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# North Carolina Adult Programming

*State-wide environmental scan of adult programming in North Carolina public libraries generates actionable data to improve services, inform policy, and shape continuing education.*

BY *Noah Lenstra*

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## Executive Summary

This project has the goal of conducting foundational research on the current state and future potential of public library adult programming in the State of North Carolina. According to the American Library Association (2019)'s *National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment* (NILPPA) "*librarians need the information emerging from [such] research to articulate the vision of a 21st-century library and create broader awareness and support*" for programming efforts. NILPPA goes on to state that library workers "*need to ensure this vital [programming] work is visible, and to share the changing image of libraries emerging from programming.*" By studying adult programming in North Carolina, this project has the goal of illuminating and making visible the efforts of North Carolina's librarians to support and develop their communities through adult programming efforts.

In the course of researching North Carolina libraries' adult programming efforts, we heard the conclusions of NILPPA echoed. Librarians reported needing help articulating a vision of how adult programming fits within overall library operations, and they reported seeking assistance sharing this vision both internally within their libraries and externally in their communities. The head of adult services at one urban library told us "*Adult programming is vitally important to the library's mission but is also a newer endeavor in the context of public libraries. Better funding, more training, and more research is needed to improve and expand our offerings and increase their impact.*" Another stated, more bluntly, "*We need better coordination of our adult programming.*" Librarians across the state reported attempting to discern the best way to weave programming into adult services.

This report articulates the work that needs to occur to strengthen adult services by strengthening adult programming. Based on an exhaustive, one-year study, we identified **four** needs, and **nine** attributes of public libraries that have successfully integrated adult programming into their overall operations. The conclusion of this research is that, currently, **good ideas do not circulate, and common struggles are endured in isolation**. Ending this situation requires raising the profile of adult programming, transforming it from, as one of our participants called it, "*the redheaded, left-handed, blue-eyed stepchild of library services,*" into what NILPPA calls "*central to libraries' work.*"

Such a transformation will not take place over night. Indeed, those urban libraries that have experienced success integrating adult programming into operations told us it took over a decade to make such a transformation. Nevertheless, efforts are already underway across the state. We can learn from these examples, and amplify them, such that North Carolina's public libraries can, in the language of NILPPA, accelerate "*their rapid transformation to centers for lifelong experiential learning, hubs for civic and cultural gatherings, and partners in community-wide innovation.*"

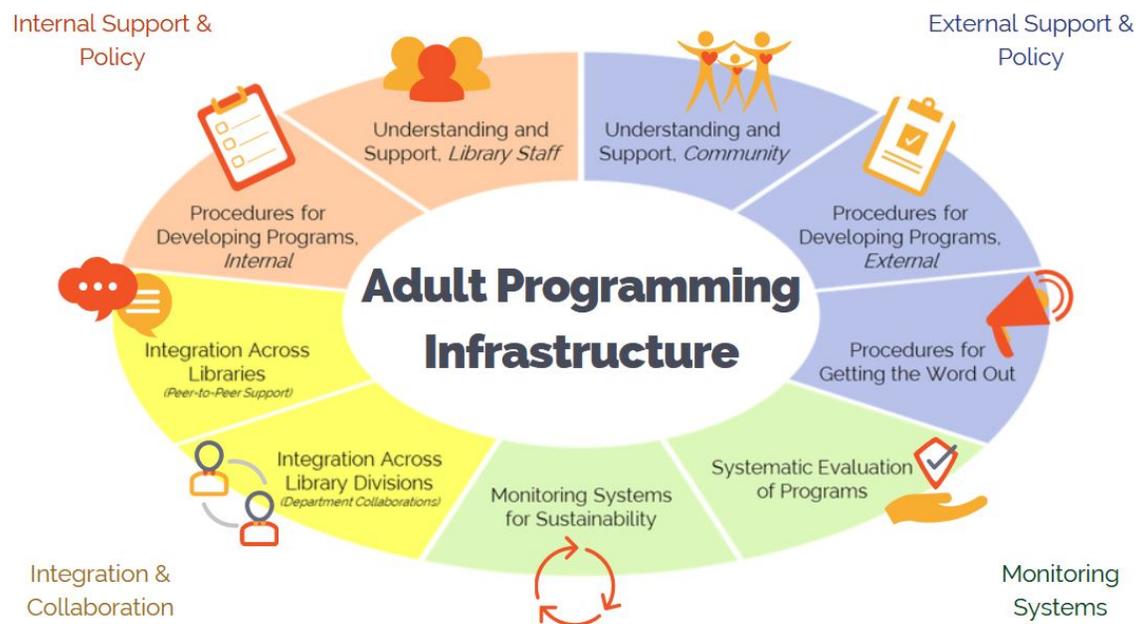
### **We can get there, together.**

To make this transformation happen, we need to work together to address four things:

1. **The need for advocacy and awareness:** Adult programming efforts are not always understood and supported, either internally or externally
2. **The need for policy and procedures:** Librarians need help developing institutional policies and procedures to integrate adult programming into overall missions of libraries
3. **The need for cross-training across divisions:** Adult services librarians look to colleagues in youth services for guidance and inspiration, a trend becoming more common in the context of increasing interest in inter-generational Family and Early Literacy Programming

4. **The need for peer-to-peer support:** Across the state adult programming successes are not widely shared, and programming struggles are typically endured in isolation. Librarians report needing and wanting more peer-to-peer support and peer-to-peer troubleshooting.

Arrayed across these four needs are nine dimensions of what we call **Adult Programming Infrastructure**. This infrastructure consists of the systems that, when present in public libraries, facilitate the successful provision of impactful adult programming over time and space.



### **Internal Support & Policy**

***Procedures for Developing Programs, Internal.*** Successful adult programming begins with internal procedures for library staff to follow as they develop and deliver adult programming, including guidance on connecting programs to library missions and strategic plans, as well as on how to integrate programs with collections and other library services and divisions.

***Understanding and Support, Library Staff.*** Success also requires buy-in and support from all levels of the library, from children’s librarians able to tell parents about upcoming adult programs to trustees prepared to communicate to their constituencies about programming efforts.

### **External Support & Policy**

***Procedures for Getting the Word Out.*** Adult programming success requires having in place tailored mechanisms to connect with desired participants. These procedures include in-house, word-of-mouth, and technology-rich methods of getting the word out about adult programming.

***Understanding and Support, Community.*** Community members need to not only know what programs are occurring, they need to know why and how public libraries develop and deliver adult programming. Cultivating community understanding and support includes advocacy efforts.

***Procedures for Developing Programs, External.*** Successful adult programming is frequently developed and delivered by partners and presenters external to the library. As such, successful adult programming requires procedures to support the development of programming partnerships.

### **Monitoring Systems**

***Systematic Evaluation of Programs.*** Not every adult program requires a full deployment of a post-program survey, but successful adult programming does require systematic procedures for evaluating programming efforts, writ large, including mechanisms to discern both immediate and long-term impacts on program participants, and on the reputation of the library in the community.

***Monitoring Systems for Sustainability.*** The long-term integration of adult programming into public library services requires systems to monitor trends over time, which enables library administrators to ensure programming fulfills library missions and strategic plans, as well as to facilitate the identification of gaps in programming efforts that could be strategically addressed.

