STRENGTHENING LIBRARY ECOSYSTEMS

Collaborate for Advocacy and Impact

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PREFACE

Dorcas Hand

For as long as I have been a librarian, I worked in the world of school libraries—but I relied on my ALA membership to keep me aware of trends in other library types that might impact my work, or from which I could learn new methods. ALA and the world of librarianship are huge worlds, and it was clear to me that I was happiest in my own silo of school libraries. And then I began to serve on ALA committees, to expand my involvement in the wider world of libraries rather than just observing it. Working with librarians from other types of libraries deepened my understanding of our commonalities and facilitated my work leading the original Ecosystem Initiative Task Force. Together we wrote the ALA Ecosystem Toolkit that is available now (see www.ala.org/advocacy/ala-ecosystem-initiative). Since 2020, the ALA Committee on Library Advocacy's (COLA's) Ecosystem Subcommittee has worked to promote the toolkit to groups within and beyond ALA in order to support stronger advocacy by libraries by encouraging greater collaboration among them. When we stand together at any level—local, state, or national—our voice is stronger.

How the Ecosystem Initiative Began

ALA's Ecosystem Initiative aims to encourage all types of libraries to collaborate on advocacy efforts The idea for the initiative came out of efforts by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) to support the inclusion of school libraries in the funding stream of Obama's 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Because this was the first federal act that named school libraries as eligible for funds, and because

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every state handles the planning process of applying for federal grants differently, AASL set up a series of workshops in over forty states to help school librarians develop the relationships they needed to convince their state leadership, and particularly the state departments of education, to include school libraries in their plans when applying for grants. Those workshops pushed the idea that libraries are an *ecosystem*, that all library types can work together to support each other, and that all libraries would benefit if school libraries were stronger. Those stronger school libraries would feed new patrons to public libraries even during those students' K–12 careers, to college and university libraries as they graduated, and to law, medical and other special libraries as those K–12 students graduated to more adult pursuits.

The Ecosystem Initiative has been developed under the aegis of ALA, which means ALA hopes it will be useful to ALA members and affiliates in supporting strong advocacy at all levels. That said, *anyone* can use these tools and ideas to further their own library advocacy efforts. ALA is not overseeing any specific ecosystem efforts or expecting any particular results. It also means that your ecosystem team members will want to take advantage of any other available ALA resources as you move your own projects forward. The Ecosystem Toolkit is intended for independent use by all interested library stakeholders.

Jim Rettig first used the term "ecosystem" in the context of libraries in 2008 or so, and Jim Neal brought the term up again about the same time as this ESSA effort came about. The job of our Ecosystem Initiative Task Force was to use these ideas to develop a toolkit to be rolled out across ALA during its annual meeting in 2019.

Once the Ecosystem Toolkit had been posted to the ALA website, the focus turned to its implementation. Starting in 2020, ALA's ecosystem team has presented the toolkit at various state conferences and affiliate groups. That variety of audiences has helped us clarify how to discuss ecosystem ideas in better ways, and to develop stronger tools for users to apply. This book reflects much of that work. Why do ecosystem ideas matter to you? And why do these ideas matter to our patrons and communities?

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FIGURE 0.1 | **Library types' advocates and supporters**

We were such a team, the initial writers of the Ecosystem Toolkit. We wrestled first with what being an ecosystem means, and then with how to offer specific methods to support building an advocacy network that included all library types. We came from many different states and all different library types ourselves, so we had the basics in our group—but sorting through the many possibilities to find benchmarks and language that would resonate with our national library community was challenging—and exciting.

And now we offer this work to you, in a comprehensive book to support your future efforts to speak across library types with *One Voice* that moves everyone forward.

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INTRODUCTION

Ecosystem. The very idea is inclusive and cooperative. In biodynamic terms, the ecosystem that supports our Mother Earth has been successful for eons. This book offers readers tools and ideas that support increased cooperation and collaboration across libraries, including all types as well as their supporters, in hopes that you will establish ecosystem initiatives that can endure current and future crises. We, the editorial team, think it is time to help you readers—librarians and library supporters—reach beyond your silos and library comfort zones to energize the library ecosystem that already exists, and thus inspire stronger and more successful advocacy initiatives. Please join our great adventure. This book consists of the following parts:

Part I, "The Ecosystem Foundation," explains what a library ecosystem is and how it can work. We also offer you an understanding of what all libraries have in common, knowledge sometimes lost in our busy everyday lives.

Part II, "Elements of Ecosystem Thinking," dives into the Ecosystem Continuum rubric and its four pillars: leadership, communication, collaboration, and sustainability.

