

**Libraries from Now On: Imagining the Future of Libraries**  
**ALA Summit on the Future of Libraries – Report to ALA Membership**  
**Prepared by Nancy Bolt**

On May 2 and 3, 2014, eighty librarians and representatives from organizations that work with libraries met at the Library of Congress to discuss the future of libraries. Inspired by five nationally recognized speakers and their own table discussions, participants engaged in wide ranging conversations about the trends in society that libraries will have to address and how librarians might prepare, respond, and, in fact, lead libraries into that future. The results of the discussion will inform the development of a Center for the Future of Libraries to be initiated by the American Library Association in the spring of 2014.

Participants were challenged with remarks by author and journalist Stephen Dubner, “How to Think Like a Freak,” on thinking differently in order to plan for the future. Lincoln Professor of Law, Culture, and Values at Arizona State University Joel Garreau asked, “What Are Libraries Good For?” in discussing culture, values, and society. Chancellor and President of the University of Houston Dr. Renu Khator challenged the group to consider “Education in the Future – Anywhere, Anytime.” Executive Director and Senior Futurist at the DaVinci Institute Thomas Frey described a transition “From an Internet of Things to a Library of Things.” Library Futurist Joan Frye Williams concluded the conference with a summation of key points discussed throughout the two days.

In addition to the key speakers, participants also had the opportunity to discuss each speaker’s comments in a facilitated table discussion; to contribute their personal reflections on the speaker’s remarks; to consider key elements in the *Declaration for the Right to Libraries*; and hear remarks from Dr. James Billington, Librarian of Congress. At the opening of the Summit, participants were asked to select “two words” that reflected their thoughts on the future of libraries as they began the Summit. Throughout the Summit, they had the opportunity to add to these words on ribbons attached to their name badges.

This report will summarize the comments by the key speakers and the responses from the participants, including identification of key issues and ideas on the future of libraries.

### Key Issues

Even though the topics were different, there were remarkably similar issues identified and discussed in the table discussions and the personal reflections for all of the speakers. There were different emphases depending on the topic (for example, the focus was heavily on the role of libraries in education following Dr. Khator’s presentation). In the discussions, Summit participants frequently referred to the “community.” This is understood to mean the community or constituency that the type of library serves – for example, students , faculty, and administrators , plus other stakeholders for school and academic libraries; employees and maybe clients of special libraries; a designated geographic area for public libraries. Throughout the discussions the overarching themes were:

- **Role of libraries in the future**  
A key topic of discussion in all sessions was: What is the role of libraries in the future? This was debated in multiple guises inspired by the speakers. Is the basic mission of libraries changing? Do libraries need staff with different skills? How should library education change to prepare librarians with different skills? Should libraries decide this future role on their own or through conversations with user (and non-user) groups?
- **The values expressed in library service**  
These values included both those adopted by libraries in serving users (privacy, neutrality) and the value that the community seems to place on libraries (trust, equity). Participants recognized that deeply shared core values, such as those reflected in the *Declaration for the Right to Libraries*, need to shape our response to the future even though the specific forms that library service takes are likely to change dramatically.
- **The need to re-envision library service**  
All of the speakers challenged the participants to think differently about the future of libraries and the Summit participants responded enthusiastically, suggesting ways for libraries to reconsider how library operations are traditionally done, including examples of libraries that have already developed new approaches to serving their communities. As part of this discussion, participants recognized that librarians must be encouraged to take risks and experiment and not be afraid to fail as they learn new ways to serve current and new constituencies. Many different library services were suggested with a particular emphasis on education as a result of Dr. Khator's remarks.
- **Libraries as community hubs**  
Regardless of the community served (public, school, academic, or special), the emphasis was that the library needs to be intricately involved in the community it serves and devote considerable effort in determining the needs and priorities of that community. This theme included emphasis on the importance of networking and collaboration with governing bodies and community organizations or constituent groups.
- **The need to "rebrand" libraries**  
Throughout the discussions there was recognition that for many in the public, the perception of libraries reflects a traditional and sometimes negative or irrelevant attitude. Participants made suggestions to increase awareness of the value of libraries with emphasis both on "stories" about the impact of libraries on individual users and on the need to collect data to prove the impact of libraries on individuals and communities.
- **Obstacles that libraries face**  
The tone of the Summit and the comments by participants were primarily, in fact overwhelmingly, positive, with an emphasis on the ways that libraries can prepare for and lead

into the future. However, there was also a recognition of obstacles that libraries face, including reluctance by librarians to face change. These are summarized at the end of the report.

