

June 2018

Project Outcome

Insights for Adopting the Model





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Introduction

Project Outcome is aimed at transforming strategic decision making, planning, and advocacy efforts at public libraries by making accessible the tools and resources library staff and leaders need to collect and use outcome data.

01



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 the Performance Measurement Task Force (PMTF), a committee within the Public Library Association; and 2) a web-based survey management and reporting portal. The initiative began in 2013, and the tools, resources, and training became available to libraries in 2015.

Evidence from the multi-year evaluation of Project Outcome attests to the initiative's success and shareworthiness. Evaluation results showed that Project Outcome helps increase public libraries' use of outcome data and helps diversify the ways they use such data, which, in turn, helps libraries 1) have a bigger impact in their communities, 2) reach more people with the same amount of resources, and 3) get more funding or non-monetary resources. There is also evidence that Project Outcome contributes to the institutionalization of outcome-based thinking, outcome measurement, and use of outcome data, through increases in management supports for such measurement and use, increases in a culture of support for outcome measurement, and increases in an orientation toward impact.

Like Project Outcome, this paper is part of the legacy of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Global Libraries initiative, which involved 20 years of collaboration with libraries and field organizations and investments of more than \$1 billion globally to enhance the power of libraries to improve lives. The Public Library Association (PLA) is one of three partners² entrusted with this legacy, part of which is a commitment to knowledge sharing that will propel the field forward.³ The purpose of this paper is to share insights into the development and evolution of Project Outcome to aid others in adopting similar field-driven models.

The story of Project Outcome is told here in four parts. First, the context and origin of the initiative is described; second, the guiding principles of its initial development and evolution; third, key decisions; and finally, best practices. The latter three are defined as follows:

Guiding Principles

"North Stars" or values that were elucidated by PMTF members and project staff and guided project decision-making (at the beginning or emergent)

Key Decisions

An historical accounting of pivotal decisions or events (informed by guiding principles, post-launch learnings, and feedback from the field), as well as the benefits and any consequences considered and experienced

Best Practices

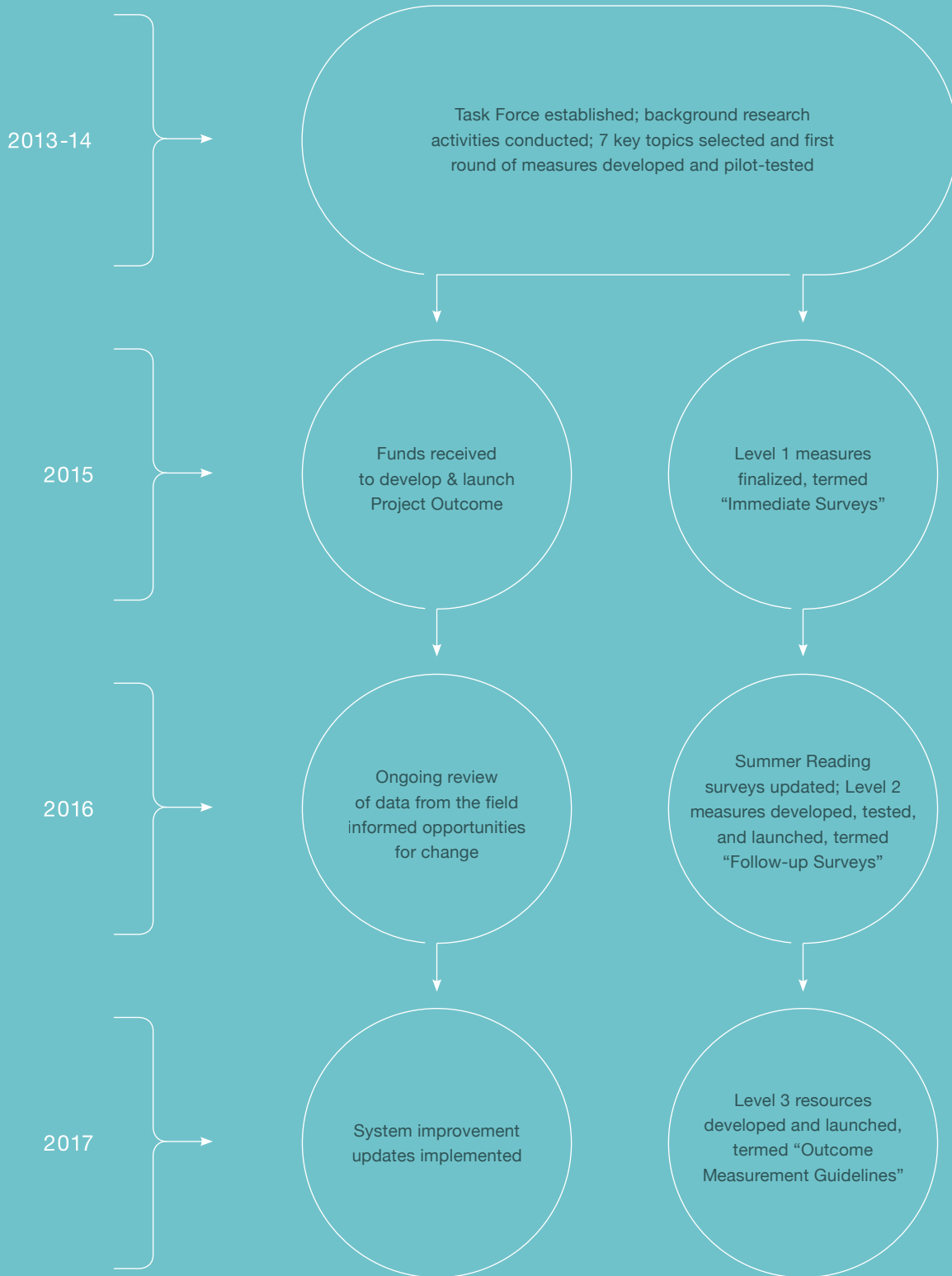
Essential elements of success, based on reflections and learnings that emerged from "living" the principles and "living through" the decisions and transitions