### **Integration & Collaboration**

***Integration Across Library Divisions.*** As Family, Early Literacy, and Teenager programming grows in importance, adult services librarians have the unique opportunity to collaborate and work alongside programming peers in children’s and youth services. These collaborations should be welcomed and supported, such that adult programming becomes more integrated into the library.

***Integration Across Libraries.*** To ensure successes are shared and struggles are not endured in isolation, peer-to-peer support networks across libraries need to be developed and supported. The success of these networks requires buy-in from individual libraries, such that adult services staff have the time and energy to engage in cross-library programming and education initiatives.

### **Why infrastructure?**

The focus on adult programming infrastructure, as opposed to competencies individual library workers need to have to be able to develop programs (c.f. the conclusions of NILPPA), emerged from the finding that such infrastructure has ***already*** emerged in particular libraries throughout the state, with great success. At the state level, however, infrastructure is weaker than it could be, causing librarians to struggle more than they need to. The experience of one urban library system in North Carolina echoes the experience of public libraries across the state:

*“At one point our programming was sporadic and inconsistent. There were bright shining spots at selective libraries, while others of comparable size and staffing offered nothing. For a few years, there was a focus on ensuring all libraries offered a similar program with a similar focus at all locations to establish a baseline. We now maintain a baseline and have adopted some new methods in planning programs that have allowed for growth and creativity. Our adult programming is stronger than it has ever been.”*

The experience of this particular library echoes what we have heard across the state of North Carolina: Namely that there are currently *“bright shining spots at selective libraries, while others of comparable size and staffing offered nothing.”* As we probed this unevenness to discern its roots and contours, we returned again and again to the concept of **infrastructure**. This urban library, and others across the state, reported being at different stages of infrastructure development. Those

with more robust infrastructure report more success, both for particular programs and for the broader goal of *integrating* adult programming fully into library operations.

## Conclusions and next steps

Following the submission of the unabridged, 150-page report to the State Library of North Carolina, an online presentation was given to State Library staff in June 2020. The authors intend to continue work on this topic, and we hope to support the implementation of its recommendations.

## Study procedures

This environmental scan of adult programming in North Carolina public libraries sought to generate actionable data to improve services, inform state-wide policy, and shape continuing education.

This project was supported by grant funds from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, as administered by the State Library of North Carolina, a division of the NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (IMLS grant number LS-00-19-0034-19). This study was undertaken by Dr. Noah Lenstra, Library & Information Science, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, on behalf of the State Library of North Carolina.

The four needs articulated in this report emerged from a year-long study (September 2019-May 2020), which had three main components:

1. A comprehensive review of all public library websites in the state of North Carolina, focusing on the representation and current state of adult programming. This step included the collection of programming plans and policies from public libraries that had them available.
2. A survey completed by representatives of 78 of the 83 public library systems across the state, focused on the administration, current state, and anticipated needs of adult programming. The survey had five sections: Budget & Staffing, Program Partners, Program Types, Program Audiences, and Program Impacts.
3. Four three-hour focus groups that included 33 representatives from 28 public library systems across the state. Participants came from all the regions of the state and from libraries of all types

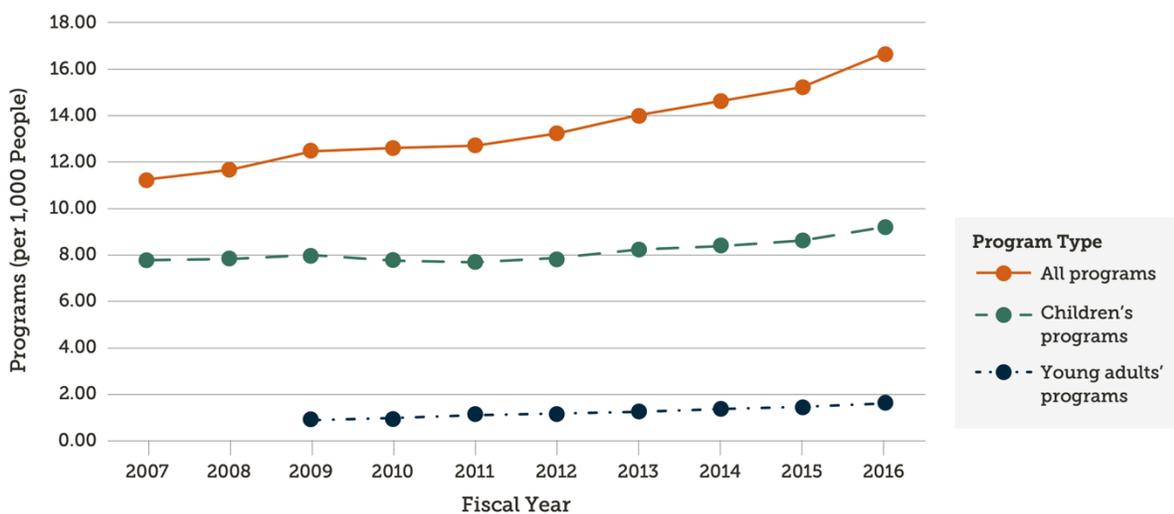
The data from these three sources was comprehensively analyzed by Dr. Noah Lenstra and graduate student assistant Lindsey Wilson. Questions about this project should be directed to Dr. Lenstra at [lenstra@uncg.edu](mailto:lenstra@uncg.edu).

## I. National and State Contexts for Adult Programming Infrastructure

### 1. National Context

The most recent Institute of Museum and Library Services ([2019](#)) Public Libraries Survey finds that across the nation **programming for all ages has increased by 72.1% since 2010**. Drilling into this data reveals much of this growth is attributable to a steady rise in adult programming (Figure 1). Between FY2007 and FY2016, the total number of library programs offered per capita increased at a much faster pace than children’s or young adults’ programs. In other words, **adult programming is increasing at a faster rate than children’s or young adult programming**.

**Figure ES-1. Total Programs Offered per 1,000 People by Program Type, FY 2007–2016**



NOTE: Per 1,000 people estimates in the figure use the unduplicated population. Total programs does not equal the sum of children’s programs and young adults’ programs. Total programs may include other state-specific program data not collected or reported by the PLS. Data on young adults’ programs were not collected until FY 2009, and therefore, 10-year trends are not available. Differences of less than 10 percent in per person estimates over time are generally not highlighted as meaningful in this report.

SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2007–2016.

**Figure 1:** The rate of increase for adult programming eclipses youth programming, IMLS ([2019](#)).

This expansion reflects changing societal perceptions of public libraries among adults. The American Library Association (2018) reports in “[From Awareness to Funding Voter Perceptions and Support of Public Libraries in 2018](#)” that “*More voters today say it’s important for the library to be a community hub,*” manifested by offering “*activities, entertainment not found elsewhere.*” **Adults increasingly say that it is important for public libraries to offer a diverse array of programs.**

Testifying to this shift in perception is the work of sociologist Eric Klinenberg, who in *Palaces for the People* illustrates again and again how diverse Americans find valuable social connections in public library adult programming. He profiles how “[Seward Park is one of many New York Public Library branches that offer karaoke sessions. They are especially popular with older Asian and Asian American patrons, some of whom travel together from branch to branch to sing as often as possible.](#)” And he gushes effusively about how there is a “[Library Lanes program in the Brooklyn Public Library where once a week groups of older library patrons assemble in common rooms, put on bowling league jerseys, and hook up an Xbox and do virtual bowling matches, one library team against another.](#)”

Klinenberg illustrates how in our world of micromarketing and social divisiveness, the human connections facilitated and supported by public library adult programming has become more and more central to public librarianship. OCLC/WebJunction's [Libraries as Social Connectors](#) emphasizes this point, and breaks it down into actionable steps programmers can implement.

