

CREATING
SUSTAINABLE
HYBRID LIBRARY PROGRAMS

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INTRODUCTION

How can libraries develop a sustainable programming model that serves patrons in person and online? During the pandemic, many libraries rapidly pivoted to fully virtual programming. Now, as libraries rebuild their in-person programs, it has become clear that some patrons will continue to want and expect virtual options for the long term. But without more staff and resources (and, in many cases, with less), libraries may not have the capacity to resume all in-person programs while maintaining a full slate of virtual ones. Hybrid programs seem to offer a solution to serving as many people as possible within the organization's capacity. Integrating hybrid programming into the library's normal way of doing business requires new ways of planning and thinking about when and how to engage patrons virtually and in person.

To understand when and how to use hybrid formats sustainably and successfully, this paper includes:

- A comparison of the advantages and limitations of in-person, virtual, and hybrid formats.
- Within hybrid programs, an exploration of key dimensions and options to consider.
- A tool for analyzing and making decisions about program format.

A person with long dark hair is sitting on a dark grey sofa, viewed from behind. They are using a laptop that displays a video conference with four participants. The room is dimly lit, with a small potted plant on a table to the left and a lamp providing light from the right.

BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF FORMATS

Like both in-person and virtual programs individually, hybrid programs have their advantages and limitations, which vary depending on the program and its intended audience. Hybrid programs have the potential to retain the best of both fully in-person and virtual formats while minimizing their pitfalls. But hybrid programs can also be difficult to execute well. Additionally, planning hybrid programs involves complex decisions, as there are multiple options and types.

To clearly understand when and how to utilize hybrid programming, it may be helpful to understand the benefits and limitations not only of hybrid programming itself, but also of fully in-person and virtual programs. By clarifying the contexts where each is likely to be most and least successful, libraries can make informed decisions about when to pursue a hybrid format.

IN-PERSON. The traditional in-person model for library programs still offers many advantages. In an era of post-pandemic Zoom fatigue, many patrons and presenters are excited to gather in person (Rice & Robertson 2022). Live programs may not require participants to have any digital literacy, equipment, or connectivity. They can foster informal conversations and help connect people to the library as a place. However, in-person programs are not accessible for some populations (Brodkin Webb 2021). People with limited transportation options (including youth), mobility challenges, or childcare responsibilities may not be able to attend. Presenters must be local or willing to travel. Programs may need to be repeated multiple times to accommodate a variety of attendee schedules and locations.

VIRTUAL. Although many libraries adopted virtual programming out of necessity, in some cases they found it had advantages or became popular (Brodkin Webb 2021; Gibson 2022; Rice & Robertson 2022). Virtual

programs provide convenience and accessibility for certain populations (Saunders 2022). Virtual programs may be more accessible to those with barriers to attending in person, such as people with caretaking responsibilities, mobility challenges, and limited transportation. Many virtual platforms support accessibility tools for those with limited hearing or vision, as well as built-in access to translation services. In some cases, virtual programs can be recorded and watched on demand, eliminating schedule as a barrier. For people with digital literacy skills and Internet connectivity, the ease of quickly joining a program from anywhere may reduce friction and increase participation. Of course, the converse is also true; those without digital literacy or access, or those who simply are tired of screen time, are excluded.

Virtual programs also have benefits for the library. They significantly expand the pool of potential programs (ALA Public Programs Office 2022; Wong 2022; Saunders 2022). Presenters can be sourced from anywhere in the world, and libraries in different locations can collaborate to bring in speakers they could not afford individually. Libraries may need to be more intentional about planning for engagement, as virtual interactions may lack the opportunities for informal and side conversations that may arise naturally in person.

HYBRID. Hybrid programs attempt to draw on the advantages of both in-person and virtual modalities while limiting their disadvantages. Accessibility is maximized because patrons can choose to attend in whatever way works best for them. The risk of hybrid is that, if not executed well, the program may provide a lower quality experience for one or both audiences. Library staff, presenters, and attendees may have less experience with hybrid programs. Organizers may find it challenging to balance the needs of two different audiences. Additionally, hybrid programming is not simply a blend of in-person and virtual modes. It is its own programming type with unique considerations. For example, the technology or the planning process that worked well for creating virtual-only programs may be different for a hybrid program.

