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Bridgebuilding: Fostering Community Engagement and Dialogue

September 2023

IREX

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

The U.S. in 2023: A fractured social landscape

"Everybody is aware that we are very divided, that there is a lot of distrust and polarization. One thing I've noticed is even the people who I see as very, very extreme and polarizing figures will point to the problem that we are very polarized. I think a lot of us are in this space like, Okay. So... what do we do about it?. . . A lot of different groups and projects are starting to emerge and we're trying to learn from each other, and we're asking, 'Do you have the right answer? What are you doing over there?...' We're all kind of in that space."

- Spokane Public Library

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American democracy needs systems-level solutions

Photo credit: Kellee Forkenbeck

The opportunity to address these social divisions and ultimately, strengthen American democracy, calls for solutions that address the roots of the problems. **Increased levels of social capital and a stronger civic infrastructure** must be integral to any such solutions.

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How to strengthen social capital and civic infrastructure? Bridging is one solution

Bridging can be defined as *engaging across difference in ways that respect identities, foster mutual relationships, seek a common good, and promote a commitment to civic engagement, thereby contributing to increased social capital and strengthened civic infrastructure, and ultimately, a stronger democracy*.

- Adapted from Interfaith America, Bridgebuilding in Higher Education

Photo credit: The Ferguson Library

Public libraries offer unique spaces in American life

Photo credit: Citizen University

Program Summary

The Library Bridge Building program, implemented by IREX and funded by More Perfect, **aims to enhance the bridging capabilities of public libraries in the U.S. to combat rising levels of distrust and division**.

IREX and its expert partner spoke with diverse public libraries, library associations, and bridging organizations and analyzed existing bridgebuilding initiatives, tools, models, approaches, and programs; analyzed challenges and gaps in resources that public libraries need to implement these activities; and identified library needs in terms of effective tools to measure impact.

This landscape analysis informed the development of a **resource hub** in collaboration with WebJunction to support public libraries and library stakeholders with implementing bridging activities in their own communities.

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We learned from…

Data were collected through in-depth interviews from late 2022 to early 2023 from library associations, bridging organizations, and 20 public libraries. Interviewees demonstrate a range of exemplary work but are not necessarily representative of all public libraries.

Library Associations
1. American Library Association (ALA)
2. The Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL)
3. Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA)
4. Public Library Association (PLA)
5. Urban Libraries Council (ULC)

Bridging Organizations
1. Bridge Alliance
2. Essential Partners
3. Interactivity Foundation
4. Living Room Conversations
5. National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD)
6. The Village Square

Individual Public Libraries*
1. Cobb County Public Library, *Atlanta, GA*
2. Columbus-Lowndes Public Library, *Columbus, MS*
3. Conneaut Public Library, *Conneaut, OH*
4. Dakota County Library, *Eagan, MN*
5. Dallas Public Library, *Dallas, TX*
6. Daniel Boone Regional Library, *Columbus, MO*
7. Estes Park Public Library, *Estes Park, CO*
8. The Ferguson Library, *Stamford, CT*
9. Johnson County Library, *Shawnee, KS*
10. Kansas City Public Library, *Kansas City, MO*
11. Lexington Public Library, *Lexington, KY*
12. Memphis Public Libraries, *Memphis, TN*
13. Milton Public Library, *Milton, MA*
14. North Liberty Library, *North Liberty, IA*
15. Saint Paul Public Library, *Saint Paul, MN*
16. Salt Lake County Library, *Salt Lake County, UT*
17. Skokie Public Library, *Skokie, IL*
18. Spokane Public Library, *Spokane, WA*
19. Topeka-Shawnee County Public Library, *Topeka, KS*
20. Toronto Public Library, *Toronto, ON*

*Data from 10 of the public libraries came via a case study questionnaire implemented in 2022 by Shamichael Hallman.

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BRIDGEBUILDING RESOURCE HUB WALKTHROUGH

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Bridgebuilding Resource Hub

Strengthening civic life and a sense of mutuality through libraries

The Library Bridgebuilding program is a project of IREX, a global development and education organization, with support from More Perfect, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, and the Walmart Foundation. The project was created to enhance bridgebuilding capabilities of public libraries to combat rising levels of distrust and division in the United States.

