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Libraries as Entrepreneurial Hubs

National Survey of Entrepreneurs Topline

November 16, 2021

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Introduction

As part of our work evaluating Libraries as Entrepreneurial Hubs, Knology aimed to understand the role libraries play in their local entrepreneurship ecosystems. While we have previously spoken with participants in entrepreneurship programs at six ULC member libraries, that data set is limited by a small number of participants who self-selected or were suggested by library staff. Wanting to paint a broader picture of how people are engaging with library entrepreneurial resources and to gauge awareness of and interest in these resources, we designed a survey to capture how library resources are used by entrepreneurs throughout the US.

Through our previous qualitative research, we identified various library services that might be valuable to current or potential entrepreneurs and the reasons those services are perceived as valuable. That knowledge informed the development of this survey. We included demographic questions to see whether libraries are reaching groups who are typically underrepresented in entrepreneurship support mechanisms.

The survey was distributed via the Prolific platform to people currently residing in the US who had previously indicated that they had started or intended to start their own business. The survey was offered in English and Spanish, but no respondents chose the Spanish-language survey. After initial data cleaning, we received 1058 responses.

Unfortunately, during the time the survey was available, the survey distribution platform experienced a large influx of new users who skewed young and female.¹ These issues are reflected in our data set, as the platform does not allow pre-screening responses to be used in conjunction with its “representative sample” option; nor does it allow collected responses to be rejected for any reason other than clear lack of engagement or random responses.

We then conducted a second wave of data collection using the same survey. We used a new option in Prolific to sample equal numbers of men and women. In order to present disaggregated results by ethnicity, we collected data primarily from entrepreneurs who were underrepresented in the original sample. We obtained an additional 1462 responses (after data cleaning) from the second round of data collection, bringing the total sample to 2520.

All crosstabs by gender and by race/ethnicity can be found in the appendix to this report.

A Note on Statistical Language: Correlation and p-Values

Throughout this report, we describe the relative strength of the relationship between two variables as a *very weak*, *weak*, *moderate*, or *strong* correlation. These descriptions are not subjective; they have a mathematical value between 0 and 1. A correlation between 0.01 and 0.20 is very weak; 0.21-0.40 is weak; 0.41-0.60 is moderate; 0.61-0.80 is strong.

The p-value represents the probability that our survey results are statistically significant, or, that they did not occur by chance. In this report, any p-value < 0.05 is statistically significant.

¹ <https://blog.prolific.co/we-recently-went-viral-on-tiktok-heres-what-we-learned/>

Key Findings

In our analysis, we identified five key findings around past, current, and future use of business-specific library resources. In general, libraries supported nearly half of respondents in their entrepreneurial-related projects, and entrepreneurs would be interested in even more library support for their small businesses. Not knowing that libraries offer entrepreneurial support is the most common reason for not accessing library resources.

- Nearly 50% of respondents who had started or planned to start a small business had made use of library resources at some point; 45% of those who had used the library (around 23% of the overall sample) had used it for something other than borrowing books, space, and internet/printing.
- The most common reason given for not using the library for business needs was lack of awareness that the library offered support in this area.
- Library users valued the helpfulness of library staff, in addition to appreciating a wide range of library resources at low/no cost.
- People are interested in getting help from libraries for a wide range of business-related needs. Those who have already used the library for business help are interested in support for more aspects of planning/starting their business.
- Almost all respondents were interested in using library resources in the future. Interest in business-specific resources such as events/talks was high compared to the number of people who had already used these resources. This suggests that a larger audience would turn to libraries for their entrepreneurial needs if they were aware of existing library resources or if they were offered more business-specific resources.



Results

Demographics

Table 1. Gender identification of respondents.

Gender	<i>n</i>	%
Man	1007	40%
Woman	1449	58%
Non-binary	50	2%
Prefer to self-describe	3	<1%
Choose not to respond	11	<1%

Table 2. Self-reported education level of respondents.

Education Level	<i>n</i>	%
High school or less	681	67%
Associate's degree	338	13%
Bachelor's degree	971	39%
Master's degree	311	12%
Doctorate, law, or medical degree	75	3%
Other	128	5%
Choose not to respond	16	1%

Notes. "Other" responses included "some college" and "vocational school."

Table 3. Racial/ethnic identification of respondents.

Racial & Ethnic Identity	<i>n</i>	%
White/Caucasian/European	1011	40%
Black/African American/African	604	24%
Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Latinx	604	24%
Asian American/Pacific Islander/Asian	484	19%
Native American/American Indian/Indigenous	83	3%
Multi-racial/Multi-ethnic (two or more races or ethnicities)	86	3%
Prefer to self-describe	10	<1%
Choose not to respond	8	<1%

Notes. Respondents could choose more than one answer. "Multi-racial/Multi-ethnic" count does not reflect respondents who selected multiple answers but did not choose "Multi-racial/Multi-ethnic."