## 2. Economic differences explain different levels of service in North Carolina

Despite increasing national attention to and support for adult programming efforts, we find in the state of North Carolina great unevenness when it comes to adult programming. After closely reviewing the [2018-2019 Statistical Report of North Carolina Public Libraries](#), the most recently available at the time of this study, this project oriented analysis around the North Carolina Department of Commerce's annual ranking of the state's 100 counties based on economic well-being, with Tier 1 being the *most* economically distressed, and Tier 3 being the *least* economically distressed.

Tier Designation	Average of Library square feet per capita	Average annual number of Adult Programs	Average of Adult Attendance Per Program	Average of % of Programs are Adult	Average of Income Per Capita (\$)
1	0.53	147.87	17.12	24.4%	21.55
2	0.61	665.03	16.22	31.5%	25.50
3	0.52	815.05	21.73	28.0%	29.92

**Table 1: Adult programming compared to the economic tiers in North Carolina**

Given these rankings are on the county level, we followed the procedures used by the State Library of North Carolina to assign a Tier Designation to Multi-County Regional and Municipal Libraries. We also limited our focus to the 78 public libraries that completed the survey, given that we only had data from those libraries.

Based on these procedures, we determined the following:

- Tier designation has little correlation with library square footage per capita – in other words *the space available for adult programs is an issue across all tiers*
- Nonetheless, the more economically robust the community served, the more adult programs offered, and the more income the library has available, per capita, for programs
- Tier 3 libraries had ca. 130% the participation rates of less well-to-do counties

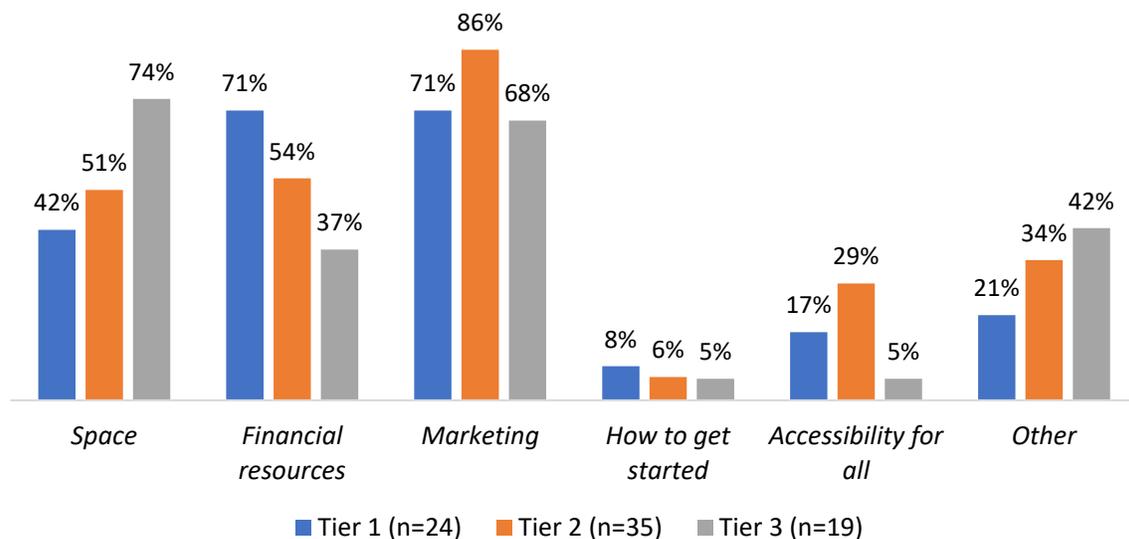
One can conclude from these facts that **libraries in wealthier communities have more programs in general, and as a result they have more programs for adults, which tend to have higher numbers of participants than those in less wealthy communities.** Given this state of affairs, the needs surrounding adult programming infrastructure are not homogeneous across the state. Those libraries in more economically distressed communities experience more needs related to the development of programming, while those in more economically robust communities report needing more help sustaining programming and integrating programming into library missions.

## II. The Need for Advocacy and Awareness of Adult Programming

NILPPA concludes that across the United States, “many in our communities are unaware of contemporary library services,” particularly as it concerns programming as a core facet of contemporary public librarianship. We came to similar conclusions. Across the state of North Carolina, the most consistently reported challenge associated with adult programming was “Marketing/Getting the word out” (**Figure 2**). Fully 77% of public libraries said they struggle with this issue. While Tier 3 libraries reported having the most struggles with space - which makes sense given the above discussion about these libraries offering the most programs, but in spaces the same size as those of poorer communities - and Tier 1 libraries were most likely to report struggles with money, **all libraries reported challenges with marketing and getting the word out.**

### Getting the word out was considered to be the greatest challenge when offering programs for adults, especially in Tier 2 designated public libraries.

% of respondents indicated \_\_\_\_\_ was a challenge in developing and executing programs for adults.



**Figure 2, n=78**

Source: Survey conducted November 2019.

“[North Carolina Adult Programming]”

As the NILPPA quote above suggests, marketing and getting the word out goes beyond technical mechanics associated with, say, putting together a flyer. This study found that that the core problem behind the issue of “marketing/getting the word out” is **Communications: How to communicate internally and externally about adult programming in ways that resonant?**

Reflecting the challenge associated with internal communications, a public library director from rural community in northeastern North Carolina reported:

*“I find myself planning the majority of the adult programs at the main library, but we often have little or no attendance, even though I try many different ways of marketing as well as different times and days for the programs. One of my branches has been having more successful adult programs and I’m not sure what causes her attendance to be better.”*

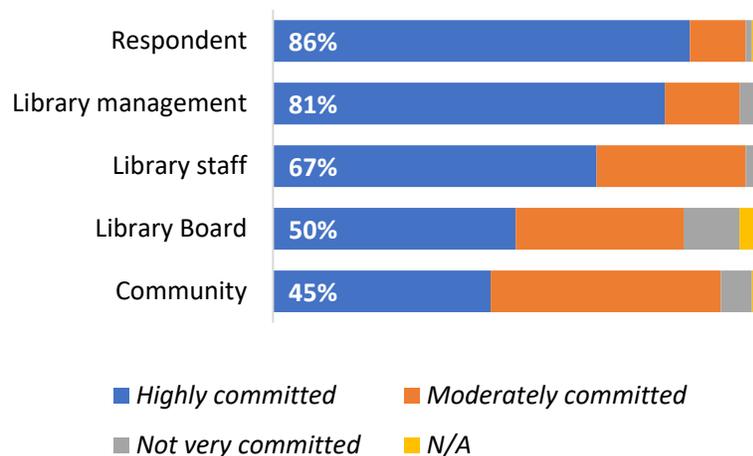
Librarians throughout the state reported being mystified as to why some programs attract an audience and others do not. What explains these differences? Our research suggests that communications issues shape these difficulties. These communications struggles include:

1. How to best utilize digital technology to get the word out about adult programming?
2. How to communicate to library staff and administration such that everyone is aware of and invested in promoting and supporting adult programming efforts?
3. How to communicate to potential partners about the benefits associated with partnering with the library to develop and deliver adult programming?

