



HOW PUBLIC LIBRARIES CAN CONNECT WITH SMALL BUSINESS

by Dr. Audrey Barbakoff



About the Author

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Introduction

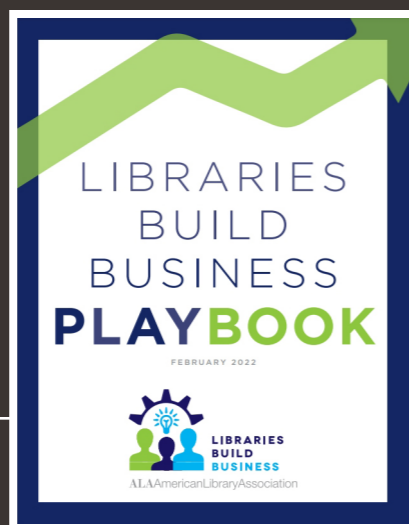
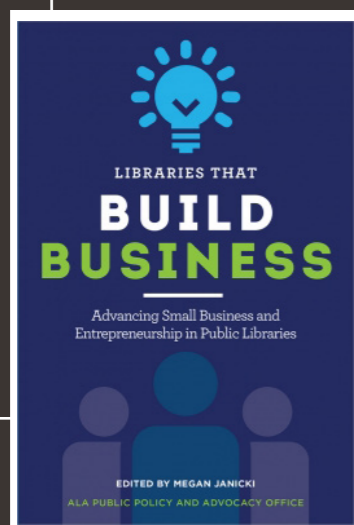
Public libraries play an important role in supporting an equitable and thriving local economy in myriad ways. In recent years, the field has been increasing its investment in services for and relationships with the small business community. Because of libraries' role as **community connectors** and trusted sources of information, they are naturally well positioned for this work, especially in support of BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and women entrepreneurs and business owners. However, many libraries can do more to tailor their services or promotion to the small business community.

In response, library organizations across the country have released a spate of resources designed to increase librarians' knowledge and confidence in serving the small business community. These include in-depth examples from real library programs, research reports, tools, and more, so librarians from any level of experience and any library size or budget can find support. For library workers looking to better serve or express their value to the business community, this paper will provide an overview of some of the key recent resources and when to consult them.

LIBRARIES BUILD BUSINESS

Libraries Build Business is a \$2 million national initiative from the American Library Association that began in 2020. Its goal is to support, learn about, and share best practices for library services to small businesses. The primary project centered on a nationwide cohort of libraries that developed an array of small business programs and services. The 13 participating libraries ranged from a small tribal library in Washington state (Yakama Nation Library) to a large urban system in Florida (Broward County), and a variety in between.

While the formal cohort wrapped up in 2022, the effort spawned a community of practice on Slack that continues to connect and educate library workers around the country. (It is free and open for anyone to join.) The initiative has also produced multiple meaningful tools and continues to develop new ones. The latest updates can be found on the Libraries Build Business webpage (ala.org). Some of the key resources are described in the following:



Initiative Highlights Report. The [initiative highlights report](#) succinctly describes the main lessons and takeaways from Libraries Build Business (LBB). Librarians looking to get started with small business services and programs may find it particularly useful, as it provides a concise high-level introduction to many of the LBB concepts, examples, and tools. Because it also summarizes key findings and lessons learned, librarians already offering business services may find it to be a good source for talking points to use with internal leaders and external community members.

Key components of the initiative highlights report include:

- Samples of real-world examples and success stories from participating libraries, such as classes for food truck and street vendors, an entrepreneurial Library of Things, and one-on-one business mentoring through a community partner.
- A three-tier model that libraries can follow to develop their own small business programs. The report provides a high-level overview alongside information about how to track and evaluate success.
- A description of the LBB project, its goals, and its impact. While this information does not directly instruct librarians on how to launch or sustain their own programs, it can provide useful context for understanding the results, as well as talking points about the value libraries offer to the business community.

Playbook. The [Libraries Build Business Playbook](#) is a free online resource with in-depth instruction on starting, building, sustaining, and evaluating small business services. It expands significantly on the content offered in the highlights report, providing a deeper dive into techniques that libraries can use. While the content is accessible to librarians at any level of knowledge or readiness, this resource may be particularly useful to librarians preparing to implement or expand small business programs. The five primary topics are:

- Getting started
- Expanding and building the program
- Equity, diversity, and inclusion
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Sustainability

Each section includes a description of how to put small business programs into action. The instructions are brought to life with quotes, real-world examples, and case studies. Tips are scattered throughout for various library types, sizes, and budgets, so that anyone can adapt the content for their own unique community. Finally, the end of the document outlines resources for further learning, including ways to connect with other librarians doing small business programming.

