

**Eight
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*Findings from a 1999 survey conducted
by the American Library Association and
the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.*

*American Library Association
Public Programs Office*



A recent survey indicates that people come to their libraries for more than just books or to log on to the Internet. People are coming to libraries in steady and increasing numbers to meet authors, artists, and performers face-to-face. They come to hear poets and authors read from their works, to listen to live music, to explore the past through exhibitions and lectures. They come to talk to each other and build community.

Ten or fifteen years ago this may have been true at some libraries, but today almost every library in the country offers some level of cultural programming for adult audiences. “We’ve created a demand for this kind of programming,” says Frannie Ashburn, director of the North Carolina Center for the Book. “I’m delighted to see libraries rising to the challenge and meeting the demand with more and more higher-quality programs.”

Libraries are performance spaces as well as the access point to cyberspace. The reasons are similar—in both cases, libraries offer a free, comfortable, unintimidating introduction to both live cultural events and the virtual world wide web to audiences who might not have home computers or symphony tickets.

The national survey, conducted by the Public Programs Office of the American Library Association (ALA) with funding from the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund (LWRD), shows the active role of the public library in the cultural life of local communities. The most striking finding was the breadth of cultural programming across all libraries—large and small, urban and rural. *More than eight out of ten libraries surveyed offer some type of adult cultural programming (85.6 percent).*

Sampling of key findings

<i>Program types and formats</i>	<i>% of libraries offering</i>
Cultural exhibits	70.5 %
Book discussions	61.4 %
Author readings/presentations	59.3 %
Lecture series	43.8 %
Musical performances	41.7 %
Traveling exhibitions	38.2 %
Dramatic performances	22.9 %
Adult reading incentive programs	20.1 %
Film series	19.8 %
Creative writing workshops	18.2 %
Dance performances	14.2 %

- Book discussions and author presentations/readings are the top two literary program formats in terms of frequency and audience size. Discussion groups meet more often with smaller audiences, while author readings are less frequent and draw larger audiences.
- The demand for literary programming is constant and, in at least one in four libraries, the demand has increased for each of the program types. More than 90 percent of libraries plan to offer similar or increased programming in the coming year.
- The total attendance for all programs for adults offered during the last fiscal year or the past 12 months ranged widely, with the highest attendance total reported to be over 10,000 (7 percent of respondents). Nearly half the libraries reported total attendance of 500 or less (48.4 percent of respondents).
- One out of four libraries has a separate line item in the budget for adult programming (24.1 percent), and one-third of these reported an increase in this budget amount.
- The library Friends group is the most frequent source of outside funding for adult programming (67.7 percent). Only 7.7 percent of the libraries depend solely on library operating funds for adult programming activities. Besides Friends, humanities councils and art groups/councils were an important funding source.

- Libraries collaborate with a diverse group of partners when offering cultural programming. The five most frequently reported were: arts groups (40.3 percent), historical societies (32.7 percent), community-based organizations (32.1 percent), newspapers (30.0 percent), and writers groups (23.9 percent). The principal contributions made by these groups include program presenters, publicity, and audience.
- The majority of libraries that offered literary programming were aware of or had participated in ALA initiatives, suggesting that these initiatives catalyze local programming.
- Respondents suggested a number of services to support local programming needs. One in two libraries identified pre-packaged programs, traveling exhibitions, speaker referrals, information on funding opportunities, and ALA-sponsored grant opportunities as ways to increase the library's programming effort.
- Libraries in all regions showed involvement in cultural activities, with the largest total percentage in the North Atlantic (87.6 percent) and Great Lakes/Plains (87.0 percent) regions.
- Libraries serving 250,000 people or more are the most likely to offer each type of programming. Size of population, however, was not a major factor in offering cultural programs in libraries serving less than a quarter of a million people—some of the smallest libraries offered the widest range of programming.
- Libraries with the lowest per capita support are the least likely to present cultural programs and represent the largest percentage of libraries that do no cultural programming.
- Over 90 percent of libraries use alternative funding sources for cultural programs.

What public programs mean to libraries and their communities . . .

“Libraries are an incredible resource for the community. Bringing real artists, real authors, real people into the library is so important. With all of today’s technology, we forget that people are still writing books, people are still painting, making music, approaching life directly—not through a computer screen. Everyone benefits from programs—the community responses are so very positive, scholars and artists recognize that they are reaching new audiences, and the libraries are drawing more people, in many cases parts of the community we don’t normally see.”

Linda Holtslander, Loudon County Public Library

“Most writers have a relationship with the page and long for the oral dimension lost in our culture. The act of reading can be nurtured, developed, heightened. That’s what a good library can do, and that’s what bringing a writer into the library can contribute. It’s good for the reader to see . . . that the book and the writer are not the same.”

Stuart Dybek, author

“I realize how significant this project has been to me personally and how many people it has touched. . . . Young and old have passed through the exhibit, reading, talking, humming, dancing, and sharing.”

“One very important aspect of our celebration of his life as that all ages, races, and religions enjoyed it together.”

“The exhibit raised consciousness in many people about the importance of our jazz heritage, and we are confident that the learning process will continue and that our audiences will seek more opportunities to enjoy the music of Duke Ellington.”

Selected comments on ALA’s Duke Ellington traveling exhibition

For the library, for the community, and for me personally, the chance to participate in this tour has been rewarding and satisfying in unexpected ways. Although the exhibit was not huge in spatial terms and the programming was modest, the overall effort was intensive and broad, giving the library a different kind of visibility in the area and demonstrating the power of cooperation and the value of respect in a community that, perhaps like many American communities, is increasingly divided and mistrustful. Thank you very much for the opportunity to participate in this experience. It has been one of the most satisfying of my twenty years as a librarian.”

Exhibition site for ALA’s traveling exhibition

A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the U.S. Constitution

The Cultural Programs for Adults in Public Libraries survey was conducted in 1998 by the American Library Association Public Programs Office in cooperation with the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science Library Research Center, with support from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. All 461 public libraries serving 100,000 or more received a questionnaire. Over 1,000 libraries serving 5,000 to 100,000 were selected from a group that met the following criteria: at least \$100,000 operating budget, at least one MLS-degreed librarian, at least two full-time paid staff, and open at least 40 hours per week. Of the 1,500 questionnaires mailed, 81.9 percent were returned. Further information on the Cultural Programs for Adults in Public Libraries study can be found at the ALA Public Programs web site (<http://www.ala.org/publicprograms>) or by calling 800-545-2433, ext. 5055.

The American Library Association provides leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.

The American Library Association's Public Programs Office promotes and supports all types of libraries in their role as a cultural center—the “university of the people”—by providing programming models and materials, financial and other resources, training and technical assistance, and networking.

ALA Public Programs Office

Linking Libraries, Communities, and Culture

www.ala.org/publicprograms