

“I’m sorry. I haven’t been trained on that...”:

A Survey of Digital Literacy Competencies Among  
Georgia Public Library Staff

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### Abstract

No longer does the public library exist solely as a repository for books. A 2016 Pew Research study found that 29% of library users aged 16 and over visit the library with the intent to access computers and free WiFi. Furthermore, intent aside, 45% of patrons over the age of 16 access the available computer technologies while visiting the library. In addition, in a 2017 Pew study that found the most frequent library users are Millennials, it is revealed that just over three-fourths of all library users consider the public library a place to get trustworthy and reliable information. Most importantly for the work of this paper, 55% of adult Pew respondents feel that training in using popular technologies, such as computers and smartphones, would benefit them in overall decision-making. Therefore, as digital technologies continue to change and evolve, it is essential to ensure that front line staff in public libraries are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to be efficient digital literacy teachers in their communities.

“I’m sorry. I haven’t been trained on that...”:

### A Survey of Digital Literacy Competencies Among Georgia Public Library Staff

Should patrons have an expectation of being helped with their digital needs when they come into a public library? Libraries are here to serve their patrons, so the answer is of course yes! However, are our staff adequately trained to fulfill this service? Are librarians properly trained in all things digital? With 45% of patrons over the age of 16 coming to the library to access the available computer technologies, are library staff prepared to answer all their potential questions (Pew Research Center, 2016)? This paper is going to explore whether or not public library staff in Georgia have been properly equipped with the knowledge to help patrons as we continue to maneuver the digital age of librarianship.

## **Literature Review**

### **Public Expectations**

Americans now expects public libraries to dedicate as much time and effort in providing access to and training in the use of digital tools and online resources as they do to traditional services such as book lending and programs like storytelling. In 2016, the Pew Research Center surveyed 1601 Americans about their public library use. Respondents were both users and nonusers of their local libraries and were aged 16 and older. One interesting statistic from the survey regards whether print books have a prominent place in today’s libraries. The percentage that separates those who “definitely” and “definitely do not” believe that traditional books belong in the library is small, with remaining 45% of respondents reporting that they were undecided but leaned towards the library moving out some of the print collections to create more

community and/or technology spaces. This leads one to believe that Americans no longer think of their libraries as just repositories for books.

This particular Pew study offers much information about the importance the American public places on libraries to be centers of digital learning. When asked to think about the ways public libraries could better provide service to patrons, 4 out of 5 respondents reported that libraries should “definitely” offer programs to teach patrons of all ages how to use digital tools like computers, tablets, and smartphone. Roughly half believe libraries should “definitely” provide 3D printers and other digital tools for patron access.

In addition, a majority of those surveyed say that having access to training in the use of digital devices and online resources would aid them in personal decision-making and over 1/3 agree that libraries contribute significantly by helping people decide what information they trust. Jaeger and Taylor (2019) wrote an exposition in a recent edition of *American Libraries* that gives excellent examples of “misinformation literacy” and provides ways librarians can take action to help patrons differentiate fact from fiction. They point out that often library staff shy away from promoting themselves as agents of information literacy because of a fear of appearing political. However, Jaeger and Taylor urge librarians and support staff to put aside those fears with the reminder that “building an information institution and opening its doors to patrons daily are political statements, statements that emphatically express our beliefs in education, equity, and the common good.” In order to be a trusted

