

Lincoln City Libraries Strategic Planning Constituent Feedback Report

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January 11, 2024



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Introduction

In fall 2023, Lincoln City Libraries (LCL) partnered with Parlay Consulting Firm, Inc. (Parlay) to facilitate the development of a three-year strategic plan. Multiple research-based activities were conducted in advance of the strategic planning sessions to help LCL invite input and feedback from key constituents, understand perceptions of the landscape in which they work, and generate ideas for potential strategic priorities for the future.

Following a targeted artifact and content review, Parlay—in partnership with LCL project leaders—designed and facilitated a series of qualitative interviews. Parlay conducted six, one-on-one in-depth, semi-structured interviews with community leaders and other partners to invite perspectives on Lincoln City Libraries' purpose and role in the community; successes, strengths, and challenges; perspectives on programming and partnerships; and potential priorities for the future of Lincoln City Libraries. Interviews were conducted from Oct. 24—Nov. 3, 2023.

Following the in-depth interviews, Parlay conducted three, semi-structured, in-person focus groups with LCL staff members on Dec. 13, 2023. Thirty-eight staff members participated in the focus groups, representing each of the five branch locations, the bookmobile, and an array of different roles (e.g., librarians, supervisors, LSA's, aids, and other administration and operations roles). Employees shared their experiences working at Lincoln City Libraries and their perceptions of how Lincoln City Libraries could further strengthen their services, programming, and workplace.

Finally, Lincoln City Libraries planned and hosted two, in-person community conversations at Gere and Eiseley branch locations on Dec. 11 and Dec. 13, 2023, respectively. Participants were recruited via an anonymous, online survey conducted in Nov.—Dec. 2023. Respondents provided their name and email address and gave permission to be recontacted about possible participation in the community conversations. (The report of results and findings from the online community survey are shared in a separate report.) Twenty-seven community members participated in the conversations. Parlay supported the design and facilitation of the conversations, which covered four topics, including the mission and purpose of the Lincoln City Libraries, the strengths and successes of Lincoln City Libraries, current and potential future challenges for Lincoln City Libraries, and possibilities for the future.

The interviews, focus groups, and community conversations created opportunities to share opinions and reflect on services, partnerships, and potential strategic priorities that Lincoln City Libraries might pursue in the upcoming years. This report provides descriptions of the themes and insights shared by participants, along with exemplar quotes, which help illustrate the sentiments expressed. A full description of the methods for the interviews is provided at the end of this report. Lincoln City Libraries expresses its gratitude to the many who generously shared their time and perspectives to help inform the future!

Interview Findings

Lincoln City Libraries' Purpose and Role

Interviewees were asked to reflect upon Lincoln City Libraries' current and future purpose and role in the community. They also offered perspectives on the extent to which the Lincoln City Libraries is communicating its purpose and role. Generally, many noted a reverence for the current and future purpose and an opportunity to expand and improve communication to boost awareness of the many resources, programs, and services that Lincoln City Libraries provides.

Current and Future Role

Interviewees were eager to describe the valuable purpose and role that Lincoln City Libraries has in the community. They focused on three critical components, which include:

- providing **equitable, no cost access** to diverse books, artifacts, materials, and technology for all community members;
- functioning as a **center for education and literacy**, illuminating and honoring patrons' freedom to pursue knowledge and information and to have self-determination in their pursuits;
- serving as a **hub for community connections**, relationally and programmatically, via its programs, services, and spaces, maintaining a posture of neutrality and welcoming hospitality that reserves conceptual and literal space for different materials and viewpoints.

Their mission, in my opinion, should be to have an all-inclusive, bicultural, bilingual...community outreach...ensuring that every child or every adult, especially with our new community members...realize[s] that this is an important space for them to continue to learn, that they should not limit themselves. (Community leader)

I think libraries are absolutely integral to teaching and learning...I love our public libraries." (Community leader)

I had a passionate patron Monday evening, who really made that [point, saying], 'This is a place of education, where I can sort of be self-determinant around what that is.' (Staff member)

There [are] so few places where you can have people of all different viewpoints or no viewpoint at all. I mean, you don't have to have an affiliation with a political party, or a trade association, or a club...whoever you are, you can come in, and we hope [to] find resources that work for you. That's our mission is to give people a place to flourish...that's our sacred trust is that I don't want anyone to be afraid to...pursue their intellectual curiosity because they think I won't approve of their belief system. I really strive for that, and I love that. We're one of the last places to offer that. (Staff member)

[There's] a mission of connection—not separateness. (Community member)

Can't remember a visit to the library when someone wasn't happy to see me. (Community member)

The library spurs imagination. (Community member)

Communicating and Promoting Our Role

Interviewees also reflected on the effectiveness of Lincoln City Libraries communication and promotion of its purpose and role. Generally, respondents say there is an opportunity to improve in the ways that LCL shares information and tells the story of the value and contributions that the system provides to the community.