Part III, "Applying Ecosystem Ideas," illustrates how ecosystem thinking can strengthen advocacy generally. Legislative advocacy illustrates one application of ecosystem ideas. And finally, we consider how ecosystem thinking can contribute to more robust responses to censorship efforts.

Part IV, "Many Kinds of Library Advocates," offers an understanding of how the various library types (school, public, and academic) differ,

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and how they can better see one another as essential allies in our work. We also consider some related groups, like trustees, Friends, foundations, state libraries, and more. All of these groups support strong libraries in their states and regions and would like to be included in ecosystem efforts.

Part V, "Ecosystems in Action," offers the flip sides of a final coin. First, we examine a few case studies of ecosystem initiatives that already exist to illustrate how different they are, and how they made some of the choices they did in proceeding toward their specific advocacy agendas. And then we hear what happens when there is no ecosystem, no cross-collaboration, but only independent actions that are less effective.

The book concludes with a set of appendixes. The "Ecosystem Agenda Building Templates" (appendix A) will guide groups in the process of developing a collaborative agenda. Appendix B includes the "Local Year-Round Advocacy Checklist," another useful template to help teams plan ahead to have what they need at the times their deadlines are approaching. These documents are elements of the overarching Toolkit.

We refer often to the "Comparison of Public, School, and Academic Libraries: Vital to Our Communities" (appendix C). This document will help everyone see how much the three main library types have in common, as well as how their missions differ in important ways.

The final appendix, appendix D, contains additional resources that can help to strengthen collaborative efforts among local library advocates.

For a general description of ALA's Ecosystem Initiative, see the website "ALA Ecosystem Initiative: ONE VOICE: Building a Strong Library Ecosystem" (www.ala.org/advocacy/ala-ecosystem-initiative), which offers links to webinars and presentations from various states. Poke around for lots of ideas to support your deepest understanding of how to build an ecosystem that does what your team needs done.

We find the nuances of ecosystem work to be both fascinating and incredibly useful on the ground in daily efforts to improve the public's understanding of what libraries do, as well as in legislative advocacy as libraries come together to enlist support at the state, federal, or even local levels. We hope you will find these ideas enticing and concretely useful, and that you will be motivated to reach out to colleagues across your own

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ecosystem, whether you knew you had one before today or not. You can start a brand-new group with these new understandings, or you can take these ideas to your existing advocacy team or state library organization and reinvigorate their current methods.

May the Ecosystem Force be with you!

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PART I
The Ecosystem Foundation

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1

WHAT IS A LIBRARY ECOSYSTEM?

Sara Kelly Johns

The selection of the term "ecosystem" to describe an integrated library network was deliberate. Ecosystems are made up of interrelated and interdependent entities that interact with and depend on each other. In a biological context, an ecosystem is comprised of three fundamental components.[1] First, there is the population comprising all the members of a species that inhabit a given location. Then there is the community, encompassing all the interacting populations of different species in a given area; and then there is the ecosystem itself, the comprehensive ensemble of the entire living community and the physical environment.

Library ecosystems parallel the biological ecosystems in the natural world. Like a biological ecosystem, a library ecosystem is also defined by three fundamental components. First, there is the *population* of all libraries and their workers of all types in a specific geographic location, along with their related supporters. Second, there is the *community* formed by this population along with the patrons who use its libraries: students and families in the general public; primary and secondary schools; colleges and universities; and both governmental and private-sector organizations and institutions. And finally, a *library ecosystem* is formalized by the networking of the libraries, their librarians and library workers, and their supporters, partners, and related organizations.

The American Library Association's Ecosystem Initiative, created to support all libraries, defines the depth and breadth of what can constitute a library ecosystem:

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> A library ecosystem is the interconnected network of all types of libraries, library workers, volunteers, and associations that provide and facilitate library services for community members; families; K-20 learners; college and university communities; local, state, and federal legislatures and government offices; businesses; nonprofits; and other organizations with specific information needs. A patron of one library is the potential patron of any other library at a different time of life or location. No library exists independent of the library ecosystem.[2]

A Network of Libraries

The are five main types of libraries—public, school, academic, special, and state libraries—and these libraries most often work independently of each other.

Public libraries provide preschool story hours for the youngest children and their parents, strong materials and programming for after-school students, and programming for the interests of the community's youth. Public libraries' collections in all formats, along with classes that support the literacy needs of adult community members, draw in adults in person and electronically.