### **How to Think Like a Freak – Stephen Dubner**

Dubner challenged the Summit participants to look behind what seemed to be an obvious problem to seek the real issue that libraries are dealing with, and to think creatively about solutions. He spoke about the importance of measurement and the need for storytelling about library successes and—most importantly – of integrating storytelling with data. He challenged librarians to say “I don’t know but I’ll find out” more often and to set aside our moral compasses in looking for solutions to problems. While immoral solutions would not be chosen in the end, they can lead to creative ways to solve problems differently from traditional library solutions. (Joan Frye Williams raised this issue in her summary asking why librarians are so concerned about privacy when many of our patrons seem less so and are excited about communicating online with other library users.) Dubner urged us to rethink libraries in general and offered two lessons for thinking creatively: redefine the problem (what is the real problem?) and face limits that are there, but reject limits that are artificial. One of his remarks described an imaginary context that has become true with e-books.

*There is nothing about the library’s continuing strength that was foreordained. Like a lot of institutions, it is to a degree the product of an accident of history. If a relatively small group of people hadn’t decided, many years ago, that the public library was an institution that deserved funding, and tending, and recognition, would we still have them? If, that is, the library were an idea that was proposed anew today, would it come into existence? I’m not so sure. Can you imagine the conversation with the publishers? Yes, we’d like to buy one copy of your book and then let 1,000 people read it, for free. Ha! All books come equipped with some self-destruction device that would blow it up after five readings.*

### Table Discussions - Dubner

Not surprisingly, considering the topic of Dubner’s presentation, a key theme in the table discussions was that libraries need to “think differently” about their mission and their future. Participants commented that librarians need to redefine what problems librarians are trying to solve and asked the same question that Dubner asked: What would libraries look like if just created? One asked, “What if we closed all physical buildings and used library funding to give everyone an iPad? Would they form neighborhood “pop-up” libraries anyway? How important is the “real estate” the library provides?” Another, “What if libraries are not run by librarians but by the patrons? What would they do? How can we engage communities in new ways and capture that information?” A final comment in this theme was that librarians need to “create the future rather than reacting to it...making and taking bets... taking risks.”

A second major theme was how the library can and should respond to its community. For example, we make assumptions about our users’ needs, that “we know better” when we should be aggressively seeking the needs of the community from the community. This presumed expertise is a “barrier and an

illusion.” We should not confuse librarian interest and passion with users’ passions and needs. Four participants specifically said that librarians should become “embedded” in the community, actively participating in community organizations to achieve community goals, and bringing in new voices and different people. Tied into this theme was the concept of the library as a community hub, a “public square,” a “space” for people to come together to build community.

A third major theme was the values that drive library operation and librarian decisions. The groups responded to Dubner’s urging to leave our moral compass at the door. The concrete example from one table was potential stereotypical opinions about some populations or the homeless. Another was librarian commitment to protecting privacy when many users are very willing to give up their privacy in return for sharing opinions and ideas with other library users. There was also recognition that one strength of libraries is their moral compass -- that they are perceived as a “trusted and safe place” and “neutral, accessible, and communal.”

A final discussion theme was the need to rebrand the library as essential to the community it serves. Again, the participants responded to Dubner’s call for storytelling about the library and using impact data in support of the stories. One participant said, echoing Dubner, that libraries developed as a “happy accident with intrinsic value but this is not an underlying truth we can rely on to sell libraries any longer...Not everyone believes in free access to information in libraries.”