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PROS AND CONS OF HYBRID PROGRAMMING

Advantages:

- Maximizes accessibility
- Provides patron convenience
- Offers choice and flexibility
- Expands potential pool of presenters and partners
- Potentially reduces cost

Disadvantages:

- Complex to plan and manage
- May be hard to provide consistent quality across audiences
- May require new or different technology
- May require new or different planning processes



DIMENSIONS OF HYBRID PROGRAMMING

Hybrid programming describes multiple possible delivery methods that all revolve around a core idea: to provide similar content and experiences in person and virtually, so that people can participate using whichever mode they prefer. In practice, there are multiple possible ways to achieve this goal (Aronofsky 2022; Rice & Robertson 2022). Key dimensions to consider include content source, audience experience, and timing. Deciding how to shape a program along these dimensions is important to the success and sustainability of a program.

CONTENT SOURCE: IN-PERSON FIRST, VIRTUAL FIRST, OR MULTIMODE.

With an in-person-first model, a program takes place live in the library. It is recorded or streamed for virtual access. An example of this model was the Boston Public Library's Lowell Institute Lecture with Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr. (Gifford and Motte 2022). The speaker came to the library and held a moderated discussion. Audience members could watch in person or through an online livestream. Dr. Glaude then took questions from both in-person and online attendees. Following the talk, patrons could purchase signed books onsite or online. Some staff members were assigned to the virtual event only, for tasks such as monitoring chat, advancing slides in Zoom, and facilitating Q&A. The library was also thoughtful about its audiovisual setup, ensuring a high-quality experience for online attendees.

In a virtual-first model, the program content is provided virtually, and people have the option to gather in person to engage with it. For example, the Carbondale Public Library in Illinois brought a virtual presenter to an

in-person program (Rice and Robertson 2022). They showed a documentary in their meeting room, then had the filmmaker join in by Zoom to lead a discussion. According to Library Director Diana Brawley-Sussman, this hybrid model allowed for a fully interactive experience that “felt like [the presenter] was here in person,” but without the cost of travel expenses.

In a multimode program, each participant engages both in person and virtually. An example might be a peer-led learning circle, where people go through a self-paced course online, then meet in person to discuss what they’ve learned. Or patrons may attend an in-person program that is followed by virtual discussion or engagement. Patrons may visit the library to pick up a kit of physical supplies in person for use during or after a virtual program. For example, in a conversation hosted by the Association of Library Services to Children (ALSC), one library shared that they offered an online cooking class, and people could visit the library to pick up supplies (Aronofsky 2022). Another offered “virtual safaris” with a take-home birdwatching guide.

The multimode model opens an exciting new array of possibilities for long-term engagement, self-directed learning, and community connections. However, multimode programs also require patrons to be able to access both virtual and in-person elements, which may make programs less accessible.

All three content sources have merit, and which is a better fit may depend on a variety of factors, like the level of interaction (e.g., lecture vs. discussion), the location or preference of the presenter or attendees, the availability of resources, and cost. In making a selection, it is important to consider the experience of the audience engaging with the content in its non-native format (Saunders 2022). Both audiences should have an “equivalent experience,” says Melissa Wong (2022), adjunct lecturer in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “How can you give a good experience to both your in-person and online attendees?”

In a virtual-first program, how will the library provide value for in-person attendees? For example, if little or no engagement is possible with a virtual presenter, the library might invite a local facilitator or expert to lead discussion or answer questions. In an in-person first program, how will the library support the virtual experience? Ensuring high-quality audio and video is essential, as is having a clear plan for if and how virtual attendees can

interact with the presenter and other participants. This may mean having an additional staff member scheduled to manage the virtual environment, investing in new equipment, or outsourcing video production.

AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE: SEPARATED OR BLENDED. Are the virtual and in-person audiences both engaging with the same content at the same time, or are their experiences separate? The word “hybrid” may initially conjure up an image of the first scenario, such as an in-person speaker being simultaneously livestreamed to a virtual audience (Rice & Robertson 2022). The Boston Public Library lecture described earlier was an example of a blended program (Gifford and Motte 2022). However, blended programs do not have to be lectures. For example, The Dalles Library in Oregon offers hybrid book groups and movie discussions that patrons can attend virtually or in person (Gibson 2022).

It is also possible to create separate, customized experiences for different types of attendees (Denneler 2022). A live program might be recorded and offered for virtual viewing only at a later date. In discussion-based programs, participants might break into groups, with participants engaging only with others using the same modality. A program could simply be offered twice—once in person, and once virtually—at different times and with separate audiences. For example, the National City Library in California began offering literacy tutoring either in person or online (Brodkin Webb 2021). According to Mikki Vidamo, National City Library’s Academic Enrichment Programs Coordinator, “the accessibility level went up, especially for kids...we could reach at home through Zoom while parents had to work.”

