

Outputs and Outcomes

What is the difference between an output and an outcome? According to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), outputs are direct products of program activities, usually measured in terms of work accomplished—such as circulation counts, door counts, program attendance, computer sessions, etc. In contrast, outcomes are benefits or changes for individuals or populations during or after participating in program activities, including new knowledge, increased skills, changed attitudes or values, modified behavior, improved condition or altered status. An output is a measurement of activity size and scope. An outcome shows the social value added. An output is a quantitative measurement. An outcome is generally a qualitative measurement. We can use outputs to measure outcomes, but not the other way around.

In the past decade there has been discussion on the need to reshape how library service is evaluated in order to articulate outcomes better to key stakeholders and share success stories with the community. **Pure data, as described above, does not have the impact it used to have.** It is not good enough anymore for groups such as a local Chamber of Commerce member to think, “Yeah, the library is a good place because it helps my kids with their homework.”. Residents have to understand that the library is important to them directly. When they understand that, residents begin to understand the true value, the outcomes we are trying to achieve.

The challenge we have as librarians is that outcomes are “soft” while outputs are “hard”—and librarians and many stakeholders are accustomed to hard proof of what libraries deliver. Previously, many library directors wanted a number, showing that something increased 3% over the year before. Not only did we want a precise number, but we wanted this number generated by a computer. We still collect these outputs, as they are required by the State of Colorado and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), but these numbers do not generally translate on the effectiveness of the library. In my position I do use outputs if I feel they can be used to tell a story. An example is our program on White Allyship this past summer. Spread over a four week period, we were able to share that the sustained, high attendance at all four sessions served as a key performance indicator that attendees were very engaged with the subject matter.

As detailed in the Aspen Report on Public Libraries (<https://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/Dialogue-on-Public-Libraries/2014/report>), leadership is needed across the community—from elected officials, government leaders, business and civic leaders and libraries themselves—to build communities that thrive and succeed together. Library leadership wishes to align the library and its work with the community’s educational, economic and other key goals. It must have input from all stakeholder groups in the community. Key steps in building community leadership to support the public library include better communications with community leaders, developing community champions, strengthening intersections with diverse communities and communities of color, reaching out to and engaging with young-professional organizations and demonstrating the collective impact of partners working together.

The library district is currently interviewing for a newly created position of Programming and Events Coordinator. This position will work closely with library staff and our community partners. This person will analyze emerging community issues, as well as identify needs and intended outcomes to determine our direction for programs and events. We believe this new position will help us improve how we evaluate library programs and services and if we are successfully meeting community needs.