### Personal Reflections

The personal reflections expanded on the themes above. Four reflections that stood out are:

*I think we are focused on finding a solution to a problem that we haven’t identified or fully explored. To do this we need to 1) put aside our assumptions/passions for libraries; 2) talk to those who are not as passionate as us (policy makers, community leaders, etc.) to understand their arguments against libraries or maybe in support of other institutions. We need to talk to people who don’t agree with us!*

*Dubner’s admonition to set aside one’s moral compass when approaching a problem and solution is quite challenging but makes a lot of sense. We often ground our search for solutions in values – and other foundational principles. But by starting with a foundation too weighted, one limits where and how the solutions may be rooted. Values are important – but how important and/or at what time do you bring them in?*

*Thoughts on “measurement” – important to evaluate experiments. We are often so pressured to succeed that even when we do experiment, we don’t stop to evaluate the results, just assume success.*

*Users are not coming to us for authoritative information anymore. We should stop trying to insert ourselves in that process, support authority when possible, and find new needs to meet.*

## What Are Libraries Good For? -- Joel Garreau

Garreau emphasized that libraries need to reexamine the role they play in their respective communities. He emphasized the importance of library as “space” and the way communities use that space to come together for human interaction and face-to-face experiences. He specifically mentioned the concept of the “trust” role of libraries in communities. Garreau felt that the future of libraries isn’t about books or computers but about building communities; the more we digitize, the higher the value of what we can’t digitize. He quoted Adam Kahane in saying, “A system is perfectly designed to produce the results it is now producing,” a call similar to Dubner’s for libraries to think differently. Garreau’s book, *Radical Evolution*, dealt with alternative paths to human evolution and survival. He extended this theme to libraries and felt they had a role to play in the improvement of society and “for libraries to prevail, they need to help the species prevail.” The species will prevail because humans will come up with new ways to solve emerging and changing world issues. Libraries will prevail because they are in the business of creating human achievement and community.

### Table Discussions – Garreau

Not surprisingly, Garreau’s emphasis on community and space sparked similar discussion at the tables. The librarians spoke more of the integration of technology and space, particularly the space created by the replacement of print resources with more current online resources. Participants used words such as “commons”; “third place” (home and school/work being first and second place); “human touch”; “central gathering place”; “community hub”; and “social space” to describe this new role of the library. One described it as a “playground and resource.”

Garreau’s remarks also prompted a discussion of what expectations communities have of libraries and how to plan for them. One person commented that there may be different expectations from those with different cultural backgrounds and that, as constituent demographics and culture change, libraries must be attuned to this change and respond. There was general agreement that people want instantaneous access, one-stop shopping, flexibility, quality, and the expectation of free service. One person said that the constituencies may expect the library to change faster than libraries are able or prepared to and that libraries need to engage these constituencies. Another participant asked “What happens when we have libraries in our pockets (phones) and then our heads (nanos)? Is there a threat or concern for libraries? How does this impact the mission of libraries?”

Other comments on Garreau’s presentation centered on his use of the word “prevail” in the sense of librarians continuing to exist. Some felt that libraries need to do more than prevail; they should flourish and play a significant role in helping constituents, organizations, and institutions to flourish as well. One emphasis was on a traditional library role of libraries – preserving local culture – expanding in the digital age to “capture today for tomorrow, to preserve and curate.”

As in response to other speakers the values enconced in library service were discussed – particularly the trust that people have in libraries. One participant said that “people trust libraries and libraries

need to trust the people”; another noted that libraries are a “safe space face-to-face and increasingly becoming a safe space online, too.”

The final question at the table asked what opportunities libraries could provide for their constituents. This provoked a wide range of suggestions for different programs and services. One suggested that libraries provide “content and service that would not exist otherwise.” Another said that libraries should provide “rich learning experiences that excite the imagination and are learning driven and creative.”