1 For the Executive Summary of the final evaluation results, see: https://projectoutcome.org/ckeditor_assets/attachments/362/pla_project_outcome_executive_summary_final.pdf

2 The other two partners are the Technology and Social Change (TASCHA) group at the University of Washington's Information School and the Int'l Federation of Library Assoc.

3 <http://www.ala.org/pla/initiatives/legacy>

Key Milestones



The Origin of Project Outcome

Project Outcome was born of a fertile context—to fulfill a growing need to demonstrate library value. It benefited from a well-positioned champion, due diligence, and outcome-based planning.

02



Traditional measures focus on volume and capture how much is done (outputs), like the number of activities or services offered.

Project Outcome instead seeks to capture the benefits by focusing on what good is done (outcomes), like changes in library users' awareness, knowledge, confidence, and behavior.

Fertile ground

When the initiative originated five years ago, forces both external and internal to the public library field demanded that public libraries demonstrate their value. There was a growing, long-term trend questioning the value of government services broadly, and The Great Recession of the late 2000s and early 2010s required the tightening of budgets for all public institutions. At the same time, performance measurement was gaining popularity as a means for measuring value in the broader non-profit sector, and many public libraries were being urged by their respective governing authorities to move beyond traditional output measures.

Within the public library field, a decline in usage of traditional library resources such as books and DVDs, as well as an increase in demand for—and investment in—technology and programming widened the gap between traditional library metrics and actual library activity and usage. There were also pressures for libraries to become more outward-looking. Libraries were caught between trying to offer new and responsive services and dealing with declining revenues. Outcome measures could enable public libraries to demonstrate their value to the community and also make decisions around programs and services based on local needs and priorities.

A well-positioned champion

Also responding to these forces—and contributing to them—was the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the U.S. federal agency that provides grants and other support to libraries through state library agencies, primarily through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grants to states. The 1996 legislation that established IMLS required evaluation of funded programs.⁴ IMLS required LSTA grantees to report on performance in narrative form until 2013, when they piloted new reporting requirements in 16 states based on standardized measures for describing each project awarded to libraries and its impact.⁵ The new reporting requirements for describing projects were rolled out nationally in 2015, with the idea that the new requirements for reporting on outcomes would follow after grant recipients became accustomed to more systematic reporting to describe projects.⁶

Throughout this period, resources like the 2008 Program Manager's Guide for Evaluation⁷ and state library agency trainings supported libraries' efforts to fulfill LSTA reporting requirements and increased grantees' awareness of outcome-related concepts and outcome measurement. However, field-wide understanding of these concepts was inconsistent and for many, designing outcome measures and methods and collecting outcome data were overwhelming. Further, most library staff did not understand how to use outcome data to communicate library value, inform decision making, or track progress against goals in a strategic plan, all of which inhibited the diffusion of public library outcome measurement beyond what was required by the LSTA grants.

In 2013, then-PLA President Carolyn Anthony recognized a need that was not being met—field-wide performance measures that would speak to community impact and not be perceived as onerous to collect. As a part of her presidency, she started an initiative that brought together a group of about 10 librarians around supporting the field's measurement needs. This group became the Performance Measurement Task Force (PMTF), a PLA committee charged with developing and promoting standardized measures of effectiveness for widely offered public library programs.”

“We were hearing from leaders in the library field—at local, state, national, non-profit levels—that we needed better stories that conveyed the benefits to patrons of going into libraries. That story becomes particularly relevant because of... rapid changes going on in the field, be it economically, with a shift in revenue streams, or be it technologically, given the rise of internet technologies, or be it socially, given demands for services and support that now libraries are seen as the avenue [for] getting.”

MATTHEW BIRNBAUM, IMLS, PMTF ADVISOR

4 <https://www.ims.gov/about-us/legislation-budget/timeline>

5 https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/measuring-success-defining-projects_jan2015.pdf

6 The new reporting requirements were a product of the Measuring Success initiative, a collaboration between IMLS and its state library agency partners. The initiative resulted in standardized outcome measures that were very similar to Project Outcome's, but because IMLS introduced the new measures in phases, the outcome measures developed through Project Outcome were launched first.