Then I also think that currently, we don't do a good job of marketing the library...You're not trying to win customers away from your competitor or anything like that. Also, I think there's sometimes that humility. Just not wanting to go out and toot your own horn, so to speak, about what you do every day. I think that that has also lent itself to not being as well known in the community or thought of in newer and more innovative ways in our community. (Community leader)

...our app has gone down...[and] while it's eventually posted...it's obviously not getting out to our customers. So, we need a better way to connect with them. (Staff member)

We all know what the hospital was for. We all know what the school was for. But the library? ... There are people that have become so disconnected from it, and the main thing that I hear from people that don't regularly use the library is, 'Does anyone even go to a library anymore? Why?' (Staff member)

More outreach might be needed to increase understanding [of the library's purpose and role]. (Community member)

Lincoln City Libraries' Current Context

Interviewees were asked to reflect upon Lincoln City Libraries' current context, including recent successes and strengths of the organization, as well as challenges. Many current resources, programs, and services were mentioned and described as providing value and support to the community.

Successes and Strengths

They noted many successes, including increased participation in One Book One Lincoln and early childhood/family programming, such as Snowplow Santa. Other successes and strengths mentioned include:

- providing access to myriad collections and materials,
- collaborative and safe spaces and a welcoming environment for community members to meet and connect,
- outreach efforts to schools and the community,
- services responsive to the community's needs,
- committed, resilient, and talented team members and a strong leader,
- becoming a fine-free library, and
- opening of the new branch location.

I think that, again, the creativity that some of our libraries are showing in terms of programs, and responding, and listening to their patrons [is a strength]. I think especially at the [branch name], they have developed programming for various groups of people. (Community leader)

We don't have all the answers, but we will try our hardest to get them. (Staff member)

Commitment of the staff. I mean, I think we are very fortunate at having people that love what they do...a lot of it is, you have to do it because it needs to be done...I think [a strength of the Lincoln City Libraries is] the overall commitment of our employees. (Staff member)

I think we've got a good leader. He is out in the community. He's very much wanting to listen not only to folks in the community but also his staff...I also think that he has a good group of people who are very excited and energized. (Community leader)

[LCL] offers a welcoming environment for all. (Community member)

Challenges and Opportunities

Additionally, interview participants described a broad range of current and future challenges and opportunities that Lincoln City Libraries may need to account for, as it decides strategic priorities and sets goals for the next few years. Among the challenges mentioned are:

- capacity limitations due to constrained budgets,
- increasing costs for resources, books, and generally, the difficult economy,
- staffing shortages,
- confusing hiring practices/processes that make talent acquisition, engagement/career growth, and retention challenging,
- parking fees and bus drop-offs are not in proximity to all branches,
- “red tape” and other constraints that blunt initiative and innovative ideas/partnerships,
- facilities improvements and maintenance needs,
- managing shifting and diverse public perceptions of the purpose and expectations of libraries, and
- managing difficult behaviors with members of the public.

I think that's with any branch that's always short-staffed. The public doesn't know that...Sometimes I wish they did know it. (Staff members)

I like the fact that when you go to the library, you can get multiple sources. And for me personally, I love to go and just go through the new books and find out what's there. I think we have to get that word out to people that the library is different now, but it hasn't outlived its usefulness. (Community leader)

If you look at our expenses, our largest chunk is salaries. Yet every time...I've been here, what, 12 years, and when they've gotten to the point, 'Well, we need to cut positions,' or... 'Well, we're going to have to shorten our hours.' Because we are threadbare right now, and it's just really frustrating. (Staff member)

Well, and our community does suffer. They have to wait to interact with someone. (Staff member)

...there's sort of a fine line between, yes, we want to help, and we want to be able to do things in an empathetic and...lead with compassion...But when you've got someone who's clearly in distress or whatever, and all you can do is...listen. (Staff members)

Well, and it's very hard...We have temp [employees] that apply for our positions all the time...And it's very rare that they even make it into the [hiring] pool...But it also feels kind of bad to be like, 'You've worked this hard. Sorry, we're not actually going to consider you to stay.' (Staff members)

...just [meeting the diverse needs of] ... our community is difficult. Because just when you have someone that wants this building to be quiet, and restful, and...you have other people who want it to be boisterous, and loud... (Staff member)

[They are] actively working to combat censorship during a difficult time and context. (Community member)

Valued Resources, Programs, and Services

Interviewees mentioned specific resources, programs, and services that meet community members' needs, providing meaningful and responsive support to patrons. These include computers and internet access, Storytimes, Bookmobile, Libby and Hoopla, ConnectEd, Summer Reading program, BookNooks, Polley Music Library, Heritage Room (though not an accessible place), holds that are delivered to other locations, tools/printing services, and space to study and work with tutors or meet with colleagues.