### Personal Reflections

Garreau inspired many reflections. Several concepts resonated in the personal reflections: the role of libraries in the community; the idea of trust; and the role of libraries in both human and social evolution. There was also an emphasis on face-to-face interactions (one participant said that all participants probably came to this conclusion) but at least one expressed the point of view that “virtual connections are still an important part of the fabric. By this I mean the ability to meet community needs which could be a virtual convening.” Several comments stood out in looking at the role of libraries:

*From his talk it seems that libraries are critical to the development of communities that can support positive evolution as a species. Key to that is for libraries to be a trusting safe space where people from different backgrounds can come together and contemplate/discuss/problem-solve – libraries must play a role in building trust among community members who may not initially see themselves as equals/partners.*

*“Trust location” was resonant to me. Also the concept of scenarios is very helpful in resolving the central question of culture, value, and society –we reflect these things clearly but how do we envision services, staff training, space accommodation and materials to be reflective of that community.*

### **Education in the Future – Anywhere, Anytime – Dr.Renu Khator**

Khator’s presentation outlined a very different educational environment of the near future with dramatic changes that impact all aspects of education. Higher education institutions are facing issues of mission creep, changing technology, and an expanding market for talented professionals (they are being recruited by other countries). In her picture of the future, she included visions of educational globalization, competition among programs for quality content and graduates, and businesses driving needs for employee learning and thus curriculum. A concept that resonated particularly with the Summit participants was the issue of decoupling – development of content decoupled from development of delivery; learning decoupled from credentialing. She also called for integration of services supporting teaching and learning – such as libraries – with emphasis on the changes brought about by online education.

Khator presented a vision of rapid change in education including increased “vocational” education (beyond a two-year institutional model) because content in higher educational environment must lead to employment/ jobs. This could result in competition for resource support among different types of institutions. She called for a full rethinking of education saying, “We cannot serve today’s learners with yesterday’s methods and expect to be in business tomorrow,” advice which could be applied to all aspects of library service. She suggested that in the future place-based higher education might continue to be appropriate for younger people, but that middle age and older adults seeking formal education might want more a more customized approach. Khator said that universities and libraries must figure out the future together: libraries must look outward; libraries are about experience, not books; libraries are about place; libraries are about communities of learning; libraries are about focus. Above all, universities and libraries must be open, flexible, and innovative.

### Table Discussions

Summit participants saw education as a growth area for public library service and an opportunity for school and academic libraries to expand and innovate their services – and a challenge for all libraries to be ahead of the curve as education curriculum and practices change, for example the Common Core in public education and MOOCs in higher education.

Public libraries, traditionally called the People’s University, can be expected to expand this role since they have the “space, access, and infrastructure” and because both formal continuing education and informal learning are expanding. Baby boomers, healthy and often with available time, are eager to engage in formal courses. Maker spaces, more prominent in public than other types of libraries, offer individual experiential learning opportunities with the library serving as site and the librarian as facilitator and navigator. Immigrants and entrepreneurs were singled out for particular attention.

While Khator did not discuss early childhood education, participants quickly saw the role that public libraries currently play and the expanded role public and some school libraries could play in developing reading readiness skills in pre-school children.

Summit participants were intrigued by Khator’s suggestion that education be “decoupled” from learning that leads to credentials and the possibility that libraries could participate in this process – helping users engage in the learning, certifying their achievement, and tracking their progress over time. This related to a reexamination of the mission or role of the library. Are public libraries ready to play a larger, more than just supportive, role in formal education? How can school libraries help decrease the high drop-out rate through both formal and informal learning opportunities? How will academic libraries support thousands of students enrolled internationally in a MOOC?

### Personal Reflections

The fascination with decoupling, credentialing, and disruption in higher education was carried over into the personal reflections. Some representative comments were:

*Schools won't be the only place where learning counts. Anything could happen. We are in such dire straits that a promising alternative could easily and quickly change the institution. Credibility is the biggest [goal] to crave. Once credibility is decoupled from the institution, changes will cascade.*

*Publishing market and academic libraries are not set up to support "a la carte" education. Will this fall to public libraries? Will the line between public and academic blur? What about public & K-12? Can we expand our mission and still keep community – focus on high-touch?*

*We will need to be prepared to be in the "thick" of these new models. People will come to us expecting us to understand – and support their involvement in- dramatically different educational experiences.*