In elementary, middle, and high schools, school librarians carefully select materials to support students' curriculum and personal interests, coupled with instruction for the developing literacies needed by them. School libraries also often provide safe havens for many. Stories also abound about former students revealing to school librarians that they would not have survived the stress of middle and high school without the school library as a supportive place to spend time.

College and university librarians provide in-depth print and digital collections to support the majors offered in their institutions, reference support, and instruction. All libraries provide a safe place for people to be themselves, connect with others, and learn what they want at their own pace.

Special libraries offer a broad spectrum of industry-focused collections ranging from the law library in the courthouse to the medical library at the hospital, to the archival library in a small town or a university.

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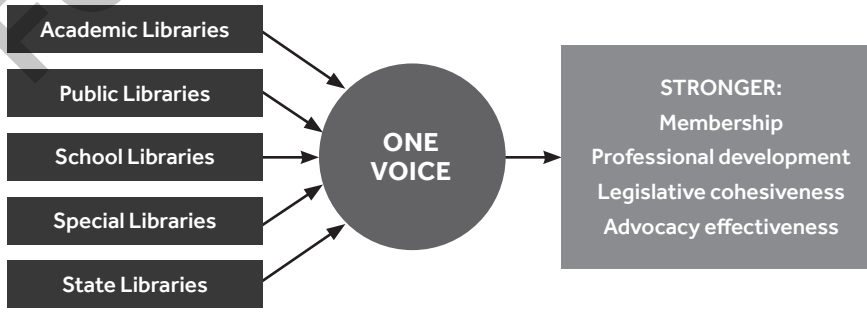
State library agencies are part of state and territorial governments and support library services for all state residents. These services include interlibrary loan, reference and research assistance (especially for state archives), public library standards, distribution of Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds, and advocacy for libraries. Most state libraries have open hours for public research and are centers for the distribution of state resources. One example is centralized circulation of resources for the blind and visually impaired.

Libraries thus offer a "cradle-to-grave" continuum of education and support for society. These different types of libraries are interconnected by common goals and by the fact that any library user anywhere might use any of these library types during their lifetime. Every person has access to these libraries, and every community relies on these libraries to support lifelong learning, local businesses, and democratic access to information. Libraries are inherently supportive of our democracy.

Librarians from different library types often cooperate for practical reasons such as sharing access to collections and information about activities. However, the need for a formal ecosystem emerges when libraries are facing controversial issues or when support by library communities is waning or even confrontational. To quote Jim Rettig, a past president of ALA, "If one part of the [library] system is threatened or suffers, the entire system is threatened and suffers."[3]

The additive effect of combining our expertise and experience as a library ecosystem amplifies our experiences and voices. Formalizing a library ecosystem results in *One Voice* where libraries can make a difference together (figure 1.1).

FIGURE 1.1 | **One Voice visualized**



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Library Ecosystems: From Localized Communities to National Networks

The library ecosystem's community can expand to involve a municipality or school district that is dealing with budget decisions or with building renovation/expansion approvals. The ecosystem can also extend to a state government facing legislative matters where all types of libraries must collaborate. Furthermore, an ecosystem has the potential for even broader expansion to encompass the entire country or even global communities facing a common issue, such as the censorship of library materials and programs.

Though not necessarily recognized as such, ALA's Unite Against Book Bans initiative is an example of the latter type of ecosystem.[4] It is a national, even global, effort that works as an ecosystem to bring together partners from individual libraries, library associations, foundations, publishers, and many other organizations that support libraries, the arts, and intellectual freedom.

Libraries: Safe Havens and Educational Anchors across the Lifespan

What does ALA's Ecosystem Initiative provide to America's libraries? Library ecosystems can offer a platform for collaborative efforts to promote awareness of the inherent value and universal accessibility of resources to patrons regardless of economic status, race, disability, or ethnicity. Inspiring narratives abound that illustrate how refugees, individuals facing illiteracy, and those with limited education can transform their lives through the diverse resources and programs offered by different types of libraries. The profound impact of cultivating an educated and engaged membership contributes significantly to the betterment of society.

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From Diversity to Cohesion: The Common Ground of Library Values

Each library type has unique services and strengths, but all libraries share core values that define their professional practice. These common values form a solid base that supports all libraries, forming a working ecosystem. Knowing your community and meeting its needs is crucial and can take concentrated and collaborative action by ecosystem members. According to the ALA Ecosystem Continuum:

> At its most effective, the strong library ecosystem supports a diverse library community in speaking with a unified voice about issues that are important to all members of the ecosystem in order to most constructively advance the collective goals of the group.[5]

Every library, regardless of size, whether a small public or school library with just one professional or a large system like the New York City or Seattle public libraries, must engage in marketing and public relations efforts for its promotion. Those two large city libraries on opposite coasts, for example, must create public relations campaigns that reach out to their own communities.

