Mohawk Valley Library System

Summary of Findings - 2016 Focus Groups

MVLS Focus Group 1: Johnstown

1.) What does MVLS do?

- Provides excellent support for computer and technology use needed in libraries.
- "Wonderful resource for the exchange between libraries for materials use, books, etc."
- Facilitates collaboration between MVLS and libraries.
- "Becomes a hub that allows for us to connect with all of these other entities to do things that we could not do individually because the projects are too big or too expensive."

2.) Looking ahead, what needs do you think your libraries will have in the next five years, and do you think they're either being met or not being met?

- MVLS could help with a lobbying effort at the state government level.
- Every citizen should be recognized, in that everyone needs library services and the state government should finance it.
- Statewide reform of direct access, and get local municipality and state funding.

3.) How should advocacy and awareness be used to help libraries and the System?

- State needs to change the way it views libraries.
- "NYLA sets lobbying agenda every year, and we don't have a lot of control of it."
- "It becomes more of a local issue where we are advocating our local communities to try and get them involved as individuals."

4.) At your library now, what would be an interesting story that could be told that someone at a news publication or a politician at the state level would be interested in hearing?

- "We have a program that we are running for a year now where we have been teaching Spanish locally."
- "We help those who are looking to travel or students looking to improve. Nurses have been coming in to learn more Spanish to communicate with patients, as well as teachers trying to learn more in order to ease communication with Spanish parents. One lady travels from Saratoga to Gloversville to take this class."

Don- MVLS can act as a filter to find stories and allow for news outlets to come in and see those stories.

5.) How important is it to use PR?

- "I don't know that important is the right word. As far as time management, it ends up at the bottom. PR is the worst thing, that at least in Gloversville that we do. It's simply a matter of not having enough staff, volunteers, and dedication"
- One of the things MVLS provides is professional staff in many areas that libraries can't afford to own, whether its joint automation, some libraries don't even have a librarian.
- "We need more funding, want local people to pay, and state to recognize that not only do we need state aid, but we need enough money to aid all that we serve."

6.) How would you rate your communication with the system?

- Information can be accessed, if they need assistance they speak to director and have trustees come to a meeting.
- Communication in general is working well.
- The director filters out what's appropriate to communicate.

7.) Tell me about your library and a younger demographic.

- Our children's books circulation is way up.
- Young people are coming to the library.
- Younger people are geographically isolated and cannot always have access.
- Every community should have a library.
- Increase in the kids in their 20s, typically unemployed.
  - They come in more so take out DVDs, read more teen graphic novels.
- Junior High kids are less typical to see.
- "Misfits" are more common to come to the library, and respondents say they need special staff to work with this demographic.

8.) How well would you say the system is helping you address these problems?

- "The system has not helped at all, but maybe because we haven't asked for help."
- "We haven't received one-on-one staff time with the system."
- Temporary assistance might only be needed for limited time periods where they may not reach out.
- We need more interaction between libraries to help each other with various situations, adapt and adopt other ways of handling issues.
- Perhaps if a large amount (five directors) deal with a situation, maybe the system can get involved. Especially if it's not temporary.

9.) What would you say the System's greatest weaknesses are?

- We have reduced staff at the system level.
- The nature of how the system worked has changed.
- "I don't know if the system has really tried to be innovative and look beyond to 'this is what we really need to do.'"
- They package programs for children well.

10.) Why would I choose the library system over a school district?

- Knowing the library has more programming available, more books on the shelf, and offers a fuller experience.
- Parents may not know about the opportunities at the library.
- Social aspect for parents at the library that could attract more than just the kid.
- Libraries get fresh new batch of books every two months.

11.) Who are a library's competitors?

- Interracial poverty.
- Idea that "if it's good enough for me, good enough for my children" perception that libraries may not be useful.
- Everyone and everything.

12.) How has technology affected you? Are you adapting adequately to new technology? Could the system help?

- Technology has changed who comes into the library and what they come into the library for.
- E-book circulation, more tech questions.
- They didn't get any hands-on training; they received one training session when they got iPad and Kindles but it was more so for set-up.

13.) How well do you think it works all being a part of one system?

- Libraries with larger budgets have an easier time handling things individually.

14.) If you were looking ahead to the next five years, from a System-wide perspective, what do you think would be the three chief things the System should do?

- "Promotion, promotion, promotion.''
- Educating the public.
- Engagement from board members.

MVLS Focus Group 2: Canajoharie

1.) What does the System do?

- Liaise between the state and the individual libraries.
- Categorizes books, interlibrary loan system, computer repairs and maintenance.
- Obtain books for book groups.
- Acts as a clearing house in regards to the different members of staff; adult services, children's services.
- Resource in regard to what we need to know at the state level, or questions about governance.
- Provides extra books, videos, things that they can't afford at the local library level.

2.) Should I care as a consumer about the System? And why?

- "Absolutely -- it expands the world."
- One library is expanded to an entire system of resources because that system exists.
- "Because we are a part of MVLS we can provide our services."