### **From an Internet of Things to a Library of Things -- Thomas Frey**

Frey had done more writing about libraries than any of the other speakers. He said that the future is constantly unfolding, relentless, and happening whether we want it to or not. It will happen whether or not librarians agree to participate. He related what actions we take brings about our vision of the future and if we change that vision, we will change the actions we take to bring it about. Frey asked a series of questions about the future to challenge the thinking of the participants: What does the future want? What systems do we employ today that are the dead-end equivalent of Roman numerals? How does the future get created? What are the big things that still need to be accomplished? How do libraries determine what is relevant? When will we reach peak demand for library service? Ideas are the new form of information – should libraries be archiving ideas? Frey described disruptive technologies of the past (electricity, automobiles, airplanes, photographs) and predicted some for the future (distance education and medicine, 3D printing "will be bigger than the Internet," and tools on smart phones and iPads replacing physical tools which employed thousands of people in the production supply line).

Frey identified seven trends for libraries:

1. Libraries will continue to evolve.  
While other speakers emphasized the library as place, Frey focused on the explosive expansion of "smart" everything in our society (smart pet door that only lets your dog in and out) and the explosion of electronic data and information available.
2. Libraries were the original sharing economy. Their role in the future sharing economy is up to you.  
New industries are set up to share cars (zip car), rides (uber), homes (Airbnb), chores (Task Rabbit), and even ideas (TED talks). What new things will libraries share/loan?
3. Libraries are transitioning from a place to consume things to a place to produce things.  
"People are no longer satisfied with just receiving information; they want to help create it."  
Examples are library as publisher, maker-spaces, support for entrepreneurship, and 3D printing of everything from pottery to bicycles to cars to houses to clothing.
4. Education is about to be redefined.



The changing nature of careers means more education; “micro” colleges will teach everything from making beer to grooming dogs to drone piloting to aquaponics and many, many other careers. Will/can/should libraries provide support for credentialing from these “micro” colleges or the attainment of the competencies for these careers?

5. The Quantified Self is driving the hyper individualized talent marketplace. We count everything and have electronic gadgets that allow us to do this. What support can libraries provide to assist people to meet personal goals related to their own self and their personal understandings.
6. Libraries are becoming a laboratory for freelance jobs. Early retirement frees people to create their own jobs; the poor economy and layoffs provide the same incentive. The new jobs will be project work rather than permanent employee positions.
7. Funding mechanisms for libraries will continue to evolve, with many offering premium services. Libraries will obtain new sources of income by charging for “premium” services that require more librarian work or feed user convenience.

### Table Discussions

Summit participants’ responses to Frey’s seven trends varied. Some felt that libraries were already working on some of the trends (“libraries have always been about technology, this isn’t anything new”) and many objected to Frey’s last principle as violating traditional library values. There was some concern with considering a new mission of libraries. One participant said, “libraries have problems with shiny objects... we need to think what the purpose of the tech (3D) printer is.”

The discussion followed a similar path as the discussions after the previous speakers: that libraries need to evolve to meet constituent needs; the need for rebranding (“misperception of what school libraries do”), the need for data and stories; the need to experiment.

### Personal Reflections

By the time Frey spoke, participants began to reference issues from all speakers in their reflections. Some specific comments included:

*The future of the library will depend upon specialization. It may also be important to act even more as an equalizer than it does now. What does that mean for those in the lowest socio-economic echelons? They currently aren’t well connected to the Internet, they can’t afford hot mobile, and they don’t have the resources to engage in the “specialized, sensor-laden” future. Libraries can help to ease this growing inequity.*

*The emphasis needs to be on opening the possibilities for people to create, invent, determine their own learning, and pursue individual possibilities. I think that libraries need to figure out how to support that rapidly changing learning environment without letting the “institution” of the library be a barrier.*

*Need to accelerate library innovation and rethinking. Time for dropping long-established activities – but which ones and how to get community buy in is the challenge.*

*I feel a sense of urgency to be better prepared for the future. Everything we know today is about to change in unknown ways and we need to be ready to help assist/guide people through change. This will require the ability to be nimble and quick in order to adapt to whatever changes may come.*

## **Pulling It All Together, How the *Declaration for the Right to Libraries* Interacts with our Perceptions of the Future**

The final discussion session was designed to bring all of the discussions together by shifting the focus from conversations based on the speakers' presentations to how these presentations impacted library service in specific areas: promoting literacy in children and youth; building communities; protecting and empowering access to information; advancing research and scholarship; preserving and/or creating cultural heritage; and supporting economic development and good government. Summit participants could decide which of the topics they wished to discuss so the number of people at each table varied.