Book by Megan Janicki. In 2022, ALA Editions released the book [Libraries That Build Business: Advancing Small Business and Entrepreneurship in Public Libraries](#) by Megan Janicki. The book features 26 chapters submitted by librarians around the country, each providing a description of a real-world program or initiative. It also contains four additional chapters with instructional material on developing your own small business services. This resource may especially appeal to those who want to go in depth with concrete examples of what has worked at other libraries. Because of the wide-ranging nature of the programs and contributors, most readers should be able to find at least a few chapters that are particularly relevant to the types of small business projects that interest them. Various chapters cover program models and topics, audiences, outreach techniques, and tools.

A few examples include:

- "BIPOC Business Community and Connections: Small Business—Big Impact" by Adriana McCleer and Yee Lee Vue, Appleton (WI) Public Library
- "One-to-One Support for Micro-Entrepreneurs: Business Help at Your Library" by Taneesa R. Hall, Ferguson (MO) Municipal Public Library
- "Opening the Doors to Economic Success: The Miller Business Center" by Sophia Serlis-McPhillips and Elizabeth Malafi, Middle Country (NY) Public Library



Librarians do not need in-depth business expertise to serve their small business community effectively.

Key lessons from Libraries Build Business

Libraries are particularly important for supporting equity in the local economy. In a survey of LBB program participants, 77% identified as women and 64% as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). Cohort libraries also focused on serving business owners who were decarcerated, immigrants and refugees, and those speaking a first language other than English. As economic systems frequently under-resource entrepreneurs from minoritized groups, the library's low-barrier, welcoming approach supports greater equity.

Librarians do not need in-depth business expertise to serve their small business community effectively. While many libraries serve small business owners through entrepreneurship-focused programs and partnerships, small business owners also benefit from the library's core services. These include access to technology and digital skills, from printers to makerspaces to computer classes; support for basic literacy and GED preparation; classes in ESL and citizenship; helping people navigate health care resources; and simply providing access to a robust collection and enjoyable space to work. Additionally, libraries can partner with business experts for programs, and refer patrons to them for information needs. "I learned that it is not necessary to be an expert," one participant stated in the Initiative Highlights Report. "I was able to find information and make connections for our patrons with those who have the expertise to provide support."

Overall, the Libraries Build Business ecosystem offers a "no wrong door" approach. The suite of real-world examples, how-to instructional content, and connection to other practitioners offers value to brand-new and highly experienced librarians alike. The project took care to represent a diverse set of libraries by location, size, budget, and population served, so its resources can be applied in many different contexts. For these reasons, librarians interested in starting or improving their services for small businesses may find it to be a helpful guide and partner.



Strengthening Libraries as Entrepreneurial Hubs

From 2018 to 2022, the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) partnered with the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation on an initiative called Strengthening Libraries as Entrepreneurial Hubs. Like LBB, this project centered on a cohort of libraries. ULC both supported and studied the libraries' wide-ranging set of small business services across the country. After the initial cohort ended, a related group began to focus on action and implementation. ULC developed and continues to update a set of resources both providing insight from the cohorts and providing tools for others to use. Those resources include a toolkit, research reports, and a leadership brief.

Toolkit. Libraries that want to start or improve their support for entrepreneurs can turn to the ULC toolkit ***Closing the Entrepreneurship Gap: Tools for Libraries***. Much of the toolkit is freely available, though some elements are restricted to ULC members. This toolkit is concise and particularly easy to navigate, allowing novices and experts alike to quickly locate the elements that will be most useful to them. There are seven top-level categories:

1. Starting up
2. Building staff capacity and confidence
3. Expanding and leveraging library assets
4. Positioning the library in the entrepreneurial ecosystem
5. Engaging the entrepreneur
6. Assessing and refining programs and services
7. Championing the library's essential role

Nested under each of these top-level categories, readers can find 4–6 briefly described strategies. Following these are a handful of resources aligned with the strategies for deeper learning, ranging from articles to podcasts to samples. Some of the items listed in the toolkit are blog posts from librarians who participated in a cohort, providing more detail on their services. Additional relevant **blog posts** can also be found on the ULC website.

Research. ULC partnered with nonprofit social science research firm Knology to develop the research report ***Entrepreneurship: Where Urban Libraries Fit***. This report may be especially useful for librarians trying to communicate the value of their offerings to organizational or community leadership. Through quantitative and qualitative data, it provides context about what libraries around the country are doing and evidence of the impact of their services. It also analyzes potential future areas of opportunity.

The report explores how libraries are serving entrepreneurs and the impact of those services, based on findings from a national survey and a series of case studies. The study found that libraries play a crucial role in helping entrepreneurs connect to the rest of the small business community. Libraries' low barriers and welcoming environments can make them a front door into the small business ecosystem, especially for underrepresented and excluded groups. In addition, the report identified areas where entrepreneur demand from programs is increasing technology training and small business finance.



A second, narrower report produced by ULC provides more interesting evidence for the value of library small business services. This is a **report on the early findings from its Small Business Value Calculator**. The small business calculator is a tool to help libraries quantify the monetary value of their services for entrepreneurs and small business owners, including educational programs, research services, physical spaces, and access to technology and equipment. The ULC calculator is based on one developed by the St. Louis County Library.