Blended programs may be more difficult to plan and implement than separated ones. Managing two different environments simultaneously adds complexity. Extra staff may be needed to facilitate a successful experience in both environments (ALA Public Programs Office 2022). For example, one person may monitor chat while another takes in-person questions; one person can welcome people at the door while another helps with login issues. New technology might be required, such as cameras and microphones that automatically track the speaker, in order to provide good quality video and audio. Separating the experiences may allow additional time or a more customized experience for each audience. For these reasons, a library with concerns about its ability to start or sustain hybrid programming may wish to begin with separated formats.

TIMING: SYNCHRONOUS OR ASYNCHRONOUS. In a program with separated virtual and in-person audiences, another dimension to consider is timing. Even if the in-person portion of the program takes place synchronously, the virtual portion does not necessarily have to follow suit. For example, a synchronous live program could be recorded and posted later as an on-demand video or podcast. A follow-up discussion could take place asynchronously through social media posts, an email list, or a message board. Patrons could pick up a take-and-make kit to use on their own time, either tied to a synchronous online event or with links to on-demand virtual content.

Asynchronous hybrid programs have several advantages. With an in-person-first model, they allow time to improve the quality of the virtual product (such as video editing). As one of the potential barriers to attending a synchronous program is schedule, offering a program on demand can allow greater access over a longer period of time. For example, when the Prince George's County Memorial Library System in Maryland hosted bestselling author Ibram X. Kendi, 100,000 people watched the recording after the live event (Hursh 2021). Asynchronous programming may also appeal to previous nonusers. In a survey of hybrid programs in Illinois, one library director noted that take-and-make kits appeared to be reaching a new and different audience (Rice & Robertson 2022).

However, engagement over time is not guaranteed simply by posting asynchronous content. The library may need a promotional plan to ensure continued visibility and access (Hursh 2021). The program may need to be taken down or updated after a certain period of time. Additionally, recorded asynchronous programs may compete with existing high-quality online learning products that are freely available or to which the library already subscribes. It may be a better use of the library's resources and time to point patrons to existing on-demand learning options. Before implementing an asynchronous program, the library should consider the unique value it is hoping to provide. Are attendees able to interact or build community in some way? Does the program contribute to a broader priority or series? Stand-alone asynchronous programs without opportunities for engagement (such as watching a recorded video) may take significant time and effort to produce for little use or impact. However, when offered strategically, asynchronous programs or elements of programs offer the opportunity to broaden and deepen engagement.



MAKING HYBRID SUSTAINABLE

With so many factors and options to consider, how can a library make hybrid programming a sustainable part of their ongoing services? The key is to be intentional about aligning the format with the program's purpose. Sustainability comes from integrating decision-making about hybrid formats into the library's normal planning processes, so that hybrid programs are not additional work but a purposeful way of accomplishing current goals with existing resources.

Happily, library staff are well practiced at making these kinds of decisions. Libraries have always considered a variety of factors in planning their programs. What location or time will work best for the intended audience? Will participants want to learn about this topic through a lecture or a discussion? How will success be evaluated? Modality—in-person, virtual, or hybrid, and what type of hybrid—simply becomes one more factor to consider for each program.

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When the program planner is ready to consider format, first they should define the intended audience and the desired outcomes and impacts of the program. The planner can then reflect on which choices will be most likely to reach that unique audience and achieve that specific impact. They should also consider how they will know what was effective (Gallaughar 2022).