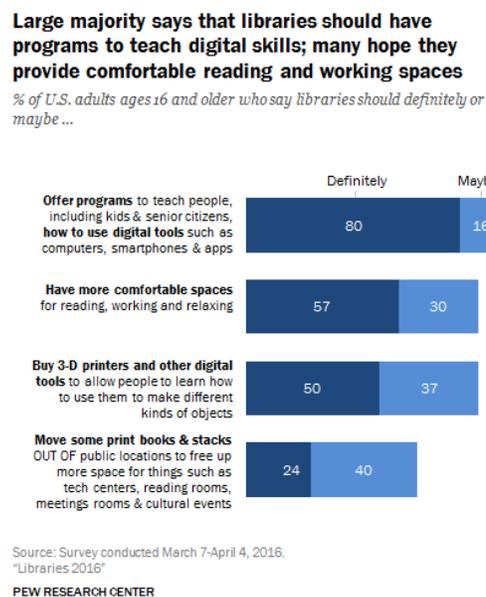


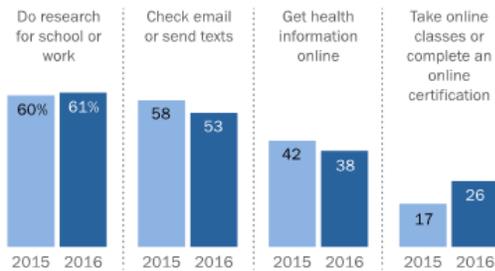
Figure 1. Americans' expectations of public libraries

information institution, it is imperative that library staff have the necessary skills to access the facts and provide valid sources to prove incorrect the fiction.

## Patron Usage

**Doing research or checking email are the most frequent uses of library tech resources, but more people are using them to take classes online than last year**

*% of U.S. library computer users ages 16 and older who used library computers in past 12 months to ...*



Note: 23% of adults ages 16 and older used library computers/internet connections in the past 12 months.

Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 4, 2016.

"Libraries 2016"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2. Public library patron use of computers

do research for school or work. In Georgia public libraries, it is likely that students will be accessing GALILEO to conduct part or most of their research. An initiative of the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, GALILEO is an online portal to academic and authoritative resources that are not accessible via free web searches, providing access to more than 100 databases indexing thousands of scholarly journals and trade publications. As explained on the GALILEO website (2019):

Through collaboration and resource sharing, GALILEO seeks to provide equal access to information for all Georgia citizens. While individual libraries benefit from the cooperative sharing of resources - lower costs and increased access to a wider range of materials - the goal is to improve library services for all Georgia citizens. No matter

There is no shortage of information in library and information science literature about the number of ways patrons use technology at public libraries or how library staff serve the various digital needs of the public. Figure 2 relates the most common ways that respondents to their Libraries 2016 relate they use digital tools and resources in their libraries. The statistic in this graphic most relative to this paper is the large number of patrons who access library computers to

where a citizen lives in the state of Georgia, a library nearby provides access to GALILEO.

Therefore, it is essential that public library staff in Georgia be able to help patrons navigate this digital resource, especially those who have not received prior instructions from educational institutions.

Another important work of the public library is contributing to their communities' workforce development. In 2017, the Brookings Institute published a report detailing how digital content of over 500 occupations, representing 90% of the American workforce, has changed from 2002 to 2016. What they found is that employers are now requiring applicants to have a higher level of digital skills than in years past. In 2002, only 5% of occupations studied required a high level of digital skills; in 2016, the percentage rose significantly to 23%. In addition, the share of jobs requiring low digital skills fell from 56% to 30%. This means that there is a smaller pool of employment opportunities for applicants who have a minimal digital skillset. The ALA (2016) reports similar findings, relating that jobs consistently go unfulfilled due to shortages in applicants that meet digital skill requirements. They go on to say, "digital literacy training boosts meaningful internet use. Those who receive formal training are significantly more likely to use the internet to pursue economic opportunities and cultivate social ties." Clark and Visser (2011) also examine the importance of a digitally literate workforce and conclude that library staff should stay ahead of the curve and "maintain the level expertise required in the digital landscape" (p.38) and continue to expand digital literacy initiatives.

### **Methodology**

In an attempt to get an accurate assessment of how adept Georgia's front-line public library staff is regarding digital competencies, we created and sent a survey to all sixty-two

public library systems within the state. The survey was submitted via a listserv to all public library directors in the state of Georgia. The instructions were to either fill out the survey themselves or pass it along to an appropriate staff member who would be knowledgeable of the system's staff digital abilities. A few key areas of the survey were designed to gauge the size of the library system; whether it was located in a rural or urban area; and the degree of digital ability of the system's staff members. We wanted to be able to compare any similarities and differences found regarding a library's service size and locality. Out of the sixty-two public library systems in Georgia who received the survey, twenty-six responded, a respondent rate of 41.94 percent.