### Promoting literacy, particularly in children and youth

These participants acknowledged that public libraries have a lot of “traction” in early learning; that this is an area where libraries can show their value in informal learning that can help lead to success in formal education. However, one participant raised the issue of how to measure the impact of the library in informal education (beyond just that for children) when the actual success of the learner can depend on multiple factors not just the action of the library. Another participant commented that early literacy can be impacted by intergenerational activities, empowering teens and others, such as seniors, to teach others. Another participant singled out the need for libraries to look and expand literacy for people wanting to learn English, regardless of their age. And again, participants recognized that trust in the library and building partnerships contribute to success.

### Building communities the library serves

This was a theme that came up in all of the discussions throughout the two days; that the role of libraries is to build the community in which the library operates. For some this meant working with individuals and for others it meant the community as a whole.

One participant put it this way: “people are the collection”; the library is about people and community development. Another raised the issue of defining who the library serves, a need for “mapping the territory and making sure constituents are part of the mapping.” Participants discussed the concept of the “lifecycle of grouping”; that people come together in “short bursts” and then disperse. How does the library maintain enthusiasm and continuity of service in this context? Along the same lines was the question of bringing diverse groups together for common activities or goals to build a better understanding of the community overall.

The table discussed the role of the library in empowering a community overall. Throughout the Summit, participants discussed planning future library services and the importance of planning in relation to the community's overall goals and the library's contributions to those goals. During this session, one person suggested shifting the "mindset of serving communities to working with communities." This was described as contributing to the overall health of the community in terms of creating content from community issues and projects and making resources available to sustain the community and support it with information. The library was seen as a "connector" of people and issues and organizations in the community.

A similar discussion returned to the concept of the library as physical and virtual space – a place for people to meet face-to-face and a place for people to discover the community virtually. One person saw this as contributing to library funding; if the funders see the contributions of the library to community growth and health, then they may be more likely to invest in the library.

#### Protecting and empowering access to information

Fewer people chose this table and one person said this was not a surprise since "we take access for granted." Another commented that "our constituents take it for granted as well." The concept of access was broadly defined. One person said access should be not just to technology and information but also to skills, raising the role of libraries in education and credentials again. Another person said that there is an assumption that access to technology is ubiquitous but that as technology expands, skill in using new technologies is a constantly moving target, and sufficient bandwidth is a constant problem, because access to technology may not be as ubiquitous as assumed.

The group also discussed equity of access in terms of actual access (inner city, people with disabilities) and knowledge of how to access (many senior citizens). Libraries need to consider various needs in relation to access and be prepared to address multiple needs.

#### Advancing research and scholarship at all levels

This group was made up primarily of academic librarians and two school librarians. The discussion revolved around the various roles of collecting and making available scholarship and research; organizing raw data so that it is understandable and useable; and teaching research skills to those who do not have these skills. One participant described this as "here's what's out there... and here's how to get to it." Two people said libraries need to teach information literacy skills "early, early, early" using as an example "teaching an 8-year-old about metadata by using the example of organizing a comic book collection."

#### Preserving and/or creating cultural heritage

The discussion at this table revolved around what to collect and how to collect.

What - One participant said an issue was how to define cultural heritage. Should a library be selective in what is preserved or “let robots preserve it all?” What part of a community’s history should be preserved and what ignored? One person commented that “winners write the history” and that “some things disappear for political reasons.” The group recognized the lack of a systematic process for curating and preserving web resources – “here today, gone tomorrow” – and that public policy doesn’t always support preservation. One person suggested that libraries need a “clear picture of what’s out there, the priorities” and raised an “interesting curation question”: which is more important, “one sampler from a 7-year-old 150 years ago vs. 1000 art projects from 2014 3<sup>rd</sup> graders.”