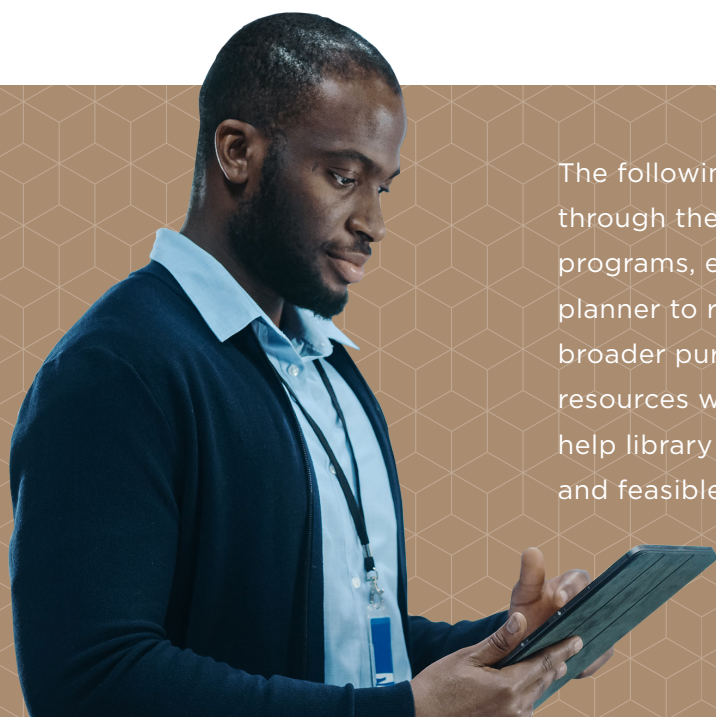
QUESTIONS TO ASK INCLUDE:

Who am I trying to reach with this program? What do I know about their preferred ways of engaging with the library? How might each format choice include or exclude them?

What outcome do we want this program to have for participants? What modes or formats will work best to support that impact? How might each format choice help or hinder?

What are the big-picture goals of the library—its mission, vision, values, strategy, goals, and/or major initiatives? How might format choices help contribute to that collective effort?

How will I evaluate the success of my format choice? How will I get feedback from my community about what is working well for them?



The following tool provides a framework for thinking through these questions for each format and, for hybrid programs, each key dimension. Its purpose is to prompt the planner to reflect on how each element would serve the broader purpose of the program and the library, and what resources would be needed for success. Thus, the tool may help library staff create programs that are both strategic and feasible—in short, that are sustainable.

Program name:

Intended audience:

Desired impact(s) and/or outcome(s) of program:

How the impacts/outcomes support broader library direction (mission, vision, values, strategy, goals, etc.):

| OVERALL FORMAT | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| | Effect on intended audience. <i>Who would be included or excluded?</i> | Effect on desired outcome. <i>How would the program's purpose be supported or hindered?</i> | Relationship to the library's overall direction. <i>How would this format support the library's mission, vision, values, strategy, goals, and/or initiatives?</i> |
| In-person | | | |
| Virtual | | | |
| Hybrid | | | |
| The format that will best support this program's goals is: | | | |
| What tools and resources are needed for this to be successful? | | | |

| HYBRID—CONTENT SOURCE | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| | Effect on intended audience. <i>Who would be included or excluded?</i> | Effect on desired outcome. <i>How would the program's purpose be supported or hindered?</i> | Relationship to the library's overall direction. <i>How would this format support the library's mission, vision, values, strategy, goals, and/or initiatives?</i> |
| In-person first | | | |
| Virtual first | | | |
| Multimode | | | |
| Describe in more detail how the content will be delivered: | | | |
| What tools and resources are needed for this to be successful? | | | |

| HYBRID—AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| | Effect on intended audience. <i>Who would be included or excluded?</i> | Effect on desired outcome. <i>How would the program's purpose be supported or hindered?</i> | Relationship to the library's overall direction. <i>How would this format support the library's mission, vision, values, strategy, goals, and/or initiatives?</i> |
| Separated | | | |
| Blended | | | |
| Describe in more detail how the virtual and live audiences will experience this program: | | | |
| What tools and resources are needed for this to be successful? | | | |

| HYBRID—TIMING | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| | Effect on intended audience. <i>Who would be included or excluded?</i> | Effect on desired outcome. <i>How would the program's purpose be supported or hindered?</i> | Relationship to the library's overall direction. <i>How would this format support the library's mission, vision, values, strategy, goals, and/or initiatives?</i> |
| Synchronous | | | |
| Asynchronous | | | |
| Describe in more detail how the program will be delivered across time: | | | |
| What tools and resources are needed for this to be successful? | | | |

CONCLUSION

Hybrid programming opens exciting opportunities to reach new people and engage them more deeply. Successful implementation requires intentional planning because hybrid programming is not just one thing, but a set of options that can blend virtual and in-person experiences in different ways. Planners should consider not only if and when hybrid is the right approach in the first place, but also how they will source content, shape the audience experience, and manage delivery over time. Beyond creating any single program, libraries should consider how to sustainably integrate hybrid into their normal programming processes, so their communities can benefit for the long term.



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