These communication needs can be visually seen in the responses to the survey question on levels of commitment to adult programming. Unsurprisingly, 86% of those librarians who filled out the

### Community members were perceived as being the party with the lowest level of commitment to adult programming efforts.

% of libraries indicated that \_\_\_\_\_ were perceived to be highly committed to adult programming efforts.



**Figure 3**, n=78

Source: Survey conducted November 2019.  
“[North Carolina Adult Programming]”

survey said they were highly committed to adult programming. Those respondents also reported that 81% of library administrators are highly committed as well. However, only 67% reported their library staff and 50% said their library board were as committed, and, most troublingly, only 45% said their community was highly committed to adult programming as an integral dimension of library services.

**Figure 3** shows us we still have a lot of work to do across the state as we figure out how best to weave adult programming into the overall structure of North Carolina’s public libraries. These efforts need to begin with communications developed in such a way that there is clear understanding of

adult programming, with that understanding first developing internally and then being shared externally.

One of the best mechanisms to improve this situation may be through staff training on retail engagement, focused on fostering staff buy-in, elevator speeches, and things like hand-selling mechanisms. One urban librarian told us:

“One of the struggles for staff is comfort in selling the program itself. I would love to see a concerted effort on some sort of training on hand-selling programs. Maybe bringing in salespeople, bringing in marketing people and just explaining ‘This is how you do it. This is how you take that opportunity and sell that program.’ So often our staff are more introverted - librarians tend to be more introverted and [therefore] less likely to do that hand selling. I would love, love, love to see some training on, ‘How do you take that opportunity [to sell a program via word-of-mouth] and go for it?’”

This librarian and others told us that they struggle building and sustaining cultures in their libraries in which everyone (from the board on down) knows why libraries offer programs for adults, knows what the library is offering, and can talk it up to anyone, either inside the library or via outreach.

Some libraries take this approach to word of mouth communications even further and are embarking on ambitious plans to train the public to be the faces of the library in the community. A librarian from the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains reported how they are developing a new Library Ambassadors Program to more effectively raise collective consciousness about adult programming as a vital facet of contemporary adult services:

“I’ve been at my library for five years, and during that time we had lots of people come to lots of different programs. And some programs have died, and some programs have risen. And one commonality in our programming successes [for adults] is that there is someone who is not a staff member, but who is really passionate about the program, who goes to say, five friends, and says, ‘Come with me to this program, and let’s do this.’

I was talking to our circulation manager, who manages adult volunteers - I manage teen volunteers - That’s just how we’ve always been set up - who’s know why, right? But she was saying that she really doesn’t have time to train all these adult volunteers. You have a process for teens: they apply for a job, and they interview with us, and we use it as a lifelong learning experience. But she just doesn’t have time to do that for the adult volunteers. So she usually just turns people away, because her staff keeps up with shelving, and there’s not a lot for them to do. And a lot of times the things that we have our [adult] volunteers do are not that fulfilling.

So she and I have talked about making a Library Ambassador program where adults can commit to a certain number of hours and what they will do is - since we don’t have a marketing staff - go and market for us, and tell their friends, and tell people we wouldn’t think of, and bring them to programs. They could do things like canvass with flyers, and just talk to their friends and be like, ‘Hey, I’m going to this program, Let’s all go! Let’s do this. Let me drive you if you don’t have a way to get there,’ because transportation is an issue here in [our] County.”

This quote demonstrates the innovative thinking that exists in North Carolina regarding a) how to harness the power of word of mouth to drive participation in adult programming, and b) how the locus of innovation is often in youth services (moving from teen to adult volunteers). This quote also illustrates a fundamental communications problem. Namely, there are adults who want to help the public library fulfill its mission who are being turned away because the library lacks a concrete way to put them to work. In the context of all the feedback we heard about librarians not having enough time and money to do things, this is a criminal waste that unfortunately is common. One librarian told us on the survey that they no longer even accept volunteer applications because they had too many volunteers and aren't sure what to do with them. Primarily they just had volunteers shelving and weeding books. If we found a way to fix this problem – the problem of how to harness community goodwill – we would fix a lot of the other problems public libraries face as well.

This librarian's comment also illustrates the nebulous boundary between internal and external communication plans. In developing an innovative Library Ambassador Program this librarian works to turn external stakeholders into internal stakeholders, moving adults from the roles of participants into invested stakeholders. By facilitating this transition, this library, and others like it, particularly in smaller communities, builds up a pool of library advocates, increases word of mouth advertising, and expands programming participants.

### **What messages should we be conveying about adult programming?**

Librarians also report needing talking points as they communicate about adult programming, both internally and externally. These talking points need to begin with a realistic assessment of what adult programming actually entails. A library director in Eastern North Carolina told us: *"Our most successful programs: They're all social interactions, and those seem to be what people want more than say, learning how to do their budget, or even the computer classes, which have kind of tanked. With the craft classes, half the comments I get are 'we had such a fun time hanging out.'"*

Again and again, here is what we heard constitutes successful adult programming:

1. It is social – people come to see each other and to interact in a learning rich environment
2. It's spread through word-of-mouth – patrons themselves do the best advertising
3. It's a partnership – Partnership-based programs lead to built-in audiences
4. It's consistent – Regular consistency in adult programming is key to building community
5. It builds community – Programs pull together heterogeneous people from diverse sub-communities and puts them in the room together, talking and interacting with each other
6. It is fun: Adult services librarians think that when they work with adults, it has to be serious (read: boring). Fun isn't just for kids. Adults like to have fun, too! Play is not only fun, it is important for mental and emotional health, as well as for effective lifelong learning
7. It is **not** a reference transaction scheduled in advance: Adult services librarians sometimes convert reference transactions into programs (e.g. 1-on-1 tech help), which can be an effective way to schedule reference work; but is not truly a program (c.f. NILPPA)

It is critical to point out that **simply because a program is social does not mean it is frivolous.**

Great ways to program around difficult topics for adults, revealed in the study, include:

- 1) Fair/Expo: Health, Comicon, Veterans' Benefits, Local authors, any topic possible
- 2) Support and interest groups: Apple Users Group, Crafting, etc.
- 3) Skill-building: Makerspace, exercise, nutrition, health etc.

### III. The Need for Policies and Procedures around Adult Programming

In organizing this study, we wanted to know if programs for adults are deliberately planned for? Or are they instead something that happens more idiosyncratically?