When there are reasons to work collectively with other libraries for the "big picture" support of all libraries, that is when the advocacy provided by an ecosystem is needed. Advocates must consider the collective goal and how all libraries are served well. There is no formula for this, though there are resources that can make it easier. ALA's Ecosystem Toolkit is one such resource.

In the pursuit of creating an advocacy ecosystem, librarians can take a practical step by focusing on user experience (UX) and potentially developing personas that characterize their patron base. Initially, this involves crafting a persona for each library's patron base and then consolidating them collectively. While marketers commonly use personas, colleges and universities also employ them to comprehend how students and faculty use their facilities.

In her description of the User Experience Group at the University of Washington (2009), Jennifer Ward outlined personas that have found utility in various library contexts, including AASL's "National School Li-

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brary Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries." Ward and UX experts define personas as "detailed descriptions of imaginary people constructed out of well-understood, highly specified data about real people."[6]

By examining the overlaps between personas across public, academic, and school libraries in your ecosystem, a targeted approach for collaborative advocacy campaigns can be developed. This tailored strategy ensures that actions are aligned with the unique needs of stakeholders in each library type, fostering a unified and impactful advocacy effort.

Defining Advocacy: Contrasts and Commonalities

Beyond the conventional association of advocacy with securing funding and mandates at local, state, and national legislative levels, an ecosystem approach can extend the impact of that advocacy. Advocacy not only addresses legislative aspects, but it also fosters public awareness and inspires action. Consider this: How well does the public truly comprehend the vast scope of what libraries offer and how seamlessly libraries integrate their services to cater to patrons' needs throughout their lives? This is the essence of what a library ecosystem delivers. While the public may grasp this concept in a general sense, collaborative efforts across diverse library types can serve to deepen the public's understanding of the profound significance of libraries' services that span all ages and all sectors of society.

ALA's Committee on Library Advocacy updated ALA's 2009 "Advocacy Action Workbook" in 2023 as a very practical handbook to plan advocacy action. The newly updated "Advocacy Action Plan Workbook" includes steps to build a team for advocacy while considering the axiom that "advocacy is a team sport, bringing together the perspectives and strengths of multiple players within and, perhaps, beyond your community for greater reach and impact. The team ensures that advocacy efforts are on track, tasks are delegated, and communication is ongoing."[7] The Ecosystem Toolkit was developed by a subcommittee of the Committee on Library Advocacy and complements the updated workbook, offering methods and tools to strengthen all types of advocacy work through partnerships, whether for legislative or public awareness.[8]

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Every division in ALA has its own definition of library advocacy, as defined by its past and current work and future needs. Examining some of ALA divisions' definitions and approaches shows both similarities and contrasts in their approaches:

- In its Turning the Page advocacy training materials, the Public Library Association (PLA) defines advocacy as "the actions individuals or organizations undertake to influence decision-making at the local, regional, state, national, and international level that help create a desired funding or policy change in support of public libraries."[9] This describes both individual libraries and broader library organizations' public awareness campaigns, from the local to international levels.
- Two ALA divisions, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), offer the same definition of library advocacy in their resources: library advocacy is an "ongoing process of building partnerships so that others will act for and with you, turning passive support into educated action for the library program. It begins with a vision and a plan for the library program that is then matched to the agenda and priorities of stakeholders."[10] This definition demonstrates the importance of partnerships between school and youth librarians and reflects these ALA divisions' commitment to providing resources that can be used by school and youth librarians as well as their supporters to demonstrate the value of their work on behalf of children and learning.
- The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) division has a multifaceted approach to legislative advocacy, called ACRL Speaks Out, with the goal of increasing the ACRL's visibility and influence in the arena of higher education policy development, legislation, and best practices.[11] The ACRL has a tightly focused definition for its legislative advocacy, one that does not include individual librarians in their own places of work. However, the ACRL's Academic Library Advocacy Toolkit is a LibGuide with well-curated resources for individual librarians' advocacy when facing challenges in their workplaces.[12]

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With all libraries, it is often the perceptions held by the general public and the users of libraries that require public-facing advocacy. Carefully defining the stakeholders, including the decision-makers, for advocacy efforts is a crucial step for success. The definitions given above are examples of library divisions and their members facing outward, an effort that requires focus. The creation of library ecosystems makes the work broader, incorporating supporters and partners that goes beyond librarians and library workers to include organizations and individuals who value the role of libraries in society.