The creativity that some of our libraries are showing in terms of programs, and responding, and listening to their patrons...they have developed programming for various groups of people...giving people the space to meet and not just check out a room. I mean really inviting them in and making them feel welcome...[people who] have special needs can come in with their caregivers and actually do an activity...I think there might even be a knitting group or something that meets there. Just different things like that. (Community leader)

...one of my proudest things is when people come in and they need to use a tool or equipment. Like the photocopiers, I really enjoy showing people [how to use them]... (Staff member)

People coming to study with tutors. I love it when I see English language learners with tutors from Lincoln Literacy that just need a space. Again, the families and story times is one of our biggest programs every day. So, success is I think people having a place to succeed in whatever that means to them. (Staff member)

...and like the computer systems, there are so many people that don't have that access to things they need in today's society, that you can come to the library, you can use for free, and we can help them with that, and that's just huge. (Staff member)

Strategic Priorities, Partnerships, and Possibilities

Interviewees were invited to reflect on several strategic focus areas, including critical priorities, collaboration and partnership considerations, and other possibilities for the future, namely, ideas and innovations for current or potential new programming and processes that could help Lincoln City Libraries best serve their respective communities.

Critical Priorities

Lincoln City Libraries interviewees were asked to identify areas of critical priority for the organization in the next few years. Priorities harkened back to previously mentioned successes as well as challenges. They noted the following areas for particular focus:

- expanded no cost, unhindered access to diverse materials, resources, and services for all with a continued focus on special populations (e.g., adults of all ages—especially young adults and seniors, early childhood, immigrant, and refugee populations, people with special needs),
- facilities maintenance/improvements,
- promotion of Lincoln City Libraries purpose and value in the community,
- funding and sponsorships,
- technology,
- green space/sustainability,
- libraries as a third space for community members to gather and connect.

New central or downtown library—a flagship for the city. (Community member)

Yeah, the cycle of the library user. You get brought to the library for a while. Then you go to college, you get really busy, and you don't read any books anymore. And then you have children, and you bring your children to the library. Then usually they continue to be library users past that point." (Staff member)

I...don't [want to] have a situation where kids can't get to the library with riding bicycles or walking or something like that, so to me, that's very, very important. (Community leader)

I just recently read something where millennials and gen Zs are using the libraries at higher rates than other generations...they all are very into sustainability. And so, they were talking about how ...they see the library as a way to...buy less books themselves, recycle, reuse. So, there is the idea of the library as a community space, like a third space... (Staff member)

... the library as a third space to combat isolation. (Community member)

I think we need to keep up with technology...I have a 3D printer that's six years old. (Staff member)

Paid parking regardless, but our patrons either don't come here because they don't want to pay for parking or wait to come when parking is free... (Staff member)

I know they're working on it, but our spaces are not always very engaging. I think in addition to being underfunded for staff and underfunded for materials, especially Bennett Martin, they have just let that [facility maintenance] go. With the idea, "We're going to get a new library." Well, as long as I've been here, they've been talking about the new library that's coming, and it's never come. I'm just so thrilled we're going to get new carpet. (Staff member)

We need another southeast location to relieve some of the pressure on Gere. (Staff member)

So, although maybe the quad system doesn't work so well anymore, but I do think... Our bus system has a central hub system...I want a quad system for our buses. (Staff member)

[LCL] could better connect with multilingual patrons and also encourage patrons to help increase awareness [of the library]. (Community member)

Bring in partners for collaboration. (Community member)

Programming and Partnerships

Lincoln City Libraries interviewees were asked about the value of partnerships in accomplishing their mission and work. Staff members, particularly, mentioned there are often untapped opportunities for productive partnership, because policies and legal considerations may preclude them from activating on certain events or programs. Additionally, they note, it is often difficult and expensive to initiate new and different programs on their own, as LCL may lack the capacity, resources, and expertise to do so. To fill this void, partners could be invited to share their services, skills, and/or expertise, and LCL could support collaborative programming with space and supportive materials and resources.