3.) How well would you say the System is providing its services to your libraries?

- Respondent: "C" grade: "because they have [a] $1.5-million budget divided by 13 libraries, [which] is $100,000 for each library [and] we can do a lot more with that type of funding."

- Respondent: "A" grade: "because we take advantage of the collections, workshops, professional development, variety of unique resources such as: Legos, science kids, etc. Also, MVLS advocates to the government on our behalf and makes us aware on how we can advocate for more funding."

- Respondent: "A" grade: Offerings have expanded over the time with a tremendous benefit. "I have a budget of $4,700 for all materials and that can't buy a lot…The fact that I can get these rotating collections is a tremendous value to my patrons. The fact that as part of our budget $2,700 a year in automation fees is chump change for what we get in return."

- "I have a really hard time coming up with negative things to say and everything seems very organized. All of the professionals are willing to answer every question you have whether it's about automation, adults, catch-all youth services, etc. They are an unbelievable crew that moves mountains."

4.) Are the board members educated enough on the System?

- "No, not at all."
- "If something comes up for me, I need to know the answer to a question, and I go to her, yeah, I get the answer."
- "I think my board needs to know what our priorities are, although they may be different than those of other libraries."

5.) I've heard in responses that if you had more advocacy and awareness of your activities, you could illustrate the benefits and opportunities offered by the libraries. How do you feel about that?

- "Yes, the System should help us."
- "As a local library, I don't see it as the system's responsibility to tell my story; it is my responsibility to tell my story, and I do."
- "I think it is the System's responsibility to tell a collective story."
- The problem is getting the people that "like" a Facebook post to turn from caring about the libraries into them actually using the libraries.
- Physical posters and direct mail (physical and e-mail) gain the most results, one respondent says.

6.) How does the System come in?

- "Two thoughts. I am a trustee but new. I would like to receive a newsletter to the trustees or something they can go in and check to see what is going on. Extend the information out in a different way than you might to a director."

- "When you talked about advocating for all of us, if you were advocating for all of us, even within us, then that way we would know that "Johnstown" is putting on the Spanish thing, we could go, 'You know what? That's a really good idea!' This way one branch could all have an idea of what our surrounding libraries are involved in."

7.) Public perception is such that "We don't need that any more" -- especially in areas with easy access to technology. If that is public perception, how do we as a library, a System, address that?

- "We have become as a System such that we tend to try to be everything to everyone."
- One of the things libraries need to keep in mind is that we do more than check books out and provide Wi-Fi.
- "You can't replace the personal connection with a librarian with technology."
- We need to get back to basic mission, "To promote the great love of reading."
- Socialization aspect of library needs to be promoted. It's a gathering place, not the perception of a "shhh" place.

8.) Why would I choose to use a public library over my child's school library?

- It is a personal connection.
- A public library can partner with local elementary schools and a librarian was able to meet with classes, which created a buzz about who they can connect with at the public library.
- We need to go to the schools and make connections.
- We gave up on our summer reading program because we were in such competition with Kids In the Park program.
- Also ran into a problem with nursery schools, Pre-K programs, universal head starts. Those programs took all of the kids.
- We have to all recognize that the community does change and we have to adapt.
- A public library is a resource when the kids are out of school and then continue to be a resource the rest of their lives.

9.) What are the demographics at your library?

- Young kids are big until the age of five and the programs bring the parents and kids in.
- Older adults' usage is the other majority.
- "The general population does not have clear insight into the values of libraries."

10.) Where would you want the System to come in to help the libraries that you may not be getting already?

- We would like to be able to show more movies.

11.) How would you rate the communication with the System?

- "Too much sometimes."
- Don't necessarily have time to read all of the emails sent in, and they don't end up being used or read.
- The information sent is not always relevant to what we are doing.
- Fort Hunter's board does not have communication with the System unless it reaches out for help.

12.) What is the System's greatest weakness?

- Too much communication in some areas, and too little in others.
- Directors and staff get communicated with, but not the board.
- Request a monthly e-mail to the trustees about what is new.
- All of the reports, the annual summer reading conference, and Library Advocacy Day fall so close together, it makes it very difficult to accomplish anything.

MVLS Focus Group 3: Cobleskill

1.) What does the System do?

- Provides us with material, including interlibrary loans, books, magazines and programs that we could not typically house on their own.
- The System serves as the library for all of the libraries.

2.) What are some positive things that the System does?

- Unites eight different counties.
- Delivery and resource-sharing among libraries.
- Handles otherwise complicated tasks in an easy way.
- Joint Automation and shared catalog turns libraries into a community.
- Allows ease-of-access to materials and other resources.
- Computer maintenance ability relieves libraries of issues they couldn't handle on their own.

3.) How well does the System serve your needs?

- "I feel that they do an extremely capable job."

4.) Are there any services you wish MVLS offered to your library that it does not?