7 <https://www.ims.gov/grants/outcome-based-evaluation/webography>

Due diligence

Particularly influential to the early thinking of the PMTF were the University of Washington's Impact Survey categories describing how patrons use public library technology services, the IMLS criteria for evaluating LSTA awards to states, and the American Library Association's Public Library Funding and Technology Access Study. Each of these sources provided rubrics that helped the PMTF think more broadly about community impact indicators, the application of those to library programs and services, and benefits to individual library patrons in alignment with those indicators.

From there, the PMTF identified commonalities (categories of programs and services oriented toward particular outcomes) and engaged a consultant to develop questions about the current practice around the commonalities, which were incorporated into PLA's annual field-wide Public Library Data Service (PLDS) survey.¹¹ The resultant data helped the PMTF prioritize the first set of outcome measures and surveys and guided the development of resources to build knowledge and skills for outcome measurement (pages 11-12).

Theory of Change outcome map

In early 2015, PLA hired ORS Impact to develop a Theory of Change outcome map to inform its strategy and evaluation plan for Project Outcome. ORS Impact facilitated a meeting with PLA staff and PMTF members to identify the short-, intermediate-, and long-term changes that represent pathways from the planned activities to the aspirational goals. Looking at these outcomes and pathways, the meeting participants considered the strategic questions: "Are these activities enough to achieve these outcomes?" and "What else do we need to do?" From this discussion, momentum for supporting field-level movement increased, which informed the development of new tactics and considerations for implementing them. After the meeting, ORS Impact and PLA iteratively refined the outcome map (see pp.12-13 for the final version), which was the basis for the project's evaluation design. In addition, PLA found the outcome map to be a helpful tool throughout the course of the initiative, and referred to it regularly to help hold themselves accountable to the initiative's intended goals and to help them process feedback from the field.

8 Education, Employment, Entrepreneurship, Health & Wellness, eGovernment, Civic Engagement, e Commerce, and Social Inclusion; see <https://impactsurvey.org/>.

9 These criteria also informed and were replaced by the standardized measures developed as part of the Measuring Success initiative.