Results suggest that **Adult Programming is more often planned for in wealthier communities, and this planning includes policies and procedures that allow for the full mobilization of outside resources, including paid presenters, volunteers, and programming partners.**

- Over 50% of Tier 3 libraries have programming policies. Less than 20% of Tier 2 and 10% of Tier 1 libraries have such policies
- Over 50% of Tier 3 libraries have structures in place to facilitate co-developed programming (programs developed with partners). Around 40% of Tier 1 and 2 libraries have such structures
- A majority of all libraries report sometimes paying outside presenters and allowing unpaid volunteers to lead programs, but these practices are most common in wealthier communities

Furthermore, a major take-away from **Figure 4**, next page, is that, across the state, funding for adult programming is either staying stable or increasing. Tier 3 libraries were those most likely to report year-to-year increases in adult programming budgets, with 63% reporting that the budget had increased between FY2018 and FY2019, 25% reporting it had stayed the same, and 13% reporting a decrease in available funding. The fact that increasing funds are seen most regularly in Tier 3 libraries suggests the following: **The development of policies and procedures to support adult programming leads to increased institutional support for adult programming, in the form of**

#### Public libraries that have adult programming policy and partnership structures are more common in Tier 3 North Carolina communities.

*% of NC public libraries indicated they have/allow \_\_\_\_\_ for adult programs.*

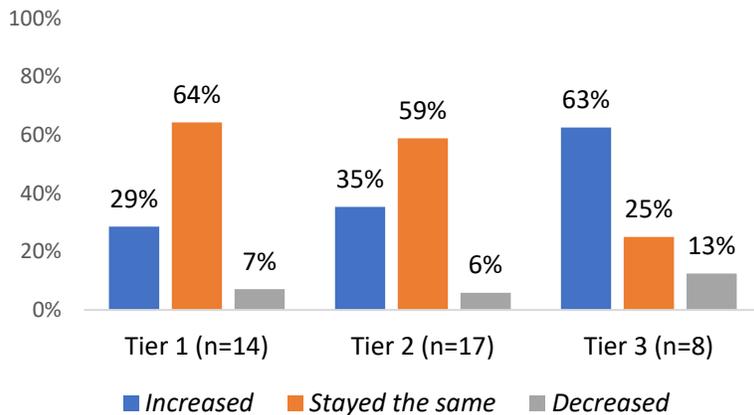
	% of Respondents Said "Yes"		
	Tier 1 (n=24)	Tier 2 (n=35)	Tier 3 (n=19)
<i>Library has programming policy to determine what type of adult programming to offer, how, and when</i>	8%	17%	53%
<i>Library has a structure in place to facilitate external partnerships for adult programs</i>	38%	40%	53%
<i>Library sometimes pays outside individuals and/or institutions to lead adult programs</i>	67%	71%	84%
<i>Library sometimes allows volunteers to lead adult programs</i>	71%	74%	79%
<i>Adult programming is considered central to the mission of the library</i>	96%	83%	100%

**Table 2, n=78**  
Source: Survey conducted November 2019.  
"[North Carolina Adult Programming]"

*increasing funds allocated to this area, which in turn enables the further development of this facet of contemporary public librarianship.*

### **Tier 3 libraries were more likely to see an increase in their programming budget.**

*% of Tier \_\_\_ NC public libraries indicated their operating budget line item for adult programming had either increased, stayed the same, or decreased when compared to the previous year.*



**Figure 4, n=78**

Source: Survey conducted November 2019.  
 “[North Carolina Adult Programming]”

The development of these policies and procedures takes a lot of time, as a quote from the assistant director of a regional library system in Eastern North Carolina who has recently embarked on this journey illustrates:

*“When [planning for programs] started out [at my library], it was basically just library administration asking librarians to submit a program plan. We gave them the form and told them, ‘Okay, You’re going to need to fill out this form on the last day of the month, along with submitting your continuing education plan.’*

*We tried to develop the form so everyone can have like a fixed idea of what’s required. But at first it wasn’t too demanding. We didn’t tell them how many programs*

*were needed. We wanted people to get used to the form first. After a few months, we started saying, ‘Okay. Now you need to have at least one Children’s, one Adult, and one Outreach program a month.’ We will still have people struggle to give you enough programs a month. But, on the other hand, we’ve got one branch that will give you a program plan every month that’s really fun. But yes, we are now to the point where it is pretty firm, and every month they have this expectation.”*

Along with this form, and required procedures for filling it out, this library has also started a shared drive space in which librarians from across the system can access other librarians’ program plans as well as evaluation information about past programs, thus creating the foundation for peer-to-peer sharing within this multi-county library system. Nearly identical systems are now in operation in many of North Carolina’s urban public library systems as well, and hypothetically such a mechanism could even exist at the state level, a point to which we return later in this report.

### **The public library is open for programming partnerships: Institutionalizing collaboration**

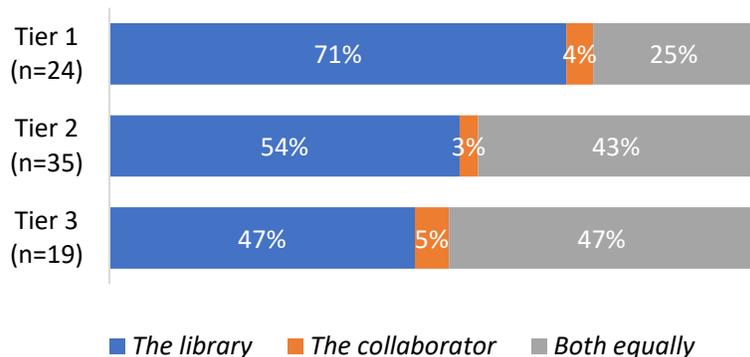
In addition to discovering that some libraries now have structures in place to require and to support consistent adult programming across branches, we also discovered that some libraries have begun creating policies and procedures to facilitate what NILPPA calls ‘co-developed programs,’ or programs developed through community partnerships. Across the country,

OCLC/WebJunction and the American Library Association have illuminated the value and importance of this programming partnerships. National entities also highlight the vital importance of **communications** in fostering and sustaining such partnerships. In the IMLS-funded [Libraries Respond to the Opioid Crisis with their Communities](#), OCLC/WebJunction concludes, “*in almost all cases, the library initiated the partnership. To develop these partnerships, some libraries relied on personal relationships they had from previous work and others used the credibility of the library institution*” (p. 16). ALA’s NILPPA also concludes there are “**three main pathways** through which libraries can develop programming:

1. Library staff may develop programs locally;
2. Libraries may co-develop programs with partner organizations; and
3. Regional or national entities may develop and distribute programs to libraries.”

### Libraries are the primary initiators for adult programming efforts in Tier 1 designated communities.

% of respondents indicated that \_\_\_\_\_ is the primarily initiator of adult programming efforts at their library.



**Figure 5, n=78**

Source: Survey conducted November 2019.

“[North Carolina Adult Programming]”

Tier 3 libraries are most likely to have equal relationships with programming partners (**Figure 5**). Although across the state a tiny minority reported partnerships primarily initiated by collaborators, Tier 3 libraries were most likely to report that libraries and partners equally initiate co-developed programs (47%), followed by Tier 2 libraries (43%), and Tier 1 libraries (25%). In more economically distressed communities, word has not yet gotten out that libraries want to work with partners to develop adult programming. Libraries in these areas are much

more likely to take the lead in initiating partnerships. This fact could potentially flow from the fact that libraries in these communities are less likely to have the policies and procedures in place that institutionalize adult programming, either internally or externally.

