and increase awareness of Project Outcome among libraries.

In appreciation of Project Outcome, SLA staff most commonly note its ease of use and applicability for libraries that may be new to outcome measurement. They also mentioned its scalability and free cost. SLA staff also note that Project Outcome is one tool in a toolbox of outcome measurement options.

SLAs support library outcome measurement by hosting in-person trainings, workshops, and webinars; providing technical assistance or guidance via informal meetings and calls; hosting project content on SLA websites; forwarding project information and updates through SLA listservs; funding library staff participation in other outcome-oriented professional development opportunities; and requiring libraries to do outcome measurement for reports linked to state or federal funding.

16. SLA staff do not yet appreciate the value of Project Outcome for their own purposes, and believe they would benefit from tools and resources specifically designed to support SLAs.

SLAs find limited value in outcome data on any one program or service area from a relatively small proportion of libraries in their state, and admit a lack of understanding regarding how they themselves are expected to use Project Outcome. They want specific guidance on how to use Project Outcome for SLA purposes, as well as resources or opportunities to learn from other SLAs that have successfully used it, including case studies/stories and connections with SLAs that have used Project Outcome successfully for their own purposes.

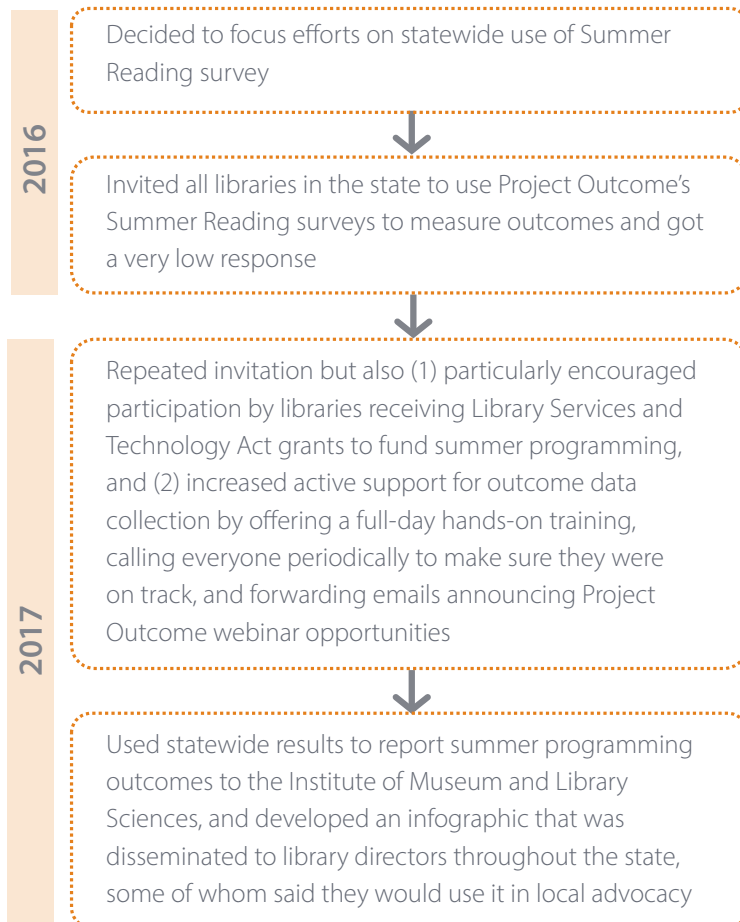
Staff in one SLA suggested developing SLA-specific and restricted functionality on the portal that would allow them to more easily review data across libraries in their state and communicate with one another.

“ [Printable] quick snapshot reports would be helpful... It would be nice to be able to set a date range and then see what the results have been for all of the categories for the last 6 months or the last year, just have something quick to show people.

CASE EXAMPLE

SLA Championship and Use of Project Outcome

How one SLA leveraged its position to increase the value of using Project Outcome for both libraries and itself:



Conclusion

During the past three years, public libraries participating in Project Outcome have forged ahead in making outcome measurement “business as usual,” and have oriented their planning, decision making, and accountability more toward patron and community impact. Evaluative evidence provided by participants, SLA staff, and PLA suggest that Project Outcome has played a significant role in this trend, by making accessible the tools and resources many public libraries need to collect and use outcome data and by seeding support by SLAs.