IREX defines bridgebuilding (also called bridging) as engaging across difference in ways that respect identities, foster mutual relationships, seek a common good, and promote a commitment to civic engagement, thereby contributing to increased social capital and strengthened civic infrastructure, and ultimately, a stronger democracy. This hub is a space to share resources to support libraries with bridging and other civic strengthening activities.

Video tour: Explore the Bridgebuilding Resource Hub

Upcoming webinar

Landscape analysis

IREX conducted a landscape analysis of current U.S. library-based bridgebuilding interventions to identify the most effective approaches and thereby help inform future interventions.

Read the report

Resource list

This collection of bridgebuilding resources for your library includes facilitation guides, training videos, resources for measuring the effectiveness of activities.

Explore resources

Photo courtesy Memphis Public Libraries

oc.lc/bridge-building

The Bridgebuilding resource collection can be searched, sorted, and filtered.

Bridgebuilding Resources

IREX / 14 June 2023

This collection is part of the Bridgebuilding Resources Hub. It includes a range of resources such as facilitation guides, training videos, and tools for measuring the effectiveness of bridge-building activities.

The list can be searched, sorted, and filtered.

Return to the Hub

Search resources				Clear all
Source ▼		Type of resource (a tag) ▼		
Type of library (tags) ▼		Approach/Type of activity ▼		

Name of resource ⌄	Source	Type of resource (a tag)	Type of library (tags)	Approach/Type of activity
"Hot Topics" Lunch Tips for organizing a Hot Topics Lunch in collaboration with the League of Women Voters to discuss timely community issues.	League of Women Voters	Facilitation guide/program organizer materials	Large and Urban Small and Rural	Speaker event
A Loving-Kindness Meditation to Boost Compassion Compassion helps us mend relationships and move forward while fostering emotional intelligence and well-being. This guided meditation develops loving kindness to all people.	Mindful (Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education)	Facilitation guide/program organizer materials	Large and Urban Small and Rural	Guided meditation
Braver Angels eLearning Courses Professional-level courses designed by experts in communications and depolarization to teach you hot to interact with people in difficult situations.	Braver Angels	Webinar/e-course	Large and Urban Small and Rural	Facilitated conversation Training
Braver Angels Programs Several program offerings including experiential workshops, skills workshops, film screenings, and more.	Braver Angels	Facilitation guide/program organizer materials	Large and Urban Small and Rural	Facilitated conversation Training
Braver Networks Network of organizations working across the political spectrum to bridge partisan divide.	Braver Angels	Community of practice	Large and Urban Small and Rural	Network building
Citizen Connect A non-partisan platform dedicated to helping Americans right, left, and center find ways to heal our divides and strengthen the nation. Citizen Connect provides details about in-person and online events, and organizations.	Bridge Alliance	Community of practice Resource bank	Large and Urban Small and Rural	Facilitated conversation Librarian education Network building Video
Civic Health index	National Conference on	Measurement tool	Large and	Measurement

Case studies

Read how public libraries have approached bridging activities, the partners that they worked with, and what they learned.

Columbus-Lowndes Public Library System

Conneaut Public Library

Daniel Boone Regional Library

Johnson County Library

Kansas City Public Library

Memphis Public Libraries

North Liberty Library

Spokane Public Library

Toronto Public Library

Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library

Does your library have a bridgebuilding example to share? Write your own case study by completing this template and sending it to social@webjunction.org. We'll work with you to share it on WebJunction.

Needs assessment and measurement tools

These tools can support you in developing a needs assessment to determine the types of programming that will be most useful in your community and then measuring the effectiveness of those programs.

Creating Social Change Through Library Programming

Needs Assessment

Data Collection for Libraries

Library Social Cohesion Impact Measure

Observation Template

Sample Indicators to Measure the Impact of Your Program or Activity

Case Study Example

Bridgebuilding Case Study: Daniel Boone Regional Library

This case study was developed by IREX as an example of a "bridgebuilding" activity. IREX defines bridgebuilding as engaging across differences in ways that respect identities, foster mutual relationships, seek a common good, and promote a commitment to civic engagement, thereby contributing to increased social capital and strengthened civic infrastructure, and ultimately, a stronger democracy.