10 <http://www.ala.org/tools/research/initiatives/plftas>

11 <http://www.ala.org/pla/resources/publications/plds>

Immediate Survey Topics



Community
and Civic
Engagement



Economic
Development



Job Skills

Topical programs
and services oriented
toward particular
outcomes



Education
and Lifelong
Learning



Early
Childhood
Literacy



Summer Reading

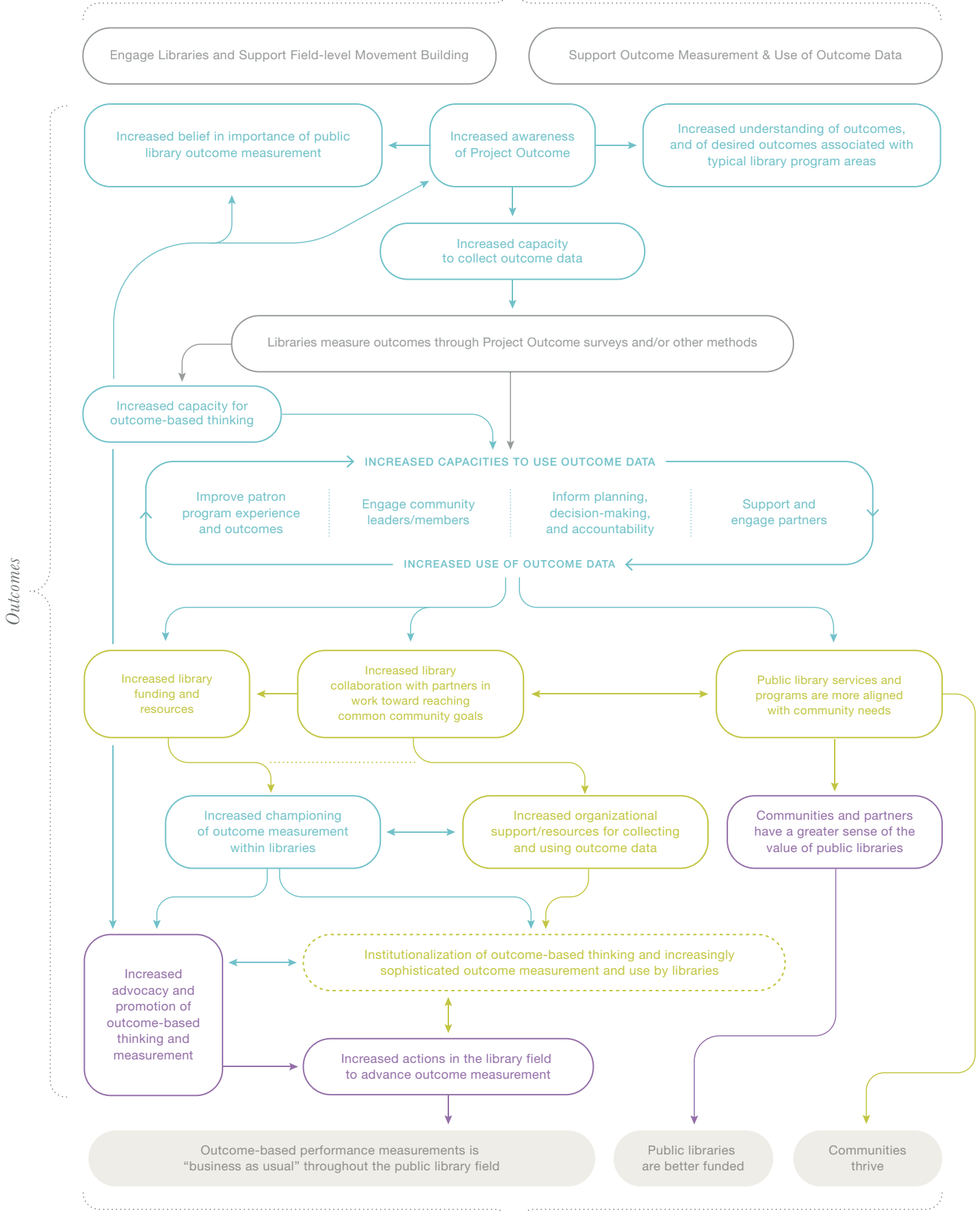


Digital Learning

Project Outcome Theory of Change

- Individual Library Leader / Staff
- Library Field and Community
- Library
- Linchpin Outcome (Library)

PLA Activities



Goals

Guiding Principles

Foundational work of the PMTF members and its supporting PLA staff members involved norming around shared values or principles. These principles primarily guided their development of the Project Outcome tools and resources, but also informed their strategies for rolling out the toolkit and conducting outreach. Most of these guiding principles were established early, and some emerged during the initiative.

03



Tools must be easy to use and scalable

Because the goal of the initiative is field-wide adoption of outcome measurement, a foundational principle was that any tools developed had to be easy to use by the diversity of libraries comprising the field—libraries with varying degrees of experience and expertise in measurement and evaluation among staff as well as varying amounts of organizational support for outcome measurement. PMTF members understood that the need for ease of use was directly and strongly related to scalability, both across libraries and within libraries across program areas. If the tools were too burdensome to implement (and perceived to be too burdensome for patrons), no amount of staff training and resources could mitigate the dampening on uptake, particularly among libraries new to outcome measurement. PLA and the PMTF recognized that they could not reduce the burden entirely—it would still take time and resources to collect, enter, and analyze the data—but they were dedicated to minimizing it as much as possible.

Tools and measures must be anchored to library use of the data and standardized

The PMTF was committed to designing outcome measurement tools that would best serve library use of the resultant data. The task force members considered data use vis-à-vis outward-facing goals (“How well is the library advancing early childhood literacy?”) and inward-facing goals (“What changes can the library make to improve services?”). PMTF members and PLA staff members recognized that libraries could use the data for a variety of reasons, so they designed training and resources that built library capacity for using outcome-based thinking to inform community-oriented goal-setting in strategic plans, for communicating value, to improve program and service design, and for funding purposes.

Valuing tool design that was oriented toward data use also was reflected in the PMTF’s commitment to tool standardization and functionality within the survey management and reporting portal that supported data analysis. The ability to aggregate and disaggregate data allowed for benchmarking the outcomes of a library system or branch against the outcomes of other libraries in its state or the nation. This could, in turn, allow library leaders to determine targets for professional development or opportunities for peer sharing. It could also be used by the library staff to tell more nuanced stories about the community impacts of their programs. For example, using the Digital Learning Immediate Survey one library set a goal that at least 90 percent of adults receiving group instruction would say they felt more knowledgeable about digital resources. Professional development or other resources to support reaching that goal can be directed toward branches or programs struggling to do so.

Don't let perfect be the enemy of good

The PMTF believed that to succeed in helping public libraries get on the outcome measurement path, it had to develop tools for collecting data that were “good enough” for the diversity of libraries to begin using for planning, decision making, program improvement, and/or communicating the value of the library. They knew there would be critics who would consider brief measures of patron-reported changes in knowledge, confidence, and awareness—and intentions to apply these—to be insufficiently rigorous, and would consider any data collected from relatively small subsets of willing program participants to be biased or not valid. However, the tools were designed for front-line library use rather than research purposes, and task force members thought the measures could be a starting point for growth over time. Similarly, though the Immediate Surveys were piloted and refined prior to their official launch in 2015, the PMTF understood tool development to be an iterative process. They believed the tools did not have to be perfect at first release and looked forward to revising and improving them based on libraries’ feedback.

Outcome measurement—and Project Outcome—are only parts of a larger story

The PMTF understood that what they developed did not have to be everything to everyone who was interested in using data to tell their library’s story. They recognized the value of drawing from multiple types of information and sources for telling the richest possible story of how libraries contribute to community vitality. Outcomes in combination with outputs allow libraries to speak to the reach of impact across a community, and anecdotal information from patrons or staff who interact with community members brings impacts to life in a way that numbers alone cannot.

Similarly, PLA and the PMTF defined success more broadly than just an increased use of Project Outcome. PLA and Project Outcome funder Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation were committed to advancing field change toward outcome-based planning, program improvement, and advocacy, regardless of the tools used. Indeed, a final evaluation finding they take pride in is that two-and-a-half years after making the toolkit publicly available, 79% percent of libraries that had registered for Project Outcome had recently collected outcome data, including 31% that had used Project Outcome tools and 18% that had used tools influenced by Project Outcome.¹²

¹² For the Executive Summary of the final evaluation results, see: https://projectoutcome.org/ckeditor_assets/attachments/362/pla_project_outcome_executive_summary_final.pdf

Key Decisions

The guiding principles went a long way to support decision making by PMTF and PLA staff members during the development and after the roll-out of the toolkit, and helped them weigh trade-offs.