- We may not be aware of all of the services available.
- Schenectady has floating librarians, and some want MVLS to have a similar design or set-up.
- "MVLS is discouraging the use of volunteers specifically for desk services due to confidentiality and not knowing the processes."
- "Training and orientation structures for staff are less developed than ideal."
- Communication of training updates is below par.
- "MVLS staff-responsiveness is great, but only if you approach them directly, have to know what to ask, and how to ask it in order to gain feedback."

5.) What is your opinion, and where does this group stand, on how MVLS should be involved in your libraries?

- "When it comes to the integrity, since all of the libraries are interconnected, MVLS needs to be involved."
- Another person agrees MVLS should be involved but believes libraries should have freedom to do what works for their community individually without being told, "you have to do this."
- Some respondents say it may help with consistency and predictability.
- Some areas should be controlled and other should not.
- MVLS should provide a foundation but allow libraries to branch off and execute differently.

6.) In terms of advocacy and awareness, do you believe this is a System issue or libraries themselves should be advocating on behalf of their own libraries?

- The consensus: the advocacy that the individual libraries do and the advocacy that the system does is like comparing "apples to tractors."

7.) Should we continue on the way we are going or should we try to use advocacy and awareness?

- "We need MVLS to train people on how to use the system, so that they can advocate more on Advocacy Awareness Day."
- Participants think that MVLS should be advocating directly on their behalf.
- Maybe MVLS should communicate what parts of their budget come from where.
- "What is the trade-off for advocacy? What are we going to lose?"
- "The idea is that once we get people in once they will come again, but this is not true, they don't come back."
- Kids come through for the summer, but only because they're brought there by the school.
- Want to increase teen use of libraries.

7.) What would you say the System's biggest weakness is?

- Not knowing all of the MVLS people.
- There is low visibility in the public of MVLS and that people (including library staff) may not have a full understanding of what MVLS does and offers.

MVLS Focus Group 4: Schenectady County Public Library Board

1.) What does MVLS do?

- "It's an umbrella organization to coordinate programs and services for the member libraries such as e-books, constructions grants, advocacy."
- "Coordinates the automation systems."

2.) The advocacy and awareness component could be critical to the future of libraries, to increase awareness of what libraries do, and improve the general standing of libraries. Is this something you believe the System should be involved in?

- "There should an umbrella system that standardizes things so that when people travel or move, they can expect a certain level of consistency, but on the other hand, there has to be some independence in navigating the specific needs of the area by the entity of the individual library."
- "We do need to stay relevant in our own community."
- One person said MVLS should integrate a social media effort to target Millennials to attract them.

3.) Looking ahead, what is critical to library success?

- "Money, Money, Money…."

4.) How do we get people to choose a library over its competitors?

- Advocate for money.
- Connect with school libraries, teachers etc. getting the students to use the libraries resources. "A sort of interconnectedness with the education system."
- Identifying different trends, or directions to increase usage, which might allow for a new allocation of funding.
- "Communication is key."
- Need to change the metrics that we define as our growth of libraries or branch success.

MVLS Focus Group 5: SCPL Staff

1.) What does MVLS do?

- Coordinates services.
- Supports member libraries.
- Writes Grants.
- Used to provide interlibrary loans.

2.) When we think about MVLS from an advocacy and awareness perspective, how important is advocacy and awareness?

- Very important.

3.) Why?
- There is a perception that libraries are obsolete.
- Advocacy at the state level for funding.

4.) Should MVLS step back from local levels and have those libraries do their own publicity, or have MVLS take stories from the local levels and advocate on their behalf?

- "I think that would be great to have people at the System level consult on how to best target the community by working with the libraries themselves."
- "We should be able to ask MVLS for assistance with advocacy."
- "Sometimes advocacy from above is important."
- "We want to be looked at as nine individual and unique libraries not one central library."

5.) How do you enhance awareness of your programs? What are your key vehicles to advertise your services?

- Flyers, social media, website.
- Word of mouth.

6.) What needs do you have from the System that are not currently being met?

- Interlibrary loans services.

- Books my mail.
- "I feel like we are not getting acknowledgement of the Schenectady County Library System as important and integral to the MVLS and maybe a chance to actually sit down periodically with the folks of MVLS to talk about our relationship and to see what we can do together and with each other."

7.) How would you rate your relationship with the System?

- "It's good, but could be better."
- Some say it is often strained, "not good."
- Because we are such a big group, there seems to be misunderstanding of what the role of the central library is and what the system is doing.
- Lack of communication: "The System does not understand what the central library's needs are."
- They may have the perception that the central libraries can take care of everything.
- "We have to go through MVLS to do certain things where when we do go through them we are questioned to the point where they don't want to go through MVLS."
- Desire to be looked at as nine separate libraries part of a central library so the branches can be looked at differently.

8.) What are 2-3 things that would be most beneficial to the system and member libraries?

- Interlibrary loan.
- Advocacy and Awareness at higher levels to help libraries accomplish more with their larger amount of resources.
- Administering system-wide network.
- Communication improvement.