As these programming partnerships emerge and spread, a growing number of libraries have sought to institutionalize this facet of adult programming. After Chapel Hill Public Library presented on their “[Propose a Program](#)” webform at the 2017 meeting of the North Carolina Library Association, libraries across the state developed similar forms focused on enabling

and supporting outside entities interested in leading programs at public libraries, see examples from [Orange County Public Library](#) and [Henderson County Public Library](#). What is remarkable about these forms is that **the process of proposing a program as a librarian is nearly identical to the process of proposing a program as a member of the public.**

Recognizing this fact, some libraries have started hiring staff specifically charged with fostering these connections and collaborations. The director of adult services at an urban library told us:

“In our county most of our adult programs are done with a performer, presenter or someone like that. It's not a lot of programming being done by the librarians. As a result, we have a community engagement person who goes out into the community and establishes partnerships throughout the county. Part of our plan is that one of our objectives is to do that, to go out and partner with different organization. So, we really try to encourage that.”

At another urban library, the library director told us that they are in the process of creating a new position, “*Public Programs & Partnerships Manager*,” whose job will be “*strategic development and management of all programs, with a focus on adults.*”

As these types of programming partnerships and staff roles proliferate and become institutionalized, some urban libraries report having “key partners” they trust to come in and do programs with minimal oversight from the library. Regarding how they work with partners, an Adult Services Director at an urban library told us:

“We have very specific guidelines that we share with partners that are coming in, in which we say, ‘This is what you can do, this is what you can't do.’ We also do a lot of piloting. We will pilot something at one library, or maybe two to see how it goes. We will meet with partners before, to lay out the ground work for the pilot. Out of this process, we have developed some very, very successful partnerships. Our partnership with [one group] is amazing. They do programs at all of our libraries three times a year. As we grow more comfortable with an organization, we tend to step back a little bit. But there's definitely a process in place, specific guidelines, meetings, piloting, and then taking it from there.”

The key lessons from this quote are as follows:

1. There is a system in place to vet and develop co-developed programs, and that system is remarkably similar to the system the library uses to develop and vet programs developed by library staff. Training and scaffolding for partners and librarians are nearly identical
2. After a relationship has grown, the library “*grows more comfortable*” with the organization, and steps back from as intensive oversight, in the same way that as a library staff member develops his or her competencies, they require less oversight or supervision

This story differs from other stories we heard at other libraries, where there was no real rhyme or reason to different programming partnerships, and in some cases library administrators could not even tell us how some partnerships operated at their branches. The key thing to take away here is the **critical necessity of developing policies and procedures for tracking and monitoring.** Moving from the idiosyncratic delivery of programs at particular locations to systems to support and document adult programming as a core facet of public librarianship takes time and it takes resources, but as we heard from those libraries already doing this work, it pays off over time. This finding holds true across urban, suburban, and rural libraries across the state, in all economic tiers.

## IV. The Need for Cross-Training Across Divisions

*“We’re doing some adult programming: Granted it’s always kind of an add-on. It’s not structured like the children’s, or the teens. Anything for adults is kind of like, ‘We just throw it in there without planning.’ So there’s not really an organization to it, or any accounting for it. And, for some reason you feel like when you go to your Friends of the Library, you ask for money for the kids. For adults, it doesn’t have the same importance to people. Sometimes I feel like I’m grasping at straws, you know. Libraries across the state are trying to do the same thing. So, it would be nice to not work in isolation.”*

The situation of this branch librarian in Eastern North Carolina echoed the experiences we heard from librarians across the state: In the absence of robust policies and procedures, library workers feel alone and isolated as they develop adult programming. Cross-training across divisions could greatly ameliorate this situation. As this librarian points out, structures and supports are already largely in place for youth programming, so there are models that could support adult programming.

Both across the country and in North Carolina, programming as a facet of public librarianship is much more developed in youth than in adult services. NILPPA found in its review of LIS curricula that *“course titles and descriptions suggested that programming courses were heavily focused on young adults, children, storytelling, and diversity.”* In our focus groups we heard librarians report little to no discussion of adult programming in either their professional or continuing education. Given this state of affairs, in addition to more support for adult programming in LIS curricula, we also need to facilitate more sharing and peer-to-peer support **between** youth and adult services.

Beyond facilitating more effective adult programming, such cross-training could also bring a more nuanced understanding of diversity and inclusion into adult programming. Again and again, we heard public librarians state that the locus of innovation, as it concerned diversity and inclusion, was in youth services. A suburban librarian stated that her experience working with a local PFLAG organization on adult programming grew out of a partnership focused on teen services:

*“I just went to them directly and said, ‘Hey, can I have some of your stuff for our teen section.’ That ended up turning into, now we’re getting them to come do presentations in the library. They’re doing one at the end of this month on gender inclusive communities across our branches. I’m really excited to have them come in because they are the experts, and we’ve actually gotten some folks to come in and start using the library after for a time feeling like they couldn’t, that it wasn’t necessarily a safe place.”*

Librarians told us there is more support and structure for this type of community engagement in youth services. The branch librarian at a library in Appalachian North Carolina stated that: *“Increasingly we try to go outside the library to do programming where people are. This is certainly true for youth programming but could also be true for adult programming.”* Similarly, a librarian from rural central North Carolina stated that *“most formal partnerships are for children.”*

Nonetheless, we did hear from an urban librarian a very nuanced understanding of diversity as it concerns a new initiative to engage lower income adults in their 20’s

*“Basically [a new report] outlined that among ages 16-24, 40% [in our city] are not in school or working, so we’ve been looking at targeting that transition age from Teen into Adult Services, because traditionally when they turn 18, they leave the library. They come back as*

*parents or seniors. So we've got a team of staff that are Teen Services folks and Adult Services folks working together. We're trying to figure out what can we do, whether it's programming, or what it is, to engage those people. So that's where our focus has been, but we haven't really kind of come up with like solutions and we're kind of just in the talking stage."*

Here is a perfect example of how adult and youth services librarians can come together in a strategic fashion to develop high impact programs focused on reaching underserved demographics.

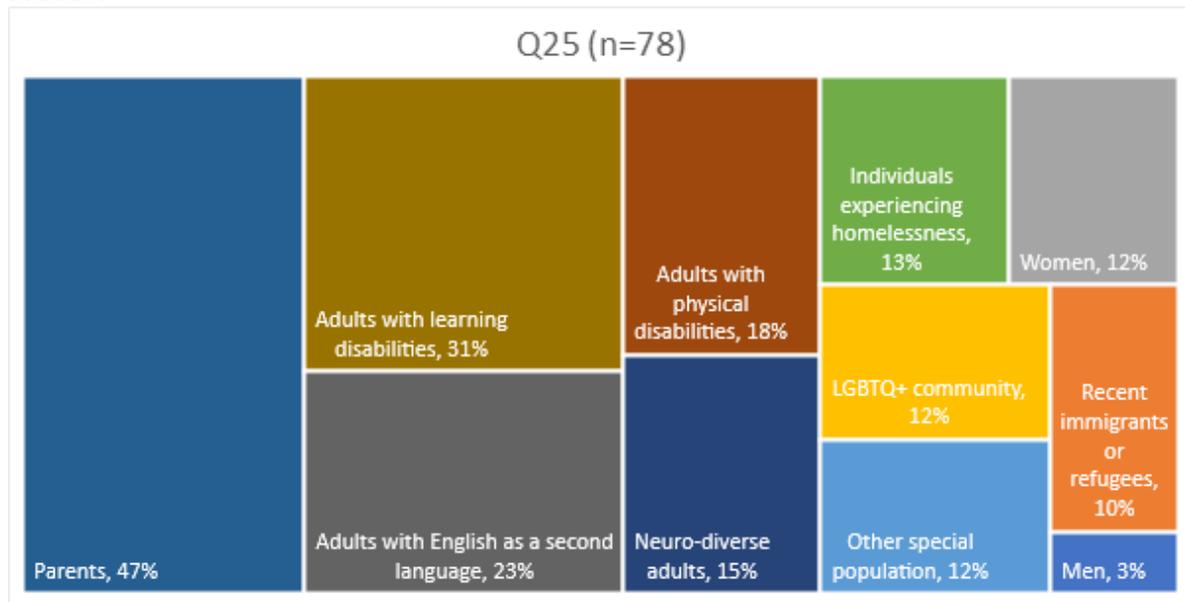
**Adult-Youth Services Collaborations in the context of Inter-generational programs**