Interviewees also mentioned the following as opportunities for new or ongoing collaboration:

- organizations with understanding of diverse and special populations,
- arts organizations,
- mental and behavioral health support to be responsive to patron needs and crises,
- other state or city entities (e.g. parks, EMS, etc.),

- medical and education school systems (e.g., LPS, SCC, Innovation Campus),
- civic engagement organizations,
- business/professional and workforce development organizations.

Literally I have to check with my supervisor, and she has to okay something. But then it has to go to [others] and someone else. Then they have to check with city legal just to see if I can have a [new program event]. (Staff member)

But there is a huge level of social work that has to be done...I think we've had some trainings on conflict management...but I think overall...it would be great if we could have a social worker on staff...not just for the clientele but also for us. (Staff members)

I think the other one that might be interesting, we already do a little bit of it here at Bennett Martin and I've seen it kind of grow nicely is things like Clinic With a Heart and Nebraska AIDS Project, two services that meet people where they're at for medical care. (Staff member)

...become hubs for people who can't afford to go to the children's museum. Or they don't want to go to the mall, because they're going to get kicked out because they're not spending money. So, our friends with differently abled [to have a place to go]. (Staff member)

There's a lot of great partnerships going on with other libraries. Like Seattle. They're not paying for their Wi-Fi. (Community leader)

There's a relatively new organization...called Civic Nebraska. The intent is to help build...citizenship focused on citizenry...Thinking about what does it mean to be a citizen...How do you contribute to the civic life?...I think libraries model that in that they're truly open to all...You can have people with dramatically differing views about books, about a book, about almost anything. They can be at the library at the same time and get along just fine. It would be really nice, if we saw that in our public square, too. Civic Nebraska would be another one, I think, could be a potential partner. (Community leader)

[There are] never any roadblocks to partnership. (Community member and partner)

Possibilities for the Future

Lincoln City Libraries constituents were also asked to consider ideas and/or innovations in current or potential future programming and/or processes that could be of strategic importance for the Libraries in the next few years. They mentioned the following:

- partnerships in providing events, goods, or services, (e.g., seed library, tool library, support animal programming, volunteer opportunities, maker spaces, board games, coffee shops housed in libraries, fairs)
- open house to share more about resources, programs, and services,
- promoting the Lincoln City Libraries and enlisting partners in advocacy,
- emphasizing and prioritizing more data-driven decision-making,
- increased branch collaboration to maximize patron service, resources, and capacity,
- sustainable practices,
- technology access (e.g., digital collections/music, Chromebooks for check out, 3-D printing)
- other services (e.g., notary public, classes)
- flexible spaces with movable/adaptable furniture, shelves, etc.,
- options for donations to the Lincoln City Libraries,
- simpler mission statement,
- serving more of an archival role,

- RFID for easy check-out!

[We need] advocacy relationships in the community...Where you essentially get...those supportive touchpoints out in the community. I think that would be one big win...we just have to understand that the reality is that library staff can't do it all. (Community leader)

But spring and really using spring, summer, and early fall having a fair, and I don't mean just a book fair...We've got the space, it wouldn't be very conducive in downtown, or maybe it is, where you could shut part of the street, have vendors...resource tables, activities that we'd all be willing to come together. (Community leader)

A lot of libraries are starting to add a data analysis position...and we don't have that here at Lincoln City Libraries. We're trying. We know the value of data-driven decision-making. (Staff member)

It is not that innovative or transformational. I want RFID...It is magical...It is. It is so cool. The moment a kid sets a stack like this tall of books on a pad, and it just goes, 'BLOOP!' (Staff members)

Workplace Perceptions

Staff members were invited to reflect on what makes them proud to work at Lincoln City Libraries. There was alignment across focus groups in the pride they feel in the high service orientation that they provide and the respect and gratitude they have for committed colleagues.

However, there was some divergence of perspectives, for example, concerning their level of autonomy to try new things. Where some expressed hitting roadblocks as they initiate new ideas or programs, others expressed that they feel empowered to try new things. Additionally, where some interviewees generally advocated for more autonomy with respect to city oversight and involvement, there was also mention that they felt supported by city leaders particularly during the pandemic.

Employees mentioned the following things that help them feel proud to work at Lincoln City Libraries:

- the commitment and dedication of fellow team members,
- the support of the board and city officials,
- support and outreach to the community offered through their respective branches,
- programming provided for children, families, and other members of the community,
- expansive collections that they provide,
- strong service orientation they exhibit, and
- accessibility of resources and services provided at no cost to the community among other points of pride.