The Four Pillars of an Effective Ecosystem

An effective library ecosystem contains four interrelated pillars. These Ecosystem Continuum pillars serve as supports for a structure that results in *One Voice* that can resonate with decision-makers and policymakers. The four pillars are Leadership, Communication, Collaboration, and Sustainability.[13]

Leadership

We join local, state, or national library organizations to have a strong voice. However, in many states, not all library types stand together in a single association, making it more difficult for them to work together at the state level. Leadership must recognize the need for a library ecosystem and break down the silos to make a difference. Thus, for a library ecosystem, leadership is the first pillar. It takes a few individuals to recognize that advocacy can be more vigorous when all groups work together to make change happen. These leaders begin the ecosystem effort by developing an agenda for the first meeting and reaching out to others to join in the work. These leaders then work to maintain forward momentum.

Communication and Collaboration

Communication and collaboration add strength to advocacy goals and methods. It takes time and commitment to consistently check back with

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an ecosystem group to ensure that everyone is aware of the objectives and continues supporting the work.

Library ecosystems can be multilayered, possibly beginning with a local group of library institutions working together for local funding or to handle a censorship challenge. Several local ecosystems might build outward to become an ecosystem across the state. In either a crisis or a long-term advocacy campaign, it is more difficult to develop the tools, messaging, and action steps needed without relying on the resources already available to all. On a national level, ALA state chapters work together to strengthen advocacy efforts by providing tools that state ecosystem efforts can adapt and refine for their local work. Library ecosystems can move easily across boundaries to encourage effective communication and collaboration within and beyond member groups.

Sustainability

The idea of continuity is behind this fourth ecosystem pillar. An ecosystem is not a short-term venture. Establishing a collaborative alliance among leaders from different library types for stronger advocacy may happen quickly in response to an immediate need. However, this structure must become enduring to support long-term success. A strong ecosystem will sustain repeated and refocused efforts over many years of collaboration across library types and will take conscious and consistent attention to its sustainability.

Ecosystems Support Existing Library Organizations

A library ecosystem differs from our already existing professional organizations or state library associations. Professional organizations represent the many faces of librarianship, but their very size sometimes makes collaboration and cross-communication unwieldy. The ecosystem concept offers methods to build strong connections across these chasms. "Chasm" may feel like too strong a word, but the press of daily business does lead to a narrow focus even when a broader awareness is needed.

Even in states with long-standing and robust state associations that include all library types, the habits of functioning within library-type si-

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los can sometimes slow collaborative advocacy work. Finding a balance between how things are and how we would like them to be requires innovators to focus more on bridge-building for the future, while other leaders focus on immediate needs. A best-case scenario brings both efforts together, but this takes imagination, time, and consistent effort.

Each library type derives advantages from collaborative advocacy efforts with a primary focus of advocating at a broader level, demonstrating to the world that libraries are an asset worthy of consistent funding. While tangible benefits like interlibrary loans provide clear examples of collaboration that are understandable to the public and legislature, there is a need for a deeper comprehension of the larger picture. This prompts the fundamental question raised earlier: Why is it crucial to recognize, activate, and sustain the library ecosystem? Understanding the contributions of ALA's Ecosystem Initiative to library patrons, communities, and American democracy becomes imperative, underscoring the potential loss to the American experience in its absence.

Advocacy in Action

The New York Library Association (NYLA) holds an annual Advocacy Day at the state capitol in Albany. On that day, librarians, trustees, and library supporters from all types of libraries make appointments with their legislators to discuss the condition of New York State's libraries and the legislative agenda developed by NYLA's legislative committee.

The rally in the Legislative Office Building features speeches by legislators, librarians, and library supporters. I will never forget the legislator who said one year long ago: "If the librarians don't care enough to show up, why should I care about their bills?"

At one exciting Advocacy Day in the capital, school librarians brought student groups with signs and T-shirts promoting the value of strong libraries. The energy reached a new level when the Queens Library buses arrived, filled with patrons who love their libraries. The community of library lovers sent a strong message that day!

When legislators' offices are filled with all types of librarians, along with trustees and members of the public, all of whom are voters in their districts, those legislators pay attention. This is an ecosystem in action with *One Voice*, a loud voice.

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With a deeper understanding of what an ecosystem is and the power that ecosystems have, we hope you are ready to work collaboratively and effectively with all librarians and their partners to have the *One Voice* needed to make a difference. Libraries have power; ecosystems have even more.

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