### **The Survey**

The survey (see Appendix A) was compiled of 23 questions. These questions fell into four categories; system information, system staff information, system staff digital proficiency, and system staff proficiency in PINES.

At the beginning of the survey we wanted to get a sense of the size of the library system who was responding to the survey. This was achieved by asking questions such as whether the library was located in an urban or rural area; how many people were employed by the system; and how many staff members held an MLIS. Another important aspect of our study concerned whether or not the library system had a staff member who was designated as a full-time continuing education overseer of all staff. (Casa Pinnacle Group. 2019. *Staff Digital Literacy in Georgia Public Libraries Survey*.)

We also inquired what the system expected of its staff. To identify this expectation, we asked questions such as, "Do you expect different skill sets from different staff members, and if so in what way?" (Casa Pinnacle Group. 2019. *Staff Digital Literacy in Georgia Public Libraries*

*Survey*.) We asked respondents whether or not staff were expected to assist patrons with questions about their personal devices. Were staff willing, and able, to adapt to new technologies when presented with them? Did staff have the digital know how to comprehend new technologies? Did systems have staff that, despite informal training and/or more formal continuing education, continued to struggle with providing adequate digital assistance to patrons?

In addition, we sought to gather information about the digital proficiency of various staff. We wanted to see if staff at different levels – circulation staff, librarians, and branch managers, for example – were expected to have varying degrees of digital proficiency. To gather this information, we asked questions on the survey about specific staff member; for example, “Are the branch managers proficient with the basic skills necessary to help patrons with their day-to-day computer needs”. (Casa Pinnacle Group. 2019. *Staff Digital Literacy in Georgia Public Libraries Survey*.) We also allowed the respondents to way add any other relevant information about their staff’s digital literacy skills.

The general proficiency section of the survey provided a section where for respondents to assign a number to their staff collectively, one through five where one was basic knowledge and five was recognized authority. Areas of interest included staff proficiency in use of popular software and online databases, as well as basic internet skills. These questions were designed to prompt respondents to assess their staff’s digital competencies as an organization, not on an individual basis.

The final portion of the survey requested participants of the PINES consortia to evaluate staff’s proficiency with the Evergreen interface, the integrated library system used by PINES

libraries. As Evergreen had shifted to a web-based interface for Georgia libraries in 2018, we wanted to know if PINES libraries had staff who continued to struggle with the new interface.

### **The Results**

One of the questions asked was whether the system identified as a rural or urban library system. We found that 77% reported as rural and the remaining as urban. Another of the questions was whether the library had a designated staff member in charge of continuing education (which would include digital literacy, as well as digital trends). To this question we found that 81% had no dedicated staff for continuing education (Casa Pinnacle Group. 2019. *Staff Digital Literacy in Georgia Public Libraries Survey*). An analysis of the responses to the questions pointed towards a correlation between urban libraries with more digitally literate worker in addition to staff designated for continuing education and rural libraries not having any staff designated for continuing education and a less digitally literate workforce.

The respondents were also asked if their staff were expected to assist patrons with issues regarding their personal devices, resulting in 84% affirming this expectation. The survey also found that 81% of respondents reported that staff were willing to adapt to new technologies. However, 85% of the respondents also stated that they had staff who continued to struggle with providing adequate digital assistance to patrons.

When questioning the various levels of digital proficiency in the systems staff, every system stated that the administrative staff were proficient in basic digital competencies such as basic internet skills. Though 96% of respondents maintained their staff possessed basic internet skills, only 65% stated that their branch managers were proficient in basic skills necessary to help patrons with their day-to-day computer needs. When asked to assess their collective staff,

only 69% of respondents replied that their staff was proficient with only databases. (Casa Pinnacle Group. 2019. *Staff Digital Literacy in Georgia Public Libraries Survey*.)

Based on this information gathered from our survey, it would seem that the disconnect in the ability of staff to effectively aid patrons with their digital needs was the lack of continuing education for staff. It would also suggest that for staff to be equipped properly, at least in some capacity, there would need to be a staff member devoted to the continuing education of all other staff members.

