

Bridgebuilding Case Study: North Liberty 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.

Background/context of the library

[North Liberty Library](#) (NLL) is committed to being a place for community members to connect, enrich, create, and thrive. Their defining principles are that they provide equal and equitable access to information and resources to all individuals through a variety of delivery methods, they value a diverse world and strive to mirror and reflect diversity in the range of resources and services they provide the community, and that their service offerings come with empathy, compassion, and excellence. In addition to these principles, the library values that their library is a safe and welcoming space for all to interact and connect, their commitment to improving the literacy skills of their patrons, and their social responsibility to support democratic societies.

What bridging initiatives/programs has the library offered?

[The Lighthouse in the Library](#) (LITL) is a series of community discussions that began in January 2021 after NLL received a Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) grant from the American Library Association (ALA). They held quarterly events, which centered on themes such as cultural competency, food/wellness inequity, and COVID-19-related education. Through [Libraries Transforming Communities \(LTC\) Facilitation Skills for Small and Rural Libraries](#), an asynchronous six-part e-course and facilitation guide, librarian Kellee Forkenbrock learned skills to design and implement the program and facilitate community conversations.

Why were bridging initiatives needed in the community?

NLL created LITL to help residents during the COVID-19 pandemic with the following goals: to bring them together, to share a sense of togetherness, and to help assist in food and wellness inequity, cultural competency, and COVID education. LITL conversation topics are selected based on survey data compiled by the city of North Liberty. Library staff used these responses to ensure that the dialogues addressed what truly concerns the community. By focusing on the exact needs of North Liberty residents, NLL enlisted community leaders to not only speak to the issues but to be sounding boards for event attendees who are community residents.

Library details

- Library name: North Liberty Library
- City, State: North Liberty, Iowa
- Size of library system: 1 location
- Contact for bridging work: Kellee Forkenbrock, kforkenbrock@northlibertyiowa.org

Use this case study to learn:

- more about ALA's Libraries Transforming Communities grants and resources.
- tips on facilitating difficult conversations.
- how community survey data can help to design a successful program.

What were the signs of success?

LITL produces events that attract patrons. One event, a cultural competency workshop, was done in partnership with the University of Iowa. Afterward, many participants expressed a motivation to be more welcoming of new neighbors in their community as a result of the workshop. NLL then shared opportunities for attendees to participate in additional community-centered programs in the area.



Photo: Courtesy Kellee Forkenbrock

What was learned?

Employing a variety of formats for community conversations (e.g., events with a panel or workshop sessions) was a key takeaway for NLL staff. Finding effective ways to promote the events has been an ongoing challenge. Forkenbrock recommends participating in the intensive facilitation course. The six-week training she received from the ALA/LTC team provided her with the skills and the confidence to launch LITL with NLL staff. Specific guidance [she found valuable](#) include:

- Practice beforehand, and learn how from other people who facilitate. If you can't do a "trial run" of the conversation you're planning, try putting facilitation techniques to work in your daily life when you run into conflict!
- Make ground rules clear before the conversation, and make sure they're enforced throughout.
- Stay neutral, even if you have strong feelings about the issue.
- Know that libraries *can* host discussions around controversial topics—and the community will thank them for it!