

TOOLS IN ACTION MICRO-GRANT PROGRAM

Launch Year Report 2021

Introduction

The Tools in Action Micro-Grant program set out to provide rural librarians with a space to explore their library work with a mentor. The goal was for participants to become aware of the needs, wants, goals, strengths, and interests of themselves, the library, and the community. Then, to use this information to think about their library's current programs, policies, and services and consider new ways of doing things. The eventual goal was to initiate meaningful change in the library that would improve the social wellbeing of their communities.

The program was designed to walk rural librarians through tools co-created by other rural librarians and Rural Libraries and Social Well Being researchers. The tools are reflective exercises on various topics related to rural library service. They are based on research on rural communities and their libraries. The program gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on how and why they do what they do and refine their practice. A respect for the individual guided the program and was a foundational approach to the research as well.

While going through the program participants reported feeling less alone and more supported. Setting aside time to be reflective was seen as a rare gift. They talked about how their thinking expanded and reported a desire to make changes that might improve the social wellbeing of their communities. The participants seemed to have an increase in confidence and were more likely to take risks and try new things as a result of participating in the Tools in Action Microgrant program.

Project

The project ran from January to June 2021. A total of 26 participants met with the mentor, Hope Decker, one-on-one, for five weeks via Zoom. The participants developed a learning goal for their experience in the program, which was checked back on at the end of the program. Each week, the participants discussed the tools that they worked through before the meeting. They also talked about their own path to librarianship and their unique libraries and communities.

Timeline:

1/11 Application opened
2/16 Awardees notified
2/22 to 3/26 Cohort 1

4/19 to 5/17 Cohort 2

6/1 to 6/23 Closing interviews with Cohort 1

The mentor listened and encouraged the participant. They discussed practical applications of the learning gained by doing the tools specific to the participant’s library and community. Sometimes the mentor would suggest tools to complete and resources based on the participant’s needs and interests, rather than prescribing the same set of tools for everyone to complete. The participant’s experience and knowledge was respected and valued. As an outsider, the mentor’s thoughts and assessments were secondary to what the participant brought to each meeting. This time set aside to reflect became a safe place to find awareness and move towards change at the participant’s desired pace. The mentor-participant relationship was an important part of this program.

Participants in Cohort 1 were given an honorarium plus a micro-grant towards a project based on their work with the tools. Cohort 2 participants did not have funding and did not develop a project. In addition to the 5 weekly meetings Cohort 1 had two optional group meetings. The participants in Cohort 1 focused on the tools and their microgrant funded project while Cohort 1 focused on the tools.

Application Process

We asked 2 questions in the application: to describe the community their library was in and talk about what the good life means to them.

98 people applied, 20 were chosen for the first cohort. We looked for applicants that demonstrated a willingness to learn and had an appreciation and respect for their community. Whenever possible we looked for libraries that were from racially diverse communities and were from states that were not represented by the research. We invited a second round of the applicants to participate in cohort 2 which did not include a microgrant for the participant’s library and a honorarium for the participant.

Tools in Action Mentorship Program Implementation

We invited 20 libraries initially for round 1 (maximum given Rural Libraries & Social Wellbeing project capacity). Invitation, waitlist, and follow-up text in Appendix B.

Cohort	# Participants	# Meetings	Grant \$	Retention	Overall Cost
1 (2/22-3/26)	20	5 1-on- /2 cohort	\$500/\$500	100%	\$25,000
2 (4/19-5/17)	6	5 1-on-1	\$0	100%	\$3,000

Participants

Both cohorts consisted mostly of directors. There was a non-director in each cohort. In both of these cases the non-director did programming and had some ability to influence change.

Participating Libraries by Cohort

Round	States	Library Budgets	Library Staff	Sq Footage
Cohort 1	AK, GA, ID, IL, IA, ME, NH, NM, NY, NC, OK, UT, VT	min. \$21,958 max. \$335,155 mean \$120,398	min. 0.25 max. 6.00 mean 2.03	min. 440 max. 9,400 mean 3,640
Cohort 2	IA, NH, NM, NY	min. \$10,308 max. \$299,627 mean \$91,342	min. 0.00 max. 4.47 mean 1.61	min. 760 max. 7,500 mean 3,498

Weekly One-on-One Sessions

WEEK 1-INTRODUCTION

Intended Outcomes

- Gain understanding of research, social wellbeing and how we got the tools (brief)
- Identify what is important to you, the library and the community
- Plan how you will approach the tools

Methods

In this meeting the groundwork for the next five weeks was laid, by becoming familiar with the research and each other. The mentor and participant introduced themselves. The mentor honored the participant's own interests and intuition about which tools to begin with. The participants discussed the learning goal they came up with in the pre survey. Most participants decided to begin with the Getting Started tool to find out which tools to work on.

Results

As the participants learned about the research and shared their own experiences, trust was built. Trust became foundational to having a safe place to explore the tools in the next four weeks. Information that the participants shared about themselves, the library, and the community was the basis of the individualized coaching the participants received.

