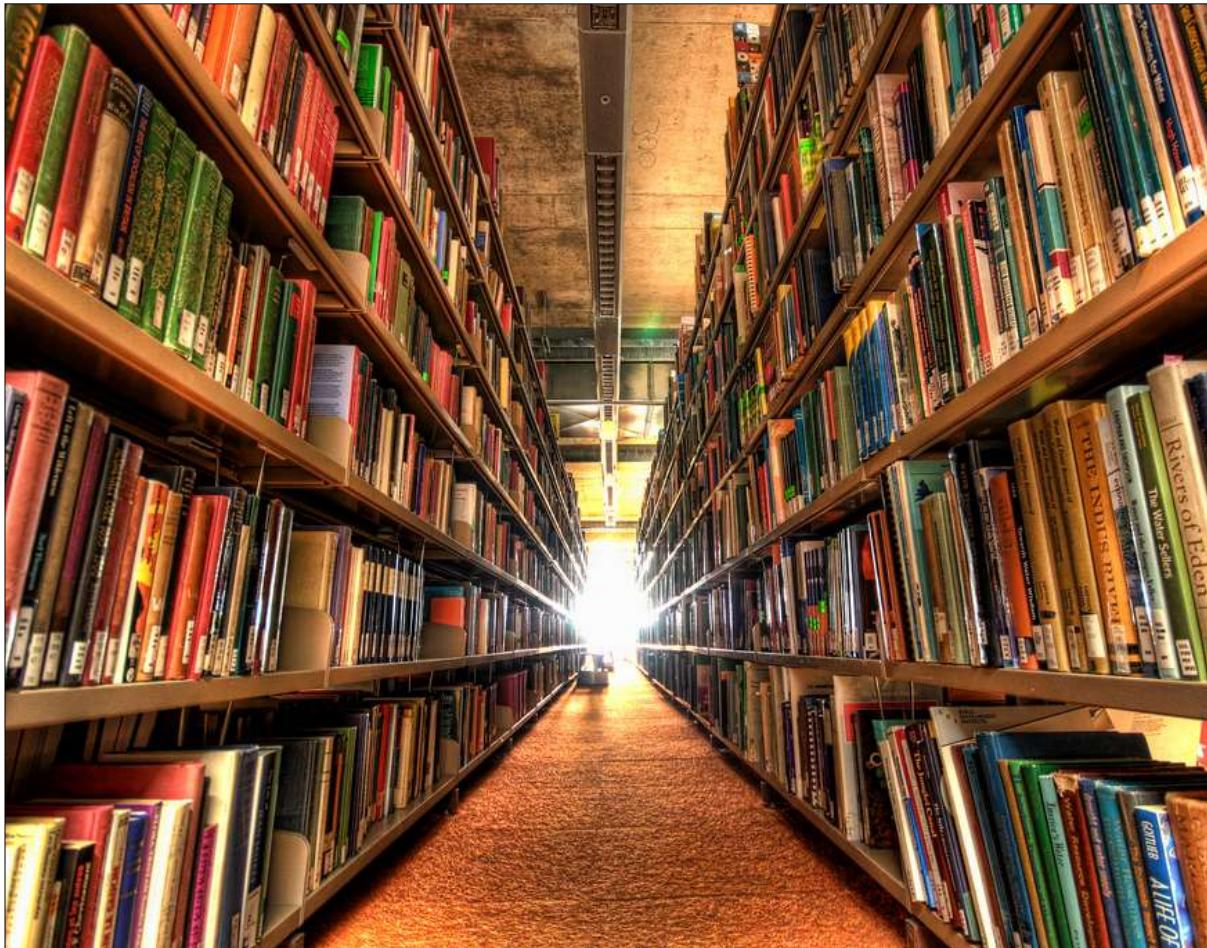




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Mid-sized Libraries Assembly

Department of State, Division of Library and Information Services

October 24-25, 2018

Tampa, Florida

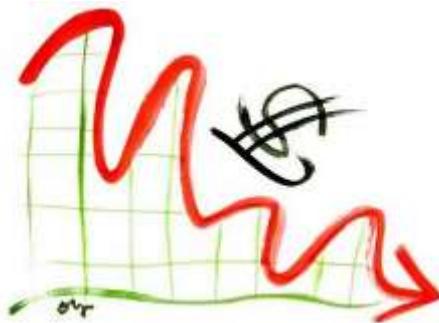
MID-SIZED LIBRARIES ASSEMBLY

The mid-sized libraries group met for the first time October 24 and 25, 2018, in Tampa, Florida. Their initial conversation focused on issues, challenges and opportunities facing libraries in Florida with emphasis on particular issues mid-sized libraries are currently dealing with. The hope is that, in partnership with the Department of State, Division of Library and Information Services, the issues raised can be managed through greater collaboration, cooperation and sharing.