Given the rapid rise of Family Programming, both across the country and in North Carolina (**Figure 7**), the context is perfect for more robust cross-training between youth and adult services librarians focused on programming. The Public Library Association now has a [Family Engagement Task Force](#), focused in part on improving “youth and adult programs to better promote parental involvement in children’s education,” and based on the idea that “expertise at all levels is needed: From the library director, children’s or youth services, and/or adult services perspectives.” We think bringing the perspectives of library workers in different divisions together could improve not only family programming, but programming for all audiences in North Carolina’s public libraries.

In any case, this national family engagement initiative testifies to the growing idea that the traditional age-based classifications of library services are, to a certain extent, beginning to blur:

**Parents are the most commonly targeted special population group for adult programs.**

*% of respondents indicated that their library offered programs for \_\_\_\_ special population group in 2019.*



**Figure 7, n=78**

Source: Survey conducted November 2019.

“[North Carolina Adult Programming]”

Adults volunteer help out in children’s programming; libraries increasingly offer programs targeted both for teens and “emerging adults” in their 20’s and 30’s; and, especially in more rural communities, librarians are tasked with serving both teens and adults in blended staff positions. We found that the most commonly served “special population” of adults is “Parents” (Figure 7).

Part of bridging this gap could focus on supporting **intergenerational programming**, family and early literacy programming, but also other programming opportunities that bring together different generations. Intergenerational programming contributes to bringing people together, and thereby feeling better connected. For instance, one idea would be to promote listening sessions in which teenagers are invited to share how they view the world and baby boomers are invited to do the same, in a [community conversation](#) format moderated to promote open dialogue. Alternatively, the already successfully deployed [StoryCorps @ Your Library](#) at Greensboro Public Library could, if expanded state-wide, focus on facilitating dialogue from older generations to younger.

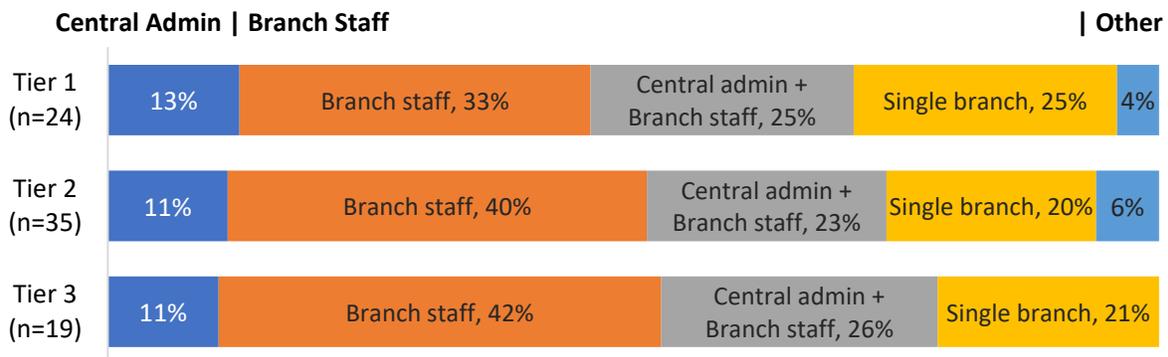
**Working alone: Adult programming emanates from the branches**

Given the lack of support for adult programming, decisions frequently devolve to branch staff working in isolation. This fact suggests that in addition to facilitating more robust peer-to-peer systems between youth and adult services librarians in particular library systems, we **also** need to work towards developing more robust systems that cut across different branches. Across the board we found that in multi-branch systems, branch staff had the primary responsibility for adult programming decisions. There were some very slight differences across the three tiers, but in general in multi-branch libraries, about 50% said branch staff led, about 15% said program decisions were handled by central administration, and about 33% said central administration and branch staff worked equally (with 2% saying ‘other’) (Figure 6).



**In the majority of libraries, branch staff are an integral part of the decision making process for adult programming.**

*% of respondents indicated that adult programming decisions are handled primarily by \_\_\_\_\_. In single branch libraries, the role of adult programming falls to branch staff.*



**Figure 6, n=78**

Source: Survey conducted November 2019.  
 “[North Carolina Adult Programming]”



In an ideal world, one would imagine that central administration and branch staff would have equal responsibility for adult programming, and that is indeed what we see in those libraries that have robust programming policies. In these libraries, there are mechanisms in place for branch staff to nimbly respond to community needs, while also achieving consistent quality of programming across all branches facilitated by monitoring mechanisms maintained centrally.

An urban librarian told us that key to her library's successful adult programming is an "adult programming committee" through which staff from different branches *"communicate with the each other: They let each other know what programs are going on at the branches, and then they also work together to present system-wide programs [programs offered at all the branches]."*

A rural library system added that in her system a key to the successful development of such a programming committee has been ensuring that it includes voices from different sectors of the library system, thus ensuring the integration of programming into the library as a whole:

*"If you decide to develop an adult programming committee, make sure that you have the right people on the committee. Don't leave out your representatives from collection development, because there's going to be some programs that you may want to develop that will cross-over with them and you'll need to communicate with them to develop the program. Because we didn't have the right people at the table [when we first started the committee]. It's been a trial by error. So, make sure that you do reach out to other departments when you're developing that program committee to make sure everyone's represented."*

This quote speaks to the point being made throughout this report: Namely that adult programming should ideally be so integrated into the warp and weave of the public library that everyone in the library is at least tangentially involved in it and connected to it. This is what integration looks like.

## V. The Need for Peer-To-Peer Support

A primary recommendation of this report is that The State Library of North Carolina can support consistent quality across libraries by **building** and/or **enhancing** infrastructure focused on facilitating the peer-to-peer exchange of ideas, documents, and possibly even library staff themselves throughout the state.

This work could focus on supporting existing efforts already underway, undertaken by groups like the North Carolina Library Association, and/or it could include the development of new digital systems complemented by face-to-face convenings of similarly situated public librarians. The main focuses of these efforts should be: 1) To ensure good ideas do not stay isolated, and 2) Common struggles are not endured in isolation.

Libraries in all tiers report funding as a top need, and two of the three tiers indicate that a program speaker/presenter referral system would be especially helpful to them (this was also the most commonly indicated support need), and that assistance determining community need would also help (**Figure 3**).