The first cohort was given outside work in addition to completing the tools. Most people did not do it and expressed guilt. Those that did the outside tasks tended to have to rush through the tools. Both approaches became a small barrier to slowly and reflectively going through the tools.

WEEK 2- GETTING STARTED

Intended Outcomes

- Find out pathways you'd like to explore by doing the Getting Started Tool
- Reflect on what is important to you, the library and the community.
- Develop a plan to using the tools

Methods

The mentor asked the participant about the tool(s) they completed. The mentor encouraged slow, thoughtful reflection rather than trying to complete all the tools quickly. The participants explored how the tool impacted them and what would be the best next step (next tool). Cohort 1 discussed possible projects.

Results

The mentor modified the weekly plan based on the tools that the participant completed and how the participant interacted with the tool and the mentorship process. This individualization reinforced the participant's experience and expertise was valued.

Many remarked at how the tools helped them think and reflect in ways they didn't normally get to do. They expressed delight at feeling less alone because the tools were created by their peers in other rural libraries, they felt "seen". Participants in Cohort 1 began to wonder what other people in their cohort were doing for their project and many were excited about meeting together as a group to share ideas. Having a project gave the participants a practical way to apply what they were discovering through the tools. However, the unintended consequence of the project was that there was less time to have a more in-depth conversation about the tools impact on the participant. It may have been a distraction at times.

WEEK 3- TOOLS EXPLORATION

Intended Outcomes

- Discuss tools that were completed
- Evaluate how these tools might (or might not) help improve library service to your community)
- Explore your own biases

Methods

The mentor asked the participant about the tool(s) they completed. The mentor encouraged slow, thoughtful reflection rather than trying to complete all the tools quickly. The participants explored how the tool impacted them and what would be the best next step (next tool). Cohort 1 discussed possible projects.

Results

Many of the participants talked about how valuable the burnout tool was to them. This week several people felt comfortable to share struggles. I originally planned to talk about Implicit Bias this week but decided to wait until week 4 to build more trust with the participants.

WEEK 4- ITERATING THE PROJECT (Cohort 1) /HINDRANCES TO LIBRARY SERVICE (Cohort 2)

Intended Outcomes

- Discuss tools that were completed
- Evaluate how these tools might (or might not) help improve library service to your community)
- Examine implicit bias

Methods

The participants talked about the tool(s) they did as in weeks 2 and 3. The mentor introduced implicit bias, in a direct/matter-of-fact but gentle/sincere manner in order to encourage participation.

Results

The mentor's approach to the sensitive topic provided an opportunity to talk about bias and library service with a trusted individual. For some this was the first time they had talked about implicit bias, for others the non-judgmental format allowed honest exploration without the added burden of excessive guilt. Other participants were well acquainted with implicit bias and benefited the mentor with a learning opportunity.

WEEK 5- PROJECT PLANNING AND FINDING HELP (Cohort 1)/ WRAP UP AND MOVING FORWARD (Cohort 2)

Intended Outcomes

- Identify people who can help with the project.
- Identify people whose input should be sought out for this and other things
- Plan project

Methods

The participants discussed the tool(s) they did as in weeks 2 through 4. If they felt comfortable the participant talked about the results of their implicit bias test(s). The participants evaluated their learning goal and the Tools in Action program. Cohort 1 talked

about their plans for the future of their project, many in Cohort 2 talked about the future of projects and services influenced by doing the tools even though that was not emphasized during the first 4 weeks.

Results

The majority of the participants did not think they completely achieved their learning goal, but felt they were on their way. Participants wanted to continue to do the tools and talk to the mentor or the group about it. The social nature of the learning in this program was satisfying to both the participant and the mentor. People regretted that the program was ending. Many expressed a desire to share the tools with their colleagues.

Personal Reflections of the Mentor and Designer

When I first started the program, I listed the participants in alphabetical order by library name. As I wrote this report I realized it was important to me to list them by their names, not where they work. They are each individuals with unique perspectives, strengths, and personalities. To honor their personhood by organizing by each individual's name is important to me. I think coming from a NYS Library System, where service is to the Library and directors come and go, made organizing by library the natural choice at first. Participants in this program are humans first, not their jobs or their libraries.

The most impactful moments for me were when the individuals showed me their humanity. These interactions were sometimes sad, sometimes joyful, but always vulnerable and honest. At these times, their personal insight had the potential to significantly impact library service. Sharing a great loss with a compassionate witness, had the potential to alleviate a little of the burden of carrying it. The isolation felt by a rural library director had the potential to be lessened, as they were seen, known, deeply listened to, and celebrated.

Future Implementations

The program and application form link were posted on the ARSL listserv, sent out by state librarians, talked about on our webinars, and emailed to those on the rural libraries list. Getting the word out remains a challenge. The program is unique and rural librarians who have limited time may not understand the program or believe that it is beneficial or even legitimate.