IREX, Bridgebuilding project / **14 June 2023**

Background/context of the library

The Daniel Boone Regional Library (DBRL) seeks to promote access to information, lifelong learning, civic involvement, digital literacy, intellectual and cultural enrichment, community partnerships, and flexibility in addressing changing needs. By providing resources, educational opportunities, and a friendly setting for learning, community development, and personal growth, the library seeks to improve the quality of people's lives.

What bridging initiatives/programs has the library offered?

DBRL employed the Human Library concept which is a learning approach in which human beings are recognized as "living books," and share their experiences as a representative of a group in the community that is often subject to prejudice, stigmatization, or discrimination. Individuals have the opportunity to "borrow" these human books and engage in conversations with them and through that experience, their beliefs and stereotypes are challenged and they are exposed to other perspectives. Using the Human Library program, DBRL gathers people from various backgrounds to exchange stories and ultimately, fosters communication and understanding and creates a safe environment for open and vulnerable discussions about their life experiences. The Human Library program requires libraries to purchase licenses from the Human Library organization and receive facilitation training.

DBRL also holds a One Read program which aims to connect community members around civic dialogue on difficult issues. As part of this program, the library works with the community to select a book; then they invite the community to read the book over the summer, ahead of programming around the book hosted in September. These programs include author visits, book discussions, film screenings, art exhibits, and other types of programs that explore themes and topics related to the book. For example, the library selected books related to teen mental health and brought a panel of experts and students to talk about the issue in their community. The library also learned more about actions being taken by stakeholders to address teen mental health issues, as well as where there are gaps and what resources are needed to fill those gaps.

Library details

- Library name: Daniel Boone Regional Library
- City, State: Columbia, MO
- Size of library system: Two-county area with 4 libraries in 4 communities
- Contact for bridging information: Seth Smith, Public Services Librarian, ssmith@dbrl.org

Use this case study to learn:

- how the Human Library program can teach people about different experiences and perspectives.
- about innovative solutions to build empathy and create a welcoming space across different groups.
- ways to engage people who have different viewpoints on a range of topics.
- about technology-related services that you could provide to patrons, especially those looking for jobs.
- about digital wellness programs and activities that assist individuals with digital literacy

PUBLIC LIBRARIES BUILDING BRIDGES

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Seth Smith, Daniel Boone Regional Library (MO)

Seth Smith

Public Services Librarian, Daniel Boone Regional Library (MO)

- One Read at DBRL
- Human Library at DBRL

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Matt McLain, Salt Lake County Library (UT)

Matt McLain

Associate Director, Community Engagement, Salt Lake County Library (UT)

- [Let's Be Neighbors](#) discussion series at SLCL

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Recommendation

Considering the potential harms to public libraries and librarians' well-being, should we encourage public libraries to do bridging work? YES!

Public libraries should continue to facilitate bridging activities, and should recognize their contributions to civic infrastructure.

Even considering the potential harms to public libraries and library staff well-being, we encourage public libraries to continue to do bridging work. We recommend supporting public libraries to proactively work to reduce their risk.

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Recommendations for Public Libraries/Library Associations

Consider forming a **community of practice** to promote shared learning around building social capital, strengthening civic infrastructure, and bridging.
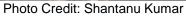

Photo Credit: Jenny Garmon

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Recommendations for Public Libraries/Library Associations

- Create **knowledge sharing opportunities** for public libraries and bridging associations.
- Consider updating current community **needs assessments** to support the public library's potential to build social capital and civic infrastructure.
- Implement a **change process** that maps out the different stages of bridging activities - from assessment to design to implementation to evaluation - that contribute to broader community change.

Photo Credit: Shantanu Kumar

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"Reflecting on closing down divides, or helping with understanding, I really like the idea that libraries are a place for everyone, and the ideological differences shouldn't matter in terms of what our programming offers and what we try to accomplish here.

"It's getting the people into the room, figuring out how to reach audiences, because it's a leap of faith, not only for the people who are volunteering, but also for people to come do a reading, because you're all being very vulnerable. You're showing: 'I'm completely ignorant about this identity that you identify as.' And so, it takes an act of bravery."

Daniel Boone Regional Library

Explore today:
oc.lc/bridge-building

Please share any questions or comments…

And stay in touch!

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