04



Start with the Immediate Surveys (Level 1)

Results of the exploratory items asking about outcome measurement in PLA's PLDS survey showed that most public libraries were not measuring outcomes of their programs and services and had limited capacity to do so. To meet libraries where they are and support progress along a developmental path, the PMTF conceptualized three sets of tools.

L1 / Immediate Surveys

The on-ramp to the outcome measurement path—help library staff think about who and what is supposed to change because of their programs and learn whether participating patrons benefited and in what ways

L2 / Follow-up Surveys

Assess longer-term impacts of program participation or what participants do with what they gained from program participation

L3 / Outcome Measurement Guidelines

Provide information, guidance, and resources to inform more complex outcome measurement, such as within the contexts of partnerships and cross-sector collaborations

Since most public libraries were new measuring outcomes, the PMTF decided to first develop the Immediate Surveys and foundational training and resources, then support progress along the path. Although this decision supported field-wide adoption, many potential early adopters with greater existing capacity for outcome measurement believed the new tools were too simple. Some tried the Level 1 tools anyway, offered helpful feedback to the PMTF, and discovered benefits of having such easy-to-use, standardized measures. Other staff continued measuring library outcomes in the same ways they had been and/or waited for the Level 2 and Level 3 tools to be released.

Measure the same four outcomes across commonalities and include open-ended questions

Guided by the potential library benefits from outcome measurement and considering the outcome measurement construct of the social change theory,¹³ the PMTF decided the Immediate Surveys would measure the same four outcomes for each program area: changes in knowledge, confidence, awareness, and behavior (intended application of the prior three). This approach helped library staff understand the types of gains they should consistently target when designing and refining programs. It allowed them to then generate data that enables comparisons in outcome achievement across different programs (e.g., to inform cross-program learning) and aggregating outcomes across different programs (e.g., to tell a story about patrons' knowledge gains across programs).

The PMTF also decided to include two open-ended items in each of the Immediate Surveys, including "What did you like most about the program?" and an item specific to each survey topic asking what the library could do to strengthen the intended impact of program (e.g., "What could the library do to better assist you in your job search?"). They saw these survey items as an important supplement to the quantitative outcome measures; an opportunity for libraries to get qualitative feedback from patrons more systematically than they may have through comment cards and conversations with staff. Users of the Immediate Surveys have appreciated that the open-ended responses can be used immediately to address unanticipated or emergent needs through even small changes to programs.

13 Thompson, B. & Kinne, S. (1990). Social change theory: applications to community health. In N. Bracht (Ed.), *Health Promotion at the Community Level*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Make the Project Outcome toolkit free

Early in the initiative, PLA made a commitment to making and keeping all elements of the toolkit free to public libraries, removing what they understood to be a large potential barrier to libraries' sustained use of the toolkit and to diffusion of its use to later adopters. By making this decision early, PLA could plan for the transition to post-grant funding period. They gathered information about complementary offerings beyond the toolkit and decided to more effectively manage operations so the cost could successfully be incorporated into the organization's budget. They also strategized around developing alternative Project Outcome-related revenue streams (such as charging fees for regional workshops, which are described in the next paragraph) and cultivating partnerships with other organizations interested in building capacity for outcome measurement within their own initiatives and fields. (See more on this in the final section, Now and Looking Forward.)

Offer a diversity of training opportunities

To meet libraries where they were, both figuratively and literally, PLA and the PMTF designed and offered a diversity of trainings on Project Outcome at national, state, and regional conferences or other convenings. Early trainings were intended to increase the field's knowledge of outcome measurement and its importance, as well as increase awareness of the toolkit. They also offered training via webinars that Project Outcome users could attend synchronously or review on the Project Outcome website. As more and more state library agencies became interested in supporting the use of Project Outcome among libraries in their states, PLA and the PMTF designed the Project Outcome Regional Training (PORT) workshops, which can be purchased by regional entities. PORTs include a full day of training followed by a series of online meetings, all facilitated by an expert trainer. These widespread and accessible training opportunities not only built awareness and skills for using Project Outcome, but also helped create a buzz about the toolkit and outcome measurement more generally.

Outreach 2015 - 2017

Reaching over 10,000 participants through:

- » 36 Webinars
- » 35 Conference Programs
- » 4 Preconference Workshops
- » 16 Regional Training Workshops
- » 54 Co-presenters from Participating Libraries

Start with an existing survey platform

From the outset, the PMTF and PLA understood that to support data collection and use, Project Outcome had to provide both outcome measurement tools and a survey management system where users could enter data and generate reports and data visualizations based on automated analysis of the data. To leverage an existing public library field asset and reduce the amount of time needed to be ready for the launch of the toolkit, PLA and the PMTF decided to work with the University of Washington Information School to adapt their Impact Survey portal for use by Project Outcome participants rather than create one from scratch. This involved ceding some control over design and their ability to be responsive to feedback, but they did not want perfect to be the enemy of the good and felt the risks outweighed the benefits.