## **Discussion**

### **Staff Competencies**

As the research shows, libraries and library staff are on the front line for helping patrons fulfill their digital needs. However, as our survey respondents make clear, public library staff continue to struggle to provide the necessary assistance to those who visit our libraries. It is essential that we maintain our relevancy in order to ensure our survival, a concern that librarians have always faced. As Koerber (2015) notes “Librarians have always taught patrons how to use the tools that serve their information needs...The fundamental difference about the tech needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the ever-changing variety of personal devices that patrons use to access our services.” (p.28).

Looking a little further into the survey responses, when asked if there were any requirements for staff in relation to their digital literacy 26% of respondents said that they had no requirements. An additional 23% pointed to job descriptions. However, these descriptions are, as one respondent put it, “vague and generic.” One only has to explore available employment positions in Georgia libraries to realize that job descriptions lack the clarity that would provide an applicant a concise expectation of digital literacy skills. For example, a posting for a

circulation manager asked for “proficient use of a personal computer.” Skills in “operating a computer and applicable software” were requested for a librarian in another listing. Almost half of our respondents have no more detailed guidelines for their staff’s technical literacy than being able to use a computer. Vague job descriptions not only hurt existing staff members by their lack of guidelines but also confuse recent MLIS graduates who are looking to apply for positions that meet their particular skillsets.

The vast majority of our survey respondents expect staff to help patrons with their devices. Yet, an almost equal percentage recognize that their staff struggle to provide assistance to patrons. How can we reconcile staff members with providing help for devices they are uncomfortable using themselves?

### **Recommendations for Further Action**

It is important to remember that all solutions will be unique to the individual library system. While we all have the same goals, how we get there should be as tailored to our respective systems and environments as everything else we offer.

Any major change to a system should begin by clarifying what the desired outcome is (Koep and Felkar, 2015, p.18). Smaller rural systems might not need or want staff members to know the details of most modern technologies and might instead focus on hiring staff members who have a willing attitude towards learning and experimenting. While we noticed in our survey that the presence of a full-time staff member dedicated to overseeing the continuing education of all staff members in a system correlated with a greater focus on digital literacy, it is not necessary for all systems. For those systems who might feel that they cannot afford to dedicate a full-time staff member to professional development initiatives or feel that they are not large enough to require a full time staff member, this is the perfect opportunity to get creative with

staffing. Make the position part-time or appoint a current qualified full-time person who can add this to their responsibilities and be willing to adjust their duties to allow for this new opportunity.

A good place to begin with a digital literacy program is determining which competencies will be applicable to each staff member. WebJunction compiled a list of library competencies in 2014 that still provide an excellent baseline. Their Core Technology Competencies include basic email, hardware, and internet functions and suggest that staff members cannot simply perform the basic functions of these competencies but also understand them (Webjunction, 2014). Decide whether you are going to have one baseline competency list for all your staff members or require different competencies for various positions. Once you have these competencies decided, use a program like Excel or Google Sheets to document the requirements. Using a digital resource to keep this record reflects your dedication to becoming a more digitally literate organization. Having made these changes to technology proficiencies, take time to update other outdated or unclear job descriptions. Being able to reference a current and relevant job description can help struggling staff members to understand what is expected of them. Current job descriptions can also motivate ambitious staff to improve their chances for promotion within the organization.

Once the competencies have been decided, it is important to evaluate the actual digital competence of your staff. A checklist is an excellent way to do this. For systems that want to start from the ground up, this provides an opportunity to evaluate what each staff member does throughout the day and make sure that their duties are effective and efficient. If you do not have the resources to start from scratch, there are other systems to study that have built a great framework from which to begin. Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Library's "Learning 2.0" project (also known as "23 Things") and the Colorado Public Library's Technology Proficiency Checklist are both excellent examples of programs that have long term staying power. Links to

both programs, as well as additional resources, can be found in Appendix B. There is no reason to reinvent the wheel unless you have the time, resources, and desire to do so.