The session began with introductions. The various library representatives in attendance were asked to list two issues they are currently facing in their counties. These issues included:

- A deputy county manager who emphasizes a strong business model that brings with it increased internal controls and scrutiny of processes.
- Reduced budgets and continuing decreases expected.
- Managing free community rooms and limiting access by for-profit use.
- Working with the Friends of the Libraries groups.
- Understanding Florida government and Florida laws.
- Building relationships among various libraries within the county.
- Having too many patrons for the services that can be provided given current staff and budget.
- Benchmarking initiative within the county and need to tell the right story with the right numbers.
- Dealing with the homeless services.
- Unable to offer competitive salaries, especially when sandwiched between larger counties.
- Staff recruitment and retention.
- Prioritizing good ideas with limited resources.

Using their individual issues as a foundation, the session participants spent the rest of their working time in small groups sharing the issues they have in common and the opportunities and challenges those issues bring. Of significant concern is **declining budgets**. The participants, however, recognized that funding is not something they have direct control over. Shifting funding priorities at the state and county level, an uncertain economy and changing social views about the role of libraries all affect the amount of money spent on libraries. The group agreed that solving budget problems will not be quick or easy and that new funding models may need to be explored.



Recruiting, developing, and retaining staff was another issue shared among all participants. One factor, related to budget cuts, is the inability to pay competitive salaries to qualified professional staff. Mid-sized counties located between larger or more urban counties find themselves in tremendous competition for qualified staff. Larger library systems are able to offer higher pay, more benefits and greater variety of job opportunities. Compounding the issue of competition for staff is the limited pool of qualified applicants available to all libraries; library science is a specialized field of study.

The competition for new hires influences retention of existing employees. Some employees may begin their careers in a mid-sized library but then move on to larger systems that have more resources and bigger budgets. Mid-sized libraries find it difficult to offer a long-term career path for employees. There simply are not enough positions in mid-sized libraries for employees to advance as their experience and skill sets grow.

Employee turnover and the lack of qualified applicants make succession planning challenging for mid-sized library directors. These factors also take a toll on the employees who stay. Employees can become overworked and burned out. They may suffer compassion fatigue from their desire to help but inability to meet all of the service needs. In such situations employee morale and productivity can decline. Programs and services offered by the libraries can also suffer when there are not enough staff to develop and manage them.



Some of the participants felt a focus on the positive aspects of working in libraries should not be overlooked. Mid-sized libraries, despite budgetary and staffing concerns, can offer a safe, professional and creative working environment. There was discussion among the group about how to convey that message to current employees as well as to potential applicants. In addition to a base salary, many library employees also receive retirement and health care benefits, paid leave time and tuition assistance. To become an “employer of choice” was a goal mentioned by one participant.

Some of the session participants mentioned that they are reaching out to other industries in hiring, at least for entry-level positions. Many skills are transferable across industries. Customer service skills, for example, are useful for library staff members who interact with the public. With Florida’s large service industry workforce, there are many individuals who are trained in customer service who could become quality frontline library employees. Library-specific skills can be taught or gained through formal education over time if an employee has a solid foundation of basic work and life skills.

“Grow your own” was a phrase used in reference to acquiring quality professional library staff members. As explained, the phrase means encouraging staff who are in non-professional positions to go to graduate school to complete the required degree. Many library systems provide support to these individuals, in terms of tuition payment or tuition reimbursement, either directly or through citizen support groups.

It was also suggested that volunteers could be used more frequently and creatively to fill staffing gaps. Managing and training volunteers takes time, but properly directed volunteers may be able to take on an array of tasks. Partnerships with other organizations might also help reduce workload and staffing demands. For example, libraries are a refuge for the homeless, and managing the homeless so that all patrons can safely access library services takes staff time and energy. Workforce development centers also send individuals to use library computers to apply for jobs or public assistance. Bringing social workers or workforce counselors to libraries could free up library staff and provide more efficient and effective guidance to those in need.

Some session participants suggested that now is a good time to look at restructuring library positions and revamping job descriptions to make better use of existing staff and to get a clearer picture of staffing needs given current and projected service needs and available technology. Creating job roles that allow staff to take ownership of innovation and new projects can provide libraries with more relevant services as well as engage individual employees (adding to the quality of work environment). Libraries could also collaborate on job descriptions so there is more standardization from county to county. While this would not prevent employees from leaving one library for another, it may help keep qualified staff within the state's library system.