Move to a customized survey management system and reporting tool

About a year after the launch of the toolkit, the PMTF and PLA decided to transition Project Outcome from the Impact Survey platform to a new, custom-built survey management system and reporting tool. This permitted them to adapt the system for uses that required more system flexibility, and to be more responsive to feedback. The development of a new survey management system and reporting tool exemplifies decision making based on the guiding principles: its new functionalities were based almost entirely on field-wide feedback, its user-friendliness and flexibility for users was paramount, and it could be refined over time. The idea that the tool was built for the field based on direct feedback from the field also helped to elevate the role of champions. Key examples of such decision making included:

- » Creating the ability to customize multiple survey elements outside of the standardized questions, including options to add up to three write-your-own questions, add a header/footer to the surveys, and enter survey data in bulk
- » Developing a customizable report builder, providing improved advocacy and communication opportunities for users
- » Elevating the peer-to-peer sharing opportunities to better connect Project Outcome users
- » Offering real-time overall usage numbers to give Project Outcome users a better sense of activity

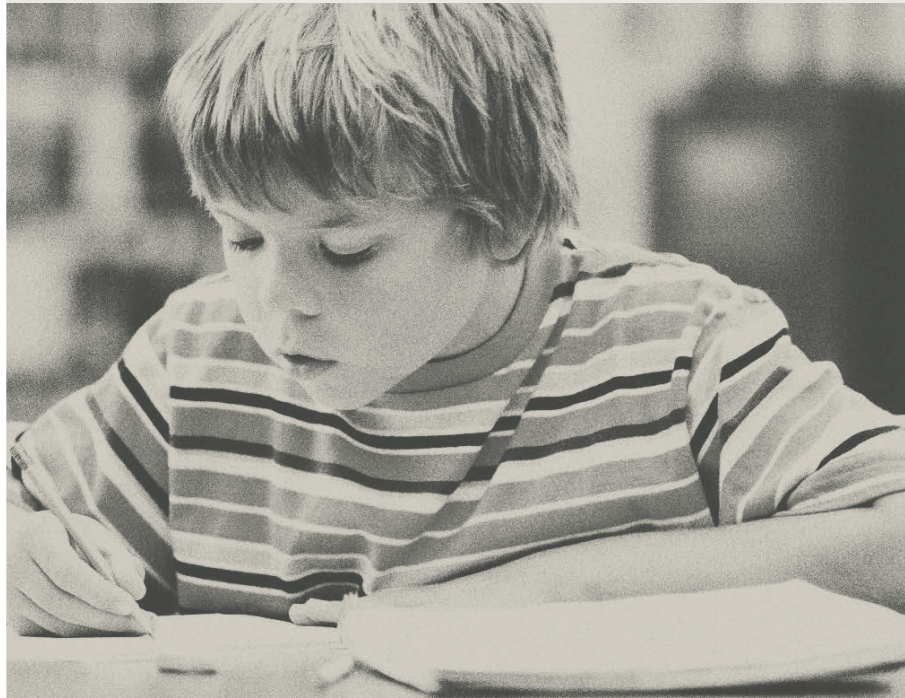
Provide flexibility without compromising the ability to aggregate data

Most libraries appreciated that the Immediate Survey was standardized to allow for benchmarking and aggregation/disaggregation, but throughout the initiative many also clamored for more freedom to tailor the surveys for their own purposes. They had excellent reasons, such as wanting to streamline their own data collection for a single program using Project Outcome items along with others required by other funders. When Project Outcome transitioned to the custom-built survey management system, it provided libraries with more flexibility to customize surveys and still use the project's survey generation, data entry, analysis, and reporting functions, without compromising standardization of the core questions. It also added a menu of commonly asked questions from which libraries could select additional items to include, as well as a place to add custom open-ended questions. Project Outcome users' feedback to these changes has been overwhelmingly positive.

Best Practices

Learnings that emerged from living the principles and living through the decisions comprise the best practices or essential elements of Project Outcome's success.

05



Initiation and championship from within the field

Project Outcome was initiated, prioritized, and championed by people within the public library field, rather than by public or private funders. The effort had already gathered substantial momentum by the time the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funding came along, which allowed the foundation to play an accelerating—rather than driving—role.

“When I first came across this initiative and sat in on one of the meetings [I saw] this was something that was initiated by field, that they were prioritizing, and that they were putting resources behind before the foundation ever got involved. And that to me was exciting... Sometimes the foundation, or the state library, or IMLS, we would say, ‘[You] need to do this.’ But until there’s somebody who is going to champion it from [within the field]... you can still be successful, but it takes, I would argue, a lot more effort, and you expend a lot of effort on that championing.”

CHRIS JOWAISAS, TASCHA, FORMER GLOBAL LIBRARIES PROGRAM OFFICER, PMTF ADVISOR]

Highly intentional field and expert involvement

The composition and structure of the PMTF contributed greatly to its success as the engine of Project Outcome. Carolyn Anthony recruited Denise Davis (then-Deputy Director at Sacramento Public Library), a highly respected public library leader and researcher, to chair the task force. They invited library professionals to the task force only if they were “truly dedicated to performance measurement”; had time and willingness to “roll up their sleeves”¹⁴ and be active champions; and provided diverse representation across library size, geography, and staff level of responsibility. All members had frontline experience, contributing to their pragmatism, and they had rich networks they could use to encourage early uptake of the tools and resources.