These findings suggest that in the more economically robust libraries, the needs are more specialized and advanced, centering around things like

### Several respondents indicated that a program speaker/presenter referral system would greatly assist in them in adult programming efforts.

*% of respondents indicated that \_\_\_\_\_ resource would help them in their adult programming efforts.*

Recommended Adult Programming Resource	% of Libraries Interested in Resource		
	Tier 1 (n=24)	Tier 2 (n=35)	Tier 3 (n=19)
<i>Training in how to develop adult programming</i>	<b>54%</b>	51%	37%
<i>Manual/materials on how to develop adult programs</i>	<b>67%</b>	51%	16%
<i>Assistance in determining community interest and/or need</i>	58%	<b>74%</b>	<b>74%</b>
<i>Assistance in developing and maintaining partnerships</i>	<b>46%</b>	40%	37%
<i>Consulting/technical assistance for developing adult programming</i>	17%	<b>20%</b>	11%
<i>Assistance in evaluating impact of adult programs</i>	50%	<b>54%</b>	53%
<i>Mentorship opportunities with other adult programmers</i>	<b>46%</b>	40%	21%
<i>Newsletter on adult programming taking place in NC libraries</i>	<b>58%</b>	54%	31%
<b>Program speaker/presenter referral system</b>	<b>88%</b>	74%	47%
<i>Source(s) for professionally produced publicity materials</i>	<b>58%</b>	43%	37%
<i>Listserv or other online group for adult programming staff</i>	<b>54%</b>	51%	47%
<i>Information on funding sources and opportunities</i>	<b>79%</b>	66%	53%
<i>Other</i>	8%	3%	<b>11%</b>

**Table 3**, n=78. Red text = need reported by more than 50% of libraries in all tiers.

Source: Survey conducted November 2019.  
 “[North Carolina Adult Programming]”

assessing interest (74%), evaluation (53%), and funding programming (53%).

In contrast, in the less economically robust parts of the state, the needs are broad, and center more around securing basic information on how to develop and expand the number and range of adult programs being offered. These Tier 1 libraries are looking for help finding partners or presenters (88%), as well as funding (79%), and information on how to develop adult programs (67%).

Tier 2 libraries were most likely to report wanting assistance in determining community interest and/or need (74%), a program speaker/presenter referral system (74%) and funding (66%).

How have some wealthier libraries throughout the state developed institutional capacity for adult programming? The major tactic utilized is the one thing public librarians across the state, and especially in less economically developed parts of the state, asked for most often: ***A system wherein librarians exchange ideas and get exposed to recommendations and referrals from other librarians.*** A librarian from an urban library system said that key to her library's success has been:

*“At the library we rotate staff. We'll have the regional manager go out from their current location for a week, and we have rotated not only that position, we also rotate the unit managers [e.g. Adult Services]. It's good to see what different locations are doing, whether it's different programs or whether everyone is following the same policy, or, is it something they're doing that they think might work at their location. So, I, I like that, but again, with the adult programmer, [in this rotation system] they might plan a program at a different location or participate in a program somewhere else and they may think that this may work at their location when they come back to their main location. So, we actually have done that rotation and we've gotten positive feedback. It takes a lot of work, you know, it's just a staffing matter. But it's a good thing to get people out there to see other things.”*

Whereas at this library they rotate staff across locations, in another urban library, the system rotates staff across service priorities. This library has developed four categories for adult programming efforts and rotates staff among these four areas, so everyone gets experience in everything:

*“Within our old structure people would get siloed. To fix this, one of the things that we do now is we rotate our services, and we also rotate librarians in a very strategic way. So that everybody isn't leading a cultural program at one time, we will have librarians rotate among our quartiles [cultural, personal development, career & education, recreational reading], so everybody isn't doing everything. We have eight dedicated librarians who are working on recreational reading, and eight dedicated librarians who work in arts and literature [culture]. But then, every year, there is a rotation of a couple librarians in and out of those quartiles. So, everybody gets an experience in all the areas. Some people have greater skill in some areas than others, but then people will get siloed or, you know, kind of stuck in something, and now they can explore other subject areas.”*

Librarians across the state also report feeling siloed, and also seek recommendations and referrals that they can put into place in their libraries. A rural librarian said, *“Sometimes I feel like I'm grasping at straws, you know, trying to find something to meet a need. Libraries across the state are trying to do the same thing. So, it would be nice to not work in isolation.”* In other rural areas, librarians have not yet implemented such rotation systems, but some are thinking of doing so. The

director of a regional library in Western North Carolina reports that she has considered implementing what she calls a “Freaky Friday” initiative:

*“This was actually suggested by my staff several times. We have these sessions where we kind of just vent and also share ideas. And staff said, ‘Can you please implement a Freaky Friday once per month where one of us have to work at a different library? So we can see everything?’ They want to find out how other librarians are doing this and that, so they can share information back and forth. And I still want to do that.”*

Librarians are lifelong learners who facilitate lifelong learning for their patrons and communities. Getting siloed probably feels unnatural, so this desire to shake things up, collaborate, and be exposed to new ideas not only makes sense, but for newer librarians may even be an expectation of the field. The challenge in terms of building a support apparatus to support idea and maybe even personnel exchange would be to think about how we can ensure that early career staff have the support and structures they need to not only harness their energy and enthusiasm while they are early in their careers and full of energy and enthusiasm for new ideas, but also to share that energy and enthusiasm across the state such that it raises adult programming efforts state-wide.

## VI. Addendum: Preparing for a Post-COVID-19 World

This research project was surprisingly and unexpectedly interrupted in Spring 2020 by the worldwide COVID-19 Pandemic. The final two focus groups were held online in April 2020. The tone of those conversations, and in particular our final focus group held on April 20, 2020, suggests that preparing adult programmers for a Post-COVID-19 world can be best facilitated by strongly supporting the peer-to-peer networks discussed above. Already by April 20, librarians reported holding online book groups and other virtual programming for adults, a trend that only accelerated as the pandemic proceeded. A rural librarian reported that they had on staff a current MLIS student who “*is just so familiar with a virtual environment, so she feels incredibly comfortable leading classes online,*” including a tech skills one-on-one program focused on reaching adults. Another suburban librarian reported in this focus group that “*our book clubs have moved online.*” Librarians shared with each other how they developed virtual adult programs and what has been working for them.

More likely than not, in-person programming will be one of the **last** library services to return to normal, given guidance that discourages groups to gather in indoor spaces. Nonetheless, the experience of these librarians suggests that, as usual, we in public librarianship make lemonade out of the lemons by taking advantage of this unique situation to dramatically increase our capacity to develop and deliver synchronous, interactive online programs using a variety of digital platforms.

Even when things return to “normal,” it is highly likely that these digital programs will continue, at least in some form. Furthermore, the experiences of the COVID-19 world may also prepare North Carolina’s public librarians to engage in more virtual peer-to-peer networks, which this report suggests are strongly needed and desired by many, especially in less economically developed parts of the state. Although this situation has prompted a re-evaluation of current adult services efforts, this re-evaluation could ultimately lead to the kind of transformations that in the end dramatically increases the capacity of North Carolina’s libraries to engage adults in socially-rich, community building, lifelong learning opportunities.