

Focus Group Summary

Mission Statement:

The Metropolitan Library System facilitates the free flow of information and ideas by providing access to materials, services and programs to Oklahoma County's diverse community.

Background:

As you may know, five focus groups (three with staff and two with library commissioners) were recently held to gather ideas for our upcoming strategic plan. The purpose of the strategic plan is to provide a unifying vision for how we can improve and adapt our services over the next five years to better fulfill our mission.

The focus group participants volunteered their time and shared their vision of where they believe the library system should strive to be five years from now. Below are the general areas that encompass much of what was discussed in the focus groups. Please keep in mind that these groupings are not exhaustive; but rather are intended to represent recurring themes from the focus groups. Please feel free to contact Kay Bauman (kbauman@metrolibrary.org) if you have any questions or comments.

Descriptions

Facilities:

There was wide agreement that our facilities should have diverse spaces that include ample room for books and technology, quiet areas and places to talk, community gathering space, and accessible parking. Participants all envisioned facilities that were up-to-date and had a welcoming atmosphere. Some participants suggested that consistency among our libraries could be improved, especially in regards to signage. Other ideas such as improvement and expansion of YA areas were presented. It was agreed that our new facilities should be designed with the flexibility to adapt to unforeseen needs.

Completion of the projects underway was considered a priority. However, a focus in the future on smaller, more numerous and accessible "store front" type libraries featuring computer labs and book drop-off / pick-up was discussed.

Programming:

There was a variety of ideas about the programming we offer. While some wanted more programming, there were others who suggested limiting our efforts to select targeted programs. It was mentioned that we should be careful not to duplicate the efforts of other

agencies and focus on the areas where we can have the greatest impact. Offering programs such as story times at consistent times and intervals was also cited as a goal. Some areas that were singled out for attention are:

1. Senior programming – especially in technology and Medicare/Social Security.
2. Family place workshops for parents
3. Life skills programs for young adults
4. Programs that can be taken outside the libraries to nursing homes, shelters, & schools
5. After-school tutoring for children
6. Expand literacy and ESL/citizenship efforts to more libraries
7. Multi-cultural programs, especially in the arts and music, were highly valued

Staffing:

Several ideas to enhance career development were discussed. One-on-one mentoring by and between staff was seen as a way to smooth the transition as older staff members retire. Many participants perceive barriers between those with an MLS degree and those without and would like to see more alternative career paths available for employees without an MLS degree. For those with an MLS, one view held that there should be various librarian pay grades, or that additional responsibility should be somehow rewarded. Another suggestion was that children's librarians be assigned only to their areas. More technology assistants along with a clear and expanded role for the position were recommended as well.

Participants emphasized the importance of a staff that is friendly and public service oriented. Increasing staff diversity was brought up several times. Overall, participants desired an increase in the number of staff. Some participants thought we should consider using volunteers to help in some areas.

Another topic of discussion in the focus groups concerned communication between library staff, administration, and the library commission. Recommendations included having a staff association representative attend ad team meetings, having a standing conflict resolution committee on the library commission, having a way for staff to voice concerns anonymously, and more lead time and information before changes in policy are implemented.

Training:

Training was seen as key in keeping our staff up-to-date and informed of what is going on at our libraries. Generally, it was felt that our staff should have the highest level of continuing education possible. Some areas that were discussed include:

1. Classes on how to manage on-the-job stress.
2. Spanish courses specifically designed for communicating in common library situations.
3. Management training for library managers.
4. Courses reviewing basic competencies that all staff in certain positions should have.

Technology:

Without a doubt, technology was the most discussed topic in the focus groups. It was felt that we, as a library system, should be prepared for and embrace the pace of change we are experiencing. One of the biggest issues was how to meet the rapidly increasing demand for computers and internet access. Some participants felt we should open up our computers more to allow access to the CD/DVD drives.

One area of concern was that many people are unable to determine whether information on the internet is credible. It was felt that some sort of disclaimer to the effect that we don't endorse the information available online would crystallize the distinction between information obtained via the internet vs. information obtained by library professionals.

Another aspect of advancing technologies is the new ways we can serve our customers. Some examples discussed included making as much material as possible available over the internet, expanding our Ask a Librarian service, and modifying the catalog to allow searches to specify certain libraries or to include databases. Some of the staff participating in the focus groups thought technology could be used to make our workflow more efficient by making the Inter-library Loan request form electronic and especially by streamlining the reserves process.

Marketing:

Many of the focus group participants felt that our system and libraries in general have an uphill battle in changing public perception about what libraries offer. It was recommended that we be more proactive about our image in the community and make more of an effort to inform the residents of Oklahoma County about the resources we have available.

We should also, it was suggested, work to foster realistic expectations about what we can and cannot provide by, for instance, communicating our policies on unattended children in the libraries more effectively.

Another suggested goal of our marketing efforts was to create a solid base of support in the community to be utilized when we ask for an increase in the mill levy. This would be done by making sure that citizens feel their tax dollars are well managed by our library system. Building goodwill through our Food for Fines program would be helpful as well. Opinions differed on how soon such a vote would be necessary with some thinking it's overdue.

It was also suggested that we explore partnering with certain business entities within our community to help fund and support specific initiatives such as a literacy or ESL campaign.

MLS Profile:

Several participants would like to see our library system become more of a presence in trade publications and at industry conferences. They want us to be willing to try more innovative strategies and move quicker in reacting to industry trends. More awareness of the way other library systems operate was seen as a good way to benchmark our services and determine where we could improve. This would also include gaining recognition both nationally and within our own community for the areas in which we outperform and are leading the industry.

Facilitator

Kay Ham, the facilitator of the focus groups, put together a list of the themes she observed during the sessions. The descriptions she provided us are below.

- The idea of resilience; that is, continuous renewal and reinvention. More than simply reacting to change, the Library will further strengthen its capacity to anticipate and find new ways to meet the needs of a growing, increasingly diverse community.
- The Library will maintain its role as a trusted, respected community leader. It will occupy an increasingly important place, central in the lives of its customers and supporters. Not only will it be the premier source for information, it will also offer rich experiences in the world of music and art. It will be seen as a destination of choice, as "the place to be."
- Library customers will experience a life-affirming environment that is welcoming, friendly, safe, and inclusive where people will want to meet and talk, study and explore ideas, or be entertained. Groups and individuals of all ages will have a wide variety of resources, activities and programs available to them and informed, caring staff to assist them.
- The Library will expand its reach into communities with new or updated facilities that are convenient to access and use, strategically located, and innovatively designed with future growth and new, as yet unforeseen, uses in mind.
- Technological innovation is an increasingly significant driving force. The Library will come to the forefront of this by providing expanded space, equipment, networking capacity, and staff support to ensure the fullest and greatest variety of use by all its customers.
- The printed page will continue to be the mainstay of the Library's vast resources, and its collections of books and other printed material will expand.
- Among identified priority needs of the community, basic reading, ESL, and adult literacy will be provided at all Library sites. In addition, the needs of seniors and the elderly for information about matters that affect their lives will receive increased attention throughout the Library system.
- To maintain consistently high levels of service excellence, the Library will foster an organizational culture of trust, participation, and open communication between and among all employees and administration. Adequate staffing levels will be maintained, and the use of volunteers will be expanded. To attract and retain highly skilled and motivated individuals, more emphasis will be placed on professional education, and career development and training will be increased.
- Finding meaning and appreciation in life, creating memories, and fostering a love for the world of ideas, are transcendent themes and will be outcomes of the MLS experience.