Key people were invited to be advisors to the task force if they could not make the time commitment that would be required of task force members or if their position prohibited them from playing such a role. For example, the participation of IMLS’s Senior Evaluation Officer as an advisor allowed for representation of a national-level library entity, as well as additional research expertise.

14 Denise Davis, in conversation, April 11, 2018

The PMTF's structure and process reinforced members' sense of commitment and encouraged active engagement. Having a group size of seven to twelve members and scheduling meetings for two-day periods created the space and time for the deep thinking needed to make progress on tool and resource development and address any sticky issues. Setting PMTF goals and expectations at the beginning fostered early alignment, and communicating frequently between PMTF meetings through a PLA-hosted online discussion board ensured that everyone knew what was happening and gave members regular opportunities to provide feedback that resulted in course corrections.

“You really do have to get the right mix of people doing these kinds of projects, and people who are advocates, who are willing to not just come to a meeting. People showed up! For two years we had almost every single member there for every meeting, that’s a large commitment, and even on phone calls, then some people were doing pilot testing in their libraries, then doing presentations, webinars, there was a huge commitment level that I think really made a difference.”

STACEY ALDRICH, HAWAII STATE PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM,
PMTF MEMBER

Practical focus

The PMTF's principles valuing ease of use, orientation toward purpose, and not letting perfect be the enemy of the good converged as a focus on the practical. The result was a toolkit that could propel libraries forward relatively quickly, from data collection through use of the outcome data for a variety of internal- and community-facing purposes, without demanding the time and capacity typically required for such activities. The Project Outcome Case Studies illustrate many ways libraries can use Project Outcome to benefit their patrons and communities:¹⁵

- » Appleton Public Library tracked impact across time and strengthened board members' championship of the library through use with their Summer Library Program.
- » Burnsville Public Library, a very small library, supported partnership development and expanded services through use with their summer reading and digital literacy programs.
- » Pima County Public Library, a very large library, deepened partnerships, improved services, and increased library championship through use with their business development and job skills programs.
- » Plano Public Library improved story time and teen programming to better meet community needs.
- » Thomas Crane Public Library improved programming, informed resource investment, and sustained a partnership through the use of their digital literacy programs and online training services.

¹⁵ <http://www.ala.org/pla/initiatives/performance measurement>

Laying the groundwork for diffusion and building momentum

With sustainability in mind from the very beginning, PLA staff and PMTF leaders understood they had a finite amount of time for Project Outcome to gain enough traction in the field and prove that it is a worthwhile investment for public libraries and the organizations that support them. They made sure state library agencies, including state data coordinators, and experts in library data were represented on the PMTF and that PMTF members understood the importance of acting as champions for the project within their networks. They also cultivated early adopter champions among public library staff whom pilot-tested the measures or attended the 2015 ALA Annual Project Outcome pre-conference, inviting them to co-present at conferences and share lessons learned during webinars, and showcasing their experiences on the Project Outcome website. This strategy allowed them to capitalize on the excitement among the piloting staff around trying something so cutting edge, and helped them establish and broadcast Project Outcome's proof of concept among libraries of different sizes, supporting a cascade of incremental successes.

The strategy also helped to establish early on that the group of Project Outcome champions was a very inclusive club, grounded in the principles that the toolkit should be by and for the field and that the road to success is incremental and iterative. Anyone who used the toolkit and provided feedback that would help them improve it, or who talked with peers about their experience using it was considered a champion, even if the feedback was critical or the experiences fraught with challenge. By regularly engaging both supporters and detractors to share information with them and their peers, PLA and PMTF helped potential adopters understand the many possible uses of outcome data in their work and drove home the messages that it is OK to learn by doing. They hoped to create a particular kind of buzz around library outcome measurement that encouraged peer-to-peer learning and discourse.

PMTF members and PLA staff also contributed to the buzz by joining as many convenings of public libraries and their stakeholders as possible, such as state conferences and the Association of Rural and Small Libraries, to talk about Project Outcome and the value of public library outcome measurement more generally.

Practicing what they preach

As described above, PLA used the Theory of Change outcome map to refine their strategies, inform the initiative’s evaluation plan, and hold themselves accountable for libraries’ and the field’ progress toward the initiative’s goals. PLA was also committed to continuous learning and improvement, both from the regular feedback they received from users—through technical assistance provision and interactions while participating in trainings, webinars, and conferences—and they also requested that the evaluation plan include data-driven learning opportunities conducted by ORS Impact every six months.

Across the two-and-a-half-year evaluation, data collection alternately focused primarily on process and then primarily on outcomes. From the process evaluation data, in combination with the feedback they were getting directly from users, PLA could prioritize improvements to the toolkit and reduce barriers to adoption—many of which were incorporated into website updates and the new custom survey management and reporting system. They could also infuse their outreach and communications with empirical evidence of progress on planned outcomes.