How - One participant raised the perennial issue of whether it was the content or the format that should be preserved: “destroy the collection in order to preserve it.” Special skills are needed to acquire oral histories -- “to discern what’s fact and what’s wishful thinking.” One participant noted the difference and difficulty of preserving “Grandpa’s shoebox – we know what to do with this – vs Grandpa’s thumb drive – we won’t be able to open this.”

### Supporting economic development and good government

This group discussed primarily the role of public libraries in supporting economic development and good government. Participants suggested a number of ways that libraries provide these services, some outside the traditional scope of a library such as bringing commercial businesses (such as a flower shop, convenience stores, or a dry cleaner) into the library or sponsoring a regular farmer’s market. The group also suggested libraries might team up with big box stores to open a branch library.

### **What Happened at the Summit – Joan Frye Williams**

During the Summit, Williams observed various table discussions and reviewed the flip chart transcriptions as they were made available to her. Her closing remarks summarized the major points raised throughout the Summit.

She began by saying that the Summit was not a design process for the Center for the Future of Libraries but rather an opportunity to “frame – and reframe – some of the important issues and questions that can inform how we extend/rebalance/enhance/redesign libraries and library services moving forward. From now on: What value will libraries add? What difference will libraries make? What business will libraries be in?”

The role of libraries will be “active, collaborative, and developmental.” Libraries will focus on progress over time and cultivate ongoing relationships with the individuals and communities libraries serve. Library success will be measured by constituent success. And that ongoing relationship will be based on trust.

Williams says that libraries will be “challenged to accommodate a shift away from an environment of unpredictable relationships and stable processes, and towards an environment of stable relationships and unpredictable processes. Creativity and comfort don’t always go together.”

Williams was particularly intrigued by one of the concepts expressed by Dr. Khator that processes we have considered inseparable in the past may be decoupled or deconstructed in the future. “We need to talk about what might happen in libraries if we were to rethink the following processes as separable: knowledge creation, management, curation, and distribution; service design and delivery; and library support and use.”

She went on to say that based on what she heard at the Summit, libraries “need to do a better job of distinguishing between principles, outcomes, and techniques. Too often, we ask ‘civilians’ which techniques we should use, when their real area of expertise is the outcomes they’d like us to help them achieve. Too often, we elevate comfortable techniques to the status of principles. Protecting patron confidentiality is a principle. Declining to analyze any patron behavioral data, even in the aggregate, is a common technique for ensuring confidentiality. “

Williams concluded by saying, “As a profession that prizes mastery, we may well find it challenging to embrace the risks, conflicts, and uncertainties that lead to growth. I can only say that, based on what I’ve heard here, I am hopeful that we can move forward successfully. It’s work worth doing.”

## **Two Words**

Prior to their arrival at the Summit, participants were asked to think of two words that reflected their initial opinion on the future of libraries. Almost all of the participants took this challenge and wrote their two words on a white ribbon that was attached to the name badge. Throughout the Summit, participants had an opportunity to add new words and attach them below the previous ribbons. A total of 130 ribbons were used by the 80 participant, some adding multiple words and some sticking with their original words. Eighteen different words or a close variant were used the most: community (16), transform (7), collaboration (6), experiential (6), learn (5), connector (5), innovate (5), change, including proceeded by social or societal (5), local (4), action (4), converge/convene (3), evolving (3), essential (3), adapt (3), place (2), optimistic (2),and culture (2). A few others were repeated but were first introduced by a speaker. The original thought was that there would be a change in perspective by participants, for example, for “no future” to a hopeful one. Rather, most people began with a positive view of the future of libraries. Perhaps the few people who did not see a positive future chose not to write on a ribbon at all.

## **Two Final Issues**

Two additional themes should be mentioned that were woven throughout the discussion: barriers to accomplishing all that was discussed and the role of staff education and skills in designing the future of libraries.