For purposes of disaggregation by race/ethnicity, we place respondents who selected more than one option in the “Multi-racial/Multi-ethnic” category, with the exception of respondents who selected only “Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Latinx” and “White.” These respondents are counted as Hispanic/Latinx². This avoids counting the same person in multiple groups when comparing them.

Table 4. Simplified race/ethnicity distribution of respondents.

Race/Ethnicity	<i>n</i>	%
White (non-Hispanic)	768	30%
Black	538	21%
Hispanic	520	21%
Asian	439	17%
Indigenous	26	1%
Multi-racial	202	8%
Other/No Response	27	1%

Enough respondents fall in the White non-Hispanic, Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and Asian categories to present disaggregated information for these groups. We can also compare White non-Hispanic and non-White respondents.

Table 5. Age of respondents.

Age Range	<i>n</i>	%
18-24	937	37%
25-34	941	37%
35-44	390	15%
45-54	190	8%
55-64	62	2%
65+	25	1%

Figure 1 below displays the geographic distribution of respondents to this survey, with each blue dot indicating one survey participant. We include the map to demonstrate that survey participants come from across the US, although most are concentrated in urban areas.

² Pew Research on why Hispanic respondents are disaggregated in demographic counts. <https://www.pewresearch.org/2012/04/16/ask-the-expert-classifying-race-and-ethnicity/>

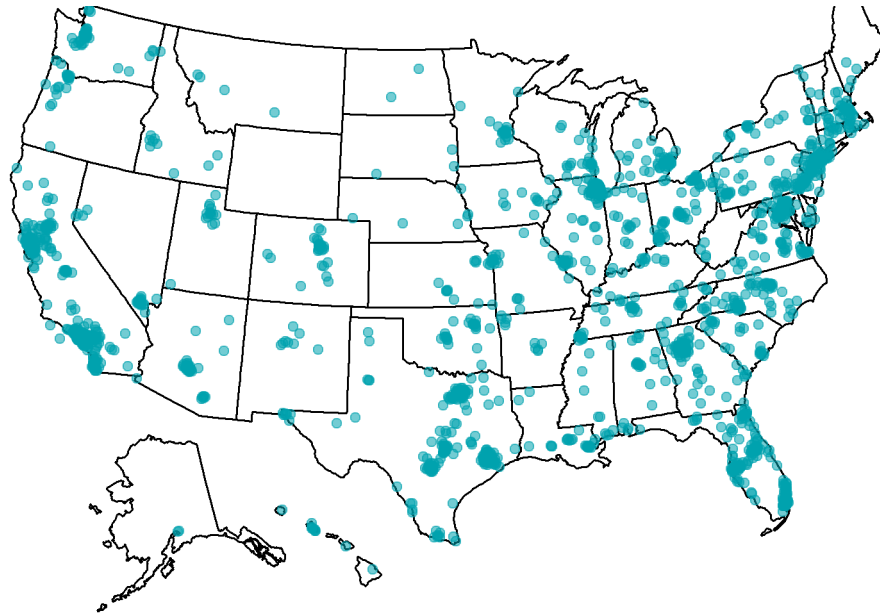


Figure 1. Geographic distribution of respondents ($n = 2520$).

Entrepreneurship Experience

Table 6. Responses to the question: *Which of the following is true of you? Select all that apply: ($n = 2520$).*

	<i>n</i>	%
I have started a business in the past, but am no longer running it.	635	25%
I have started and am currently running my own business.	791	31%
I am in the process of starting a business, or plan to start one in the next year or two.	1381	55%

Almost all respondents had 10 or fewer employees for their business, with many indicating that they were the only person involved.

Table 7. Responses to the question: *Where are the people your business serves? ($n = 791$).*

	<i>n</i>	%
My town/city	253	32%
Multiple towns/cities	107	14%
Multiple US states	53	7%
Across the US	197	25%
Around the world	179	23%

Many respondents sold goods or services online, which meant that they had customers from a wide geographic area despite being a small business.

Library Resources

Table 8. Use of and interest in library resources as a part of planning, starting, and/or running a business ($N = 2520$).

	Have used		Would use if offered	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Internet, computers, printers	828	33%	1534	61%
Books or reference guides related to business	582	23%	1303	52%
Space for meetings, work, or hosting events	360	14%	1152	46%
Business-related databases (e.g., ReferenceUSA, Lynda, DemographicsNow)	219	9%	781	40%
Business-related events/talks at the library	192	8%	1103	44%
Makerspace resources (e.g., 3D printers, audio/video equipment/software)	180	7%	1144	45%
Opportunities to speak with a library staff member about planning/starting/running a business	142	6%	547	22%
Business-related programs at the library which span multiple sessions	90	4%	710	28%
None of the above	1274	51%	124	5%

We examined the group of respondents who had used library resources and the subgroup of these who had used resources associated with business programming (i.e., something beyond books, meeting space, and computers/internet). Around 50% ($n = 1246$) of respondents had used at least one of the resources listed, and nearly half of these ($n = 578$) had used at least one business-specific resource.

