

The Three P's: Public Libraries, Partnerships, and (Health and Wellness) Programs

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ABSTRACT

In recent years many public libraries have begun offering a number of health and wellness programs, often immersing participants in healthy activities like yoga, dancing, gardening, walking, biking, and more. As integral community entities, libraries have implemented these programs to contribute to the overall health of their constituencies. However, it is nearly impossible for libraries to do this on their own; in most cases public libraries partner with other public institutions, nonprofits, healthcare agencies, and local businesses to build their capacity to implement and to sustain such programs.

Within LIS there is a fair amount of literature related to partnerships in general, and some of the research encompasses the roles of libraries in this arena, but often health and wellness is not a focus, and even less attention is paid to immersive, active programs. Many disciplines outside of LIS address health and wellness, including public health, medicine, social work, and psychology, but rarely do libraries appear in their discussions of collaborative endeavors. Yet, libraries are actively pursuing partnerships on many levels to become more involved in the health of their communities.

Based on a survey of 1418 public libraries in the United States and Canada, this poster reports on the open-ended responses of 419 librarians located on the Eastern Seaboard of the United States, and illustrates how public libraries are building health and wellness programs through partnerships. Commonalities among the reasons why libraries offer these programs other than for fun, to bring more people into the library, or to contribute to the health of their communities, include building community partnerships and collaborations with other town/city departments, nonprofits, local and state government, and local businesses. Respondents described using locations other than the library such as local fitness clubs and city parks, and (especially in New England) enacting StoryWalks along local rail trails, the farmers' market and on college campuses.

The size of the library dictated how employees developed programs and worked with partners, with larger libraries using teams or departments to create activities with collaborators, and smaller ones using fewer staff, in some cases the lone librarian. Other libraries encouraged all staff to initiate programs and relationships, as well as utilize volunteers for implementing them. Libraries also experienced some barriers when working with partners, such as finding instructors, whether volunteer or paid; and in rare cases, working with town officials with liability concerns. Other issues included being able to coordinate with partners who could help do things such as clear gardens, provide free programming, and promotion of the library and its programs.

In delving into the challenges and successes of libraries currently implementing these programs, this research offers insights that can inform both practice and LIS education.