When I started working here at the library, every library had its own individual culture. This library's culture is magnificent. What am I proud of? My coworkers, man. I'm sorry, I said I was going to be sappy! But I have just felt so welcome since I've been here, and we have really good people that work for the system. (Staff member)

It's similar but a different direction as far as the support we get from our supervisors and administration. They're very open to program ideas for the most part. If there's something I want to do, I present it, and they pretty much let me do what I want. [Laughs] There's great support for things we have a passion for. (Staff member)

I think our staff does an awesome job supporting our community. (Staff members)

I think we do a ton of things for kids, and we're willing to try things, too, and see if it'll work. So, I'm proud we're willing to go out of our way and do something new—see what'll work. But I'm really proud of that, and I think our customers really appreciate that. (Staff member)

Conclusion

Lincoln City Libraries plays a vital role in the community, providing access to resources, materials, and services community members want and need to learn, grow, and experience more enjoyment in their lives at no cost to them. There is an opportunity to build on past successes and leverage organizational strengths, including a committed, resilient team of people who are determined to make Lincoln City Libraries a safe, welcoming, and helpful resource for their neighbors. Staff members are proud of the work they do, and the survey and community conversations show many patrons are very grateful for the resources, help, and the many interactions that they receive. However, workplace perceptions vary, dependent on one's circumstance, and there is opportunity for managers and supervisors to leverage learnings and approaches across branch locations to help address experiences that blunt employee morale and engagement. Finally, focus areas could include maximizing partnerships and ensuring facilities are updated and available to promote civic engagement, collaboration, and more community connections in the future.

Study Methods

Parlay conducted six, 30-minute semi-structured, one-on-one in-depth interviews via Zoom with Lincoln City Libraries key community partners. Interviewees included current and former organization leaders and others who have perspectives about opportunities and challenges for LCL now and in the future. Parlay also conducted three, in-person, 90-minute focus group interviews with staff members. Staff members represented each of the 8 library branches, including the Bookmobile, and an array of roles and responsibilities, including aids, LSA's, librarians, IT, support services, administration, etc. In-depth interviews and focus groups were recorded, following obtaining consent from participants, using Zoom technology. Audio recordings were transcribed by a trusted third-party vendor. Parlay also designed and facilitated two, in-person, 60-minute community conversations to invite community feedback and input on strengths and opportunities for the libraries in the future. Attendees at the focus groups and community conversations were offered refreshments as a small token of thanks for their participation. Parlay coded and analyzed the data using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software and manual coding techniques.

Recruitment for in-depth interviews was conducted in partnership with Lincoln City Libraries project leaders who provided an initial contact and referral. Parlay scheduled and hosted the interviews via Zoom. Lincoln City Libraries led recruitment and provided space for staff member focus groups. Recruitment for the community conversations was conducted via the online survey, and potential participants indicated their willingness to be recontacted to participate in a community conversation.

The exploratory interview guides were developed in partnership with Lincoln City Libraries project leaders. Interviews and focus groups were conducted from Oct. 24—Nov. 3, 2023. Community conversations were hosted at Eiseley and Gere branch libraries on Dec. 11 and Dec. 13th from 6—7:30 p.m. with twenty-seven participants. Data from the interviews were cleaned, coded, and analyzed using MAXQDA, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software, and manual coding techniques. This report reflects results and findings from the one-on-one in-depth and focus group interviews and the community conversations.

About Lincoln City Libraries

Lincoln City Libraries fosters the power of reading and provides open access to all forms of information to enrich people's lives every day. The Lincoln City Library and Reading Room Association was originally organized in 1875, two years before the state legislature passed an act establishing and maintaining free public libraries. The library was officially incorporated as a city-owned, tax-supported institution in 1877, and given an initial appropriation of \$100. The Lincoln City Library now boasts eight branches, a Bookmobile, and dedicated staff members who are eager to provide assistance and access to the many resources, programs, and services that we provide.

Learn more at lincolnlibraries.org.

About Parlay Consulting Firm

[Parlay Consulting Firm](https://www.parlayconsultingfirm.com) provides organizational development services based on the unique needs of your Board of Directors, leadership team and employees. We partner with clients to design a project plan that optimally supports your organization, identifying your talents, resources, and expertise to parlay them into your desired results. We offer strategic planning, research, and leadership development services to build your organization's capacity and achieve important outcomes.

Learn more about Parlay at www.parlayconsultingfirm.com.