While the calculator itself is available only to ULC members, a report showing the results for more than 30 library systems is available to all. These data provide potentially powerful talking points about the value that libraries generate for small businesses, especially when speaking to community members who have limited experience with libraries. Even libraries with only a single location reported that they created hundreds of thousands of dollars in value for their small business communities. Many large systems measured multimillion-dollar impacts. Even if your own library does not have access to the calculator to determine your own estimate, the overall numbers could be used in a presentation, elevator speech, or conversation to highlight the size and value of a library's role in the local small business ecosystem.

Leadership Brief. ULC leadership briefs are four-page summaries that each provide a concise overview of an important trend or issue in libraries. As the name implies, leadership briefs are tailored to library directors and leaders. As a result, they are quick, practical reads. Even for those not in such roles, this focus makes them an excellent source for a bird's-eye view of an issue and for quick, bulleted talking points. The leadership brief on **strengthening libraries as entrepreneurial hubs** describes the library's essential role in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and offers strategies library leaders can use to support local economic development goals. It includes five examples of real-world library initiatives, a list of six key assets libraries bring to the small business community, and seven actionable strategies.



To increase their impact, libraries should engage staff in identifying key players in the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, conducting outreach and building partnerships, designing services with subject matter experts, and sharing stories of success.

Key lessons from Strengthening Libraries as Entrepreneurial Hubs

This initiative provided important insight into the role the library plays in the small business community. The resources produced from the project can help libraries understand and communicate the economic value of their programs, services, and spaces. This not only helps librarians design services, but also helps them educate community leaders and members about the importance of the library.

Overall, the Strengthening Libraries as Entrepreneurial Hubs initiative found that libraries can help democratize access to entrepreneurship. Libraries have a large network of community relationships that foster deep understanding of their community's diverse needs and goals. They know how to develop partnerships and create educational programs. Their meeting spaces and technology are valuable assets to the business community. Finally, because they are trusted, inclusive, and offer resources at no cost, they appeal to new entrepreneurs with limited resources. To increase their impact, libraries should engage staff in identifying key players in the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, conducting outreach and building partnerships, designing services with subject matter experts, and sharing stories of success.

Although ULC focuses on urban libraries by definition, libraries in any setting or of any size can benefit from communicating the value they bring to the local economy. Rural, suburban, and small libraries may need to consider how to best adapt examples and language to fit their audiences.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The two projects described thus far were nationwide, multiyear initiatives, providing a host of resources applicable to a variety of libraries. However, there are many other, often more localized ways to learn about small business services in public libraries and connect with other practitioners. The following are a few key examples.

Entrelib: Entrepreneurship & Libraries Conference (ELC). ELC (www.entrelib.org) offers conferences and professional development for librarians who support entrepreneurs. (It is an initiative of the North Carolina Library Association, but the audience is national and international.) For the last few years, ELC has offered mini conferences that are free and virtual. In addition to standard conference sessions, ELC offers unique ways to engage such as lightning talks and a pitch competition.

State, national, and local library organizations. Many library associations and organizations offer professional development and networking, either ongoing or periodically, focused on business services. For example, the American Library Association's Reference and User Services division (RUSA) has a Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS). State chapters may also offer similar units, such as the North Carolina business reference group that sponsors Entrelib. State libraries, local consortia, vendors of library business research products, or other organizations and groups such as WebJunction may also offer periodic training or networking with a business focus.

Local economic, business, and workforce development agencies. States, regions within states, and individual municipalities have agencies dedicated to supporting the local economy. These vary by area, but examples may include a Small Business Association (SBA) chapter, a Workforce Development Board, a small business assistance program at the county or city, or a state office dedicated to economic advancement. Often, such agencies convene networking events, conferences, or trainings focused on small business support. While these are not run by libraries, they still provide powerful ways to learn about local entrepreneurs' information needs, meet potential partners, and promote library services.

Conclusion

Libraries play an essential role in local economies. By freely offering access to space, research resources, technology, and educational opportunities, libraries can lower barriers to entrepreneurship and support small business owners. The increased opportunity is especially important for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and women entrepreneurs, as well as others from marginalized and excluded groups. Libraries of all sizes and types can and do offer many specialized services designed specifically for the business community, and there are many opportunities to learn from their experiences. Additionally, there are opportunities for librarians to better understand and communicate how general library services like meeting rooms, technology access, and the collection provide value to small businesses and the local economy.

Libraries can learn about starting, expanding, and improving their services with resources like ALA's Libraries Build Business. They can understand how to educate their colleagues and communities about the value of the library's business services with insight from ULC's Strengthening Libraries as Entrepreneurial Hubs. And they can seek out ways to continue connecting with each other and new ideas through business-specific conferences, library associations, local economic development agencies, and professional development opportunities. With so many examples, tools, reports, and connections now available, there is no better time for libraries to begin exploring opportunities to serve their small business and entrepreneur communities.

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