Future technology and its connection to staffing and service challenges was a topic that arose in one group. New technology poses additional issues in finding qualified staff by placing specific demands on the skill sets of potential employees. Technology is integral to the daily operations of libraries and so library staff must be able to deal with changing technology and learn quickly. They must also be able to educate patrons on how to use technology for simple tasks such as finding a book or requesting an interlibrary loan. Many libraries also offer opportunities for patrons to learn new technology such as drones, coding, 3-D printers, etc.

New technology will have an impact on the types of jobs libraries offer. For example, Amazon's automated shelving that is connected to an inventory system could find its way into libraries. Check-out services may become fully automated. Autonomous vehicles may be used to transport patrons, deliver books and provide a range of mobile services. Staff members who spend most of their time shelving books or driving bookmobiles may be reassigned to jobs that require a human touch. Building security technology is being used to make libraries (and thus their

programs
and services) available 24/7.



Friends of the Library



There was much discussion during the session about finding a **new model for Friends of the Library groups**. Friends groups are an important part of libraries and can offer a variety of volunteer opportunities to members of the community. They can also help libraries tap into vital community networks such as non-profit organizations,

educational institutions and potential donors. They also serve as an advocacy arm of libraries and can help tell the story about not only library programs and services, but also the many social, cultural and economic benefits libraries bring to the community.

Several participants expressed concern about the aging of Friends group members. Attracting younger members to help libraries stay relevant and vibrant is a priority. More diversity in Friends groups might stimulate more creative funding and advocacy opportunities. There was also concern that current Friends

group models allow too much control over resources and opportunities for Friends group members to push their own agendas onto the libraries, lose focus on their purpose and resist needed changes. Session participants felt that a new model could be found that would emphasize all the good that Friends groups do while keeping them on task and connected to the work the libraries need to do in their communities.

The variety of services offered by libraries, and the growing demand for those services, was also a topic of discussion. Library directors and advocates often are faced with questions about why libraries are still needed. This question is an opportunity to educate people about the many benefits libraries bring to their communities. But is indicative of a mindset among the general public and more importantly among the decision-makers who fund libraries; library directors and advocates must be able to tell a data-driven story about their successes.

Building on the discussion of library services, one participant group explored the issue of the **relevance of libraries**. They noted that it is important to keep current patrons engaged and to introduce them to all of the services offered by their libraries. And it is important to find ways to reach non-users, both to understand why they are not library patrons as well as how they can be persuaded to become library patrons. The question of relevance will always be faced as more and more people have access to the Internet for research and to electronic media. Having a clear message and dedicated advocates will help libraries better tell their stories continually and consistently.

Libraries have become much more than lenders of books and other media. A trend in public administration has been to group libraries with other **community services** with the library directors either running these larger departments or reporting directly to community services directors. Libraries thus become a key player on a team that has the very broad focus of improving quality-of-life. Situating libraries within counties in this way gives library directors the opportunity to develop strong relationships among their peers in county government that can lead to greater service collaboration and perhaps even resource sharing. Library directors can also see the bigger picture of community needs and build connections with community leaders.

Libraries are more and more becoming a vital resource in **fighting poverty**. Libraries have long been champions of literacy. Programs for toddlers and school children of all ages are a mainstay of libraries. Libraries can also be more of a resource for schools, especially as schools are having to cut media specialist positions. Nurturing the minds of children and supporting the education system can help break the cycle of poverty by ensuring students graduate from high school able to read and comprehend well

enough to further their job training or education. Library services complement programs offered by workforce development organizations, and this is a partnership that could grow even stronger.

Libraries offer a **safe space for people to explore new ideas**. In this time of what one participant described as the “era of confirmation bias,” libraries offer a place for people to gather and converse in a civil manner. Through movies, books and art, libraries can foster deep and rich community conversations on highly charged topics. Patrons can educate themselves and strengthen their critical thinking skills.



The session ended with a brief conversation about **next steps**. Improving Friends of the Library groups is important, and the session participants would like to collaborate on new models. They would also like to send representatives from their Friends groups to FLA and Library Days and to have specific program or meeting time for their Friends group representatives. A suggestion was also made to share success stories of Friends groups from other states and to perhaps offer awards for innovative or successful Friends programs.

Though many of the issues raised are faced by libraries of all sizes, participants agreed there is a need to keep connected and to communicate as a group through quarterly statewide agenda-driven conference calls, a safe online group or listserv, and FLA conferences.