Partnering and coordinating to make progress toward common goals

At the time of the toolkit’s launch, Project Outcome was clearly not the only source of support for outcome measurement within the public library field. Rather than competing for market share, PLA and the PMTF recognized other entities as partners—and vice versa. This ensured mutual investment in each other’s offerings to the field and allowed them to leverage their collective resources to further progress toward their common goals. One of these partners was the Research Institute for Public Libraries (RIPL), an annual library data summer camp for building knowledge, confidence, and skills in outcome-based evaluation, survey design and administration, benchmarking, and data visualization that also offered regional workshops. At RIPL events, attendees would learn about Project Outcome and project participants were given opportunities to talk about their experience using it. In addition, as previously mentioned, IMLS was represented on the task force, which set them up for success to further align Project Outcome measures and the outcome measures required by the IMLS state library agency grantees and public library sub-grantees.

14 RIPL is a collaborative effort by the Colorado State Library and the Colorado Consortium, funded in part by IMLS. (see <https://ripl.lrs.org/>)

“I appreciate the fact [PLA and the PMTF] have always been very committed to serving as complementary efforts, which we were too, and that’s worked well, because we focus on a similar topic but what we’re providing is different, so we have been able to come together well as partners because of that, and we can promote each other in terms of people taking advantage of both of us, that gives them a more complete toolkit.”

LINDA HOFSCHIRE, COLORADO STATE LIBRARY AND RESEARCH
INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Now and Looking Forward

At the time of this writing (June 2018), libraries have created more than 5,900 surveys in the survey management system and entered more than 140,500 responses from patrons participating in about 245 programs across the seven program areas/survey topics. These numbers reflect continued growth after grant funding for the initiative concluded at the end of 2017.

06



Since the grant-funded portion of the initiative ended, PLA has shifted organizational and committee structures related to measurement, and has demonstrated its continued commitment to helping libraries better serve their communities and tell their stories through data. Although PLA has decreased the amount of dedicated staffing for Project Outcome, it is continuing to make the tools and resources accessible at no cost, continuing to add to the project website resources to support more advanced outcome measurement as they emerge, and continuing to offer Project Outcome Regional Trainings (PORTs) upon request by state and regional entities. The PMTF and the PLDS Committee have merged into a new Measurement, Evaluation, and Assessment Committee (MEAC) with a broader set of responsibilities that support alignment of measurement-related efforts within and external to PLA.¹⁷

Building from the collaborative foundation established during the first years of the initiative, PLA and IMLS successfully negotiated 100% alignment between Project Outcome's measures and the standardized outcome measures developed by IMLS and their state library agency partners for use by LSTA grantees and sub-grantees through the Measuring Success initiative. PLA is also working with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions to support libraries across the globe in their efforts to measure outcomes to best align library services with community needs, continuously improve, and demonstrate the value of libraries as critical community assets.¹⁸

PLA's future plans for Project Outcome include expanding partnership activity with other library support organizations. For example, an organization that is developing a story time project for libraries nationally is incorporating the use of existing Project Outcome tools and resources into their program model, and PLA will provide training tailored to the programming. PLA also partnered with the Association of College and Research Libraries, which involved maintaining the general structure of the Project Outcome tools and resources but adapting the language of the items so they are more relevant to patrons of academic libraries.

17 MEAC is comprised of former PMTF and PLDS committee members and additional field leaders. The committee's charge includes: (1) reviewing and recommending measures, techniques, and data-related activities that will help the public library field provide services and programs to its patrons as well as communicate the value of libraries; (2) identifying new data trends and determining their potential for helping articulate the value of public libraries, and (3) reviewing and recommending updates to existing PLA data products and services, including PLDS/PLAMetrics.

18 <https://librarymap.ifla.org/>

PLA also is deepening its engagement with states, finding ways to help state library agencies increase the diffusion of Project Outcome usage among libraries and better understand how they can use the resulting statewide data for their own purposes.

Project Outcome has made measurable progress toward its goal of making outcome-based measurements “business as usual” throughout the public library field, and PLA continues to be actively engaged in conversations about how to do it better. The collaboration came at the right time, assembled the right people, created the right structures and processes, and maintained a humble and transparent way of working that helped propel the field forward, resulting in more community voices being heard and richer stories being told. PLA is committed to continuing this work with diverse partners in North America and around the globe.

Key Links

Project Outcome website

<https://projectoutcome.org/>

Global Libraries Legacy Partnership

<http://www.ala.org/pla/initiatives/legacy>

Project Outcome Case Studies

<http://www.ala.org/pla/initiatives/performance measurement>

Final Evaluation Executive Summary

https://projectoutcome.org/ckeditor_assets/attachments/362/pla_project_outcome_executive_summary_final.pdf

Project Outcome Annual Reports

<https://www.projectoutcome.org/pages/3>

Contributors

Stacey Aldrich, Hawaii State Public Library System
Carolyn Anthony, Skokie Public Library (retired)
Matthew Birnbaum, Institute of Museum and Library Services
Larra Clark, Public Library Association
Denise Davis, Allen County Public Library
Linda Hofschire, Colorado State Library
Chris Jowaisas, Technology & Social Change Group
Emily Plagman, Public Library Association