### Barriers facing libraries in the future

While, overall, the discussion about the future of libraries was very positive, some participants expressed serious concerns about barriers that might prevent libraries from moving forward as they wanted. One mentioned that libraries would be unable to convince boards and administrators of the value of the library to the community and the value of cooperating with the library on community

issues. Thus funds would not be available to plan and implement the exciting ideas discussed. Tied to this was the reluctance or inability of libraries to collect and analyze data on which to make decisions and base stories.

A second barrier was possibly opposition from commercial enterprises if libraries, in redefining their mission, chose to provide free access to services currently available only at a cost. The opposition and limitation of eBooks by major publishers is an example of this.

A third obstacle was the possibility that the public will move or, at least, want to move faster than the library can, for whatever reason, or that the library wants to, if it is locked in a traditional approach to collections and services. There was also concern whether, even if the library did change, it would not be able to keep up with its “success” and thus the additional demand.

A fourth obstacle was a “mission creep” or, as one participant phrased it, “maybe we should stop trying to be everything to everyone” and set priorities; and the difficulty of making sure the priorities chosen don’t seriously leave the library behind in other areas that should have been priorities.

The final obstacle mentioned was stated as “how much do we give up when we partner? What new limits are brought [with partnerships]?”

### Staff

Two main issues were raised in relation to library staff: the education and training of library staff and the identification of the skillset that librarians will need in the future.

### Education and training of library staff

One group suggested that library staff purposefully go to non-library conferences in order to talk to people not primarily involved in libraries about possible cooperation. This would also give library staff members the opportunity to learn outside their normal scope of activity. Another issue related to library education. If libraries are to move into the future, library schools that train future library leaders need to be part of national planning about the future of libraries. This might mean reexamining the graduate school accreditation goals and requirements and looking at alternative methods of certifying library staff. Continuing education should also be required for all staff to keep skills fresh and attitudes open.

### Determining the proper skill set and characteristics for future libraries

One group suggested that libraries cannot depend solely on MLS degreed librarians to staff libraries. Para-librarians and people from other fields can contribute to the planning and implementation of the library’s future. This could also mean reforming what MLS-librarians do in libraries and how para-librarians might be trained to do what MLS-librarians have done in the past. If serving a diverse community is a goal and priority in the future (if not now), then libraries should find, hire, and train a diverse staff. If libraries will play a different role in education in the future, then librarians may need a higher skill level in facilitation, teaching, coaching, and entrepreneurship. The ability to identify the real reference question and find the right answer may be a skill of limited value in the future. If expanding

technology is a priority, then all staff members, rather than just the IT staff, need to understand, not just the technology embedded in the library, but the technology that library users bring to the library. One group also identified higher-level skills as necessary, such as interpersonal and communication skills, change management, project management, partnering and collaboration, and special expertise in areas such as youth or business services. Library staff members need to understand and accept their new role.

### **Planning the Summit**

The Summit was designed for a limited invitational audience composed of librarians, thought leaders outside the library community, and representatives of organizations whose mission corresponds to libraries or who with whom libraries should partner. Library participants were chosen as representatives from different types of libraries, expertise, and time in the profession. Ethnic diversity and representation of people with disabilities was also a factor. From the beginning plans were developed to include communication with and input from those not attending the Summit. To this end, an ALAConnect site was established where Summit documents were placed. There will be many more opportunities for future input from people throughout the library profession and any individuals or groups interested in libraries. The Summit was co-chaired by Pat Smith and Julie Todaro and coordinated by Nancy Bolt. The venue for the Summit was generously donated by the Library of Congress and Summit participants were privileged to hear from the Librarian of Congress, Dr. James Billington. The Summit was also supported by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

*This report was prepared by Nancy Bolt using transcriptions of the flip charts provided by Julie Todaro and Shaula O'Connor, summaries of the presentations made by Julie Todaro, some Twitter comments, and notes provided by Stephen Dubner, Thomas Frey, and Joan Frye Williams.*