On the application we should have asked for their state and the library's service area. It would have made selection and record keeper easier for us. The application stated that the program was for libraries serving under 7,000 we received (and chose) applications from larger libraries.

Upon reflection, I think I chose people who wrote a good essay, who can figure out what we wanted to hear. This is not a bad thing, it's frustrating to read applications from people who disregard the questions and answer anyway they want. However, because of the nature of the program I think anyone who wants to learn would be a good choice for a participant. The application process should be replaced by a random selection with the understanding that the participant will be open to learning and reflecting on their practice. It should be open to anyone with a desire to grow

The money for the project did not seem to help people move through the tools. It was an incentive to apply, but I don't think it significantly helped people achieve their learning goals or move through the tools any better. It may have even been a distraction from going through the tools slowly and with intention. Focus on the project may have taken away time and effort from the tools. However, the microgrant gave the participants the freedom to do something risky, an extra unbudgeted thing. The participants reported that the microgrant gave the program legitimacy and was useful in convincing boards to allow the participants to be in the program. Participants also used the microgrant payment as a way to talk with community stakeholders and partners about their project.

Payment of librarians for their time is important. It is the ethical thing to do and it helped people carve out time to do work through the tools. I wish we could have paid the 6 librarians in the second cohort.

It would have been interesting to see what tools people did each week. A tools checklist by week would be helpful to study the progression through the tools to look for trends.

I would eliminate any extra homework or resources (actual or perceived) unless individually asked for, and I would only send it to the person who asked for it. Actual work that was assigned did not seem to contribute to a participant's experience of the program for those that did the work. In general, it seemed only to add to a person's to-do list and gave them the sense that they were not doing enough. If any outside work (other than the tools) was added in the future, I would carefully examine its ability to enhance the participant's experience. Extra outside work, just for the sake of doing extra work seems disrespectful of an adult's time. (or child for that matter) Adult learners need to see the value of the extra work they are doing. An extra burden of guilt is counterproductive to this program. It did not help build trust or self-confidence.

From the start I let people know that not every tool would be for them. They may not like the style or the content. The tool might not be what they need at that time. I realized early on in the first cohort it was also important to encourage doing one or two tools a week rather

than 2 or 3. A learner's goal usually is to complete all the tasks, so it would make sense that people wanted to do all the tools within the five weeks. People enjoyed doing the tools and found them helpful so they wanted to do them all. We are rarely encouraged to do things slowly and with intention, so this is a foreign way to approach work related tasks.

The questions in the pre and post survey need refinement. I found using Likert scale questions did not give meaningful results. In the future I would just ask direct, short answer before and after question to measure growth.

Future Research

Library space matters to how the community and director interact with library service. Our participants worked in very small fixed spaces (one room school houses, spare rooms in schools, and store fronts) and brand new large, modern, adaptable spaces. After director disposition, I wonder if the space a library is in, is one of the biggest factors in shaping library service to a community. A big modern library doesn't automatically mean that a library provides dynamic service if the director is closed off and unwilling to adapt to meeting the wants and needs of the people in the community. I am curious how the space the library is in affects the way the community feels about and interacts with library service.

Conclusion

The Tools in Action Microgrant program focused on the strengths of the participant, their library and their community. They reported feeling less alone. The participants felt seen by the case study rural librarian tool creators, who the participants had gotten to know through the tools they created. The participants thought that because the tools were created by their peers in other small rural libraries, the tools were more practical and relatable than other training they had encountered. They also appreciated being listened to without judgement by the mentor. In addition, many in Cohort 1 were glad to be a part of the program with the other members of their group. They could discuss ideas with others and get different perspectives from other parts of the country. The professional isolation that frequently happens in rural libraries was alleviated through this program.

The program gave the participants the opportunity to be more intentional about how they thought about the library and the community. Participants expressed gratitude for the time set aside to be reflective and add intention to their work. As rural librarians they don't normally have the time to stop and think about their work. This new practice influenced the decisions and actions they took in the library. The tools helped them to step away from how they normally operated and look at the library with an outsider's perspective. This allowed participants to begin to think about things differently and change things they often

overlooked. The tools also gave them language to talk to others about the important things libraries do, beyond circulation statistics.

Having weekly meetings with the mentor assisted them in doing the tools. As much as the participants liked the tools, they said it was hard to complete the unfinished tools after the 5 weeks were finished. They appreciated the accountability. Participants were also grateful to have a place to share their thoughts without judgement. The mentor guided, listened and cheered on the participants. The participants reported feeling safe to explore things that they had previously avoided, like implicit bias.

At the end of the five week program, participants described a new internal process to approach their work. They reported being more outward facing, more community minded, more willing to ask for help, more aware of barriers to library service, and more inclined to take risks. The safe environment to explore the tools facilitated additional learning and personal growth than would have been possible without the dedicated time and space spent with a guide.