Do remember to tailor what you find works for your system. For example, part of the technology-ready checklist that the Colorado Public Library created for their staff has a section for printers and printing. This section includes functions like “Turn the Printer on and off” and “Use print preview”. However, there is also a “Replace toner” function. While that might seem like an easy thing to have any staff member do, remember all that is associated with that. Does everyone need to know where the spare toner is kept? What will they do with the old toner? Who will be told if more cartridges are needed? Keep these things in mind as you create the competency lists for the different classifications. Periodically update this record and make sure staff are improving and adding to their skills. Most importantly, understand that this will be an ongoing process in which mistakes might be made and that some things might not work for your organization. Also, don’t feel that this needs to take place all at once. Be willing to adjust and change!

Once the competencies are decided it will be time to start the teaching process. Begin by creating a community where technology learning is part of the work culture. As Koerber (2015) notes, “it’s important that staff are able to do [training] on library time, to encourage participation and to show that library management is prioritizing both tech training and staff professional development” (p.29). Let staff know ahead of time that staff digital literacy is a priority and why it is important. A staff development day or a meeting of branch administrators would be an ideal opportunity to talk to staff about the plan. It is imperative to have the branch managers on your side as they will be instrumental in ensuring that branch staff members are diligent in taking or attending classes and improving their skillset. Offer a mix of practical and

fun classes for staff. For example, if one class is about general Microsoft Word skills, make the next class about creating an Instagram account. Explore opportunities to bring in outside trainers or organizations, perhaps from another county department (Koerber, 2015, p.30). Other possible training opportunities include websites like Kahoot! that make a game out of learning for a small fee or Northstar, who offers a free digital literacy assessment for individuals. In addition, Microsoft and Google both offer free digital learning opportunities.

Make sure that staff takes every opportunity to test digital devices like tablets and smartphones. If the budget allows, buy sample pieces and host regular ‘petting zoo’ events. If you’re working with a tighter budget, plan field trips to stores that specialize in digital technology such as Best Buy or Apple. Testing the devices can create a level of comfort for staff with a wide range of devices that no training can match.

At the end of a year, look back and see what has worked. Get feedback from staff about what was successful and what wasn’t. Were there certain classes/trainers/webinars that were particularly helpful? Were there training events that no one came to? Find out why. Send out the checklist again and compare it to the respondents’ answers from earlier. Where have they improved? What still needs work? Take this feedback and adjust expectations if you need to and use it create a plan going forward.

### **Conclusion**

There has always been a fear among LIS professionals that the next big thing would put the public library out of business. Could it happen? Perhaps. Luckily, however, our institution is one that can evolve to meet the needs of the people and still hold fast to the same mission of service. The public library is what we make it, and if we as library staff are willing and motivated to adapt and evolve as well and anticipate that big thing, we can propel the public

library ahead of the curve. That is, of course, with staff who are prepared and ready to meet that future. The digital age is not waning, so it is our responsibility to create learning environments in which we practice what we preach.

Appendix A

The Survey

[Survey Results](#) – CASA Pinnacle Group Survey

## Appendix B

## Resources for further learning

**Checklist Examples**

[Tech Skills Assessment](#) – Carmel Clay Public Library

[All Staff Technology Competencies Checklist](#) - PLA

[Technology Proficiency Checklist](#) – Colorado Virtual Library’s Technology Boot Camp

[Huntington Tech Training Team](#)

[Learning 2.0 \(23 Things\)](#) - Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Library

**Competencies**

[Competency Index for the Library Field – Compiled by WebJunction](#). Updated February 2014.

**Learning Websites**

[Applied Digital Skills lessons for GSuite certification](#)

[Northstar Digital Literacy Assessment](#)

[Kahoot! Learning Games](#)

[GPLS Continuing Education Fact Sheet](#)

[Digital Unite Technology Guides](#)

[Learn My Way](#)

[Microsoft Digital Literacy Curriculum](#)

[Free Online Learning at GCFGlobal](#)

[TechSoup](#)

[Staff Tech Training Curriculum at the Colorado Virtual Library](#)

**Webinars**

[Technology Competencies & How to Implement Them \(Geared towards management\)](#) – Indiana State Library

[Tools for Building Digital Skills with Your Patrons and Staff](#) – Free DigitalLead webinar from PLA

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