In our data set, age and education level were weakly correlated (0.32), which is somewhat expected as people in the 18-24 age range are often in the process of obtaining a college or graduate degree. Age and gender were also weakly correlated (0.26) due to the imbalance of the sample. Our panel provider, Prolific, had a large number of women ages 18-25 sign up in a short period of time (<https://blog.prolific.co/we-recently-went-viral-on-tiktok-heres-what-we-learned/>), which caused the responses to our initial survey to be skewed towards this demographic. Our second wave of data collection took place after Prolific had implemented an option to balance the ratio of male and female participants. However, as we targeted people of color in this wave, White respondents are still mostly women.

We found that education level was very weakly positively correlated with library use (0.15) and weakly correlated with use of business-specific resources/programs (0.22). In particular, respondents with advanced degrees were more likely to say they had used resources other than books/space/internet.

Overall, there was strong interest in using library resources, including business-specific resources, if they were made available. Fewer than 2% of respondents who reported using library resources in the past indicated that they would not be interested in using any in the future. Only 8% of respondents who had not used the library were uninterested in doing so in the future. While these numbers are small, they are statistically non-negligible.

Respondents who had previously used the library selected more options in the follow-up question as library resources they would be interested in using than those who had not (average 4.50 for previous users, 3.58 for non-users, $p < 0.001$). They also indicated that they would be interested in using more resource types, on average, than they had used already ($p < 0.001$).

578 respondents said they had already used at least one resource beyond books/space/internet. Almost 13% of these indicated that they would continue to use the library, but not use this type of resource in the future. Our survey did not ask the reason for choosing not to continue using specific resources; this could be something to explore in the future.

Over 70% of respondents who had not used business-specific resources did not indicate interest in using these resources in future. However, around 28% *were* interested in using at least one resource besides books/space/internet if available. Similarly, respondents who had used business-specific resources, on average, were interested in using more types than respondents who had not, and more types than they had already used.

Respondents who had used library resources, and especially those who had used specifically business-oriented resources, were mainly located in urban areas. See Figure 2 below.

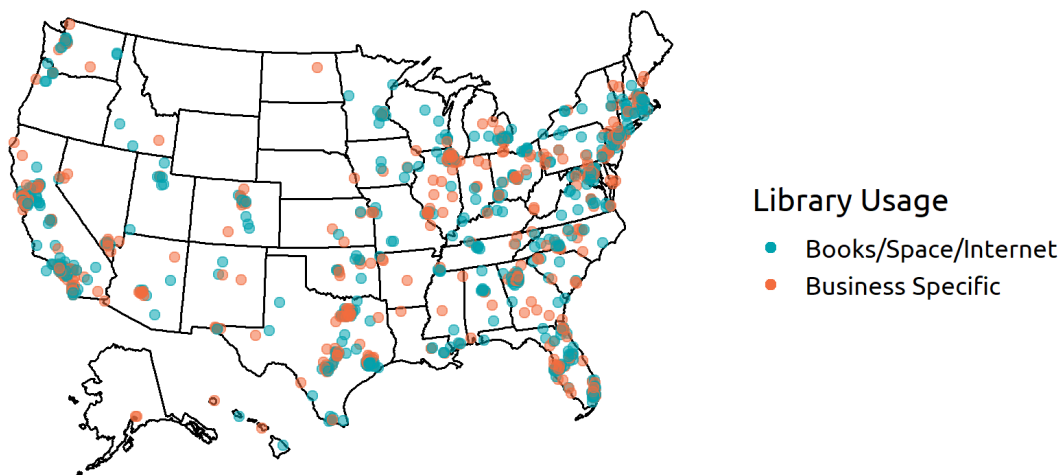


Figure 2. Geographic location of respondents who had used library resources.

Cross-referencing zip codes to population density of the area, we found a very weak correlation (0.09) between area population density and whether someone had used business-specific resources, and an even weaker correlation with whether they had used the library in general. Of course, population density varies greatly within and between urban areas, and even people living in the same area may have different conceptions of libraries and their purpose – that is, some may think of a library as only a place to borrow books.

Respondents who had never used library resources were asked a follow-up question, presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Responses to the question: *Tell us your reasons for not using these library resources/services. Select all that apply (n = 1274).*

	n	%
I never thought of looking for business-related help/resources at a public library.	869	68%
I have access to better help/resources than what is offered at libraries near me.	416	33%
I do not think any libraries near me offer resources or services related to starting/running a business.	300	24%
Public libraries near me were closed due to COVID-19.	217	17%
At times that are convenient to me, libraries near me are not open or do not offer programs.	124	10%
There are no libraries nearby that I can easily travel to.	83	7%
Other (please explain)	75	6%

While 33% of respondents indicated that they did not need to use the library due to having access to better resources, the majority were not aware that public libraries might be able to help with business-related needs and/or did not have access to business-related resources at their library. This suggests that publicizing existing library programs and making business programming available in more libraries could lead to greater entrepreneurial engagement from library patrons.

Disaggregated Responses

Figure 3 displays use and interest in library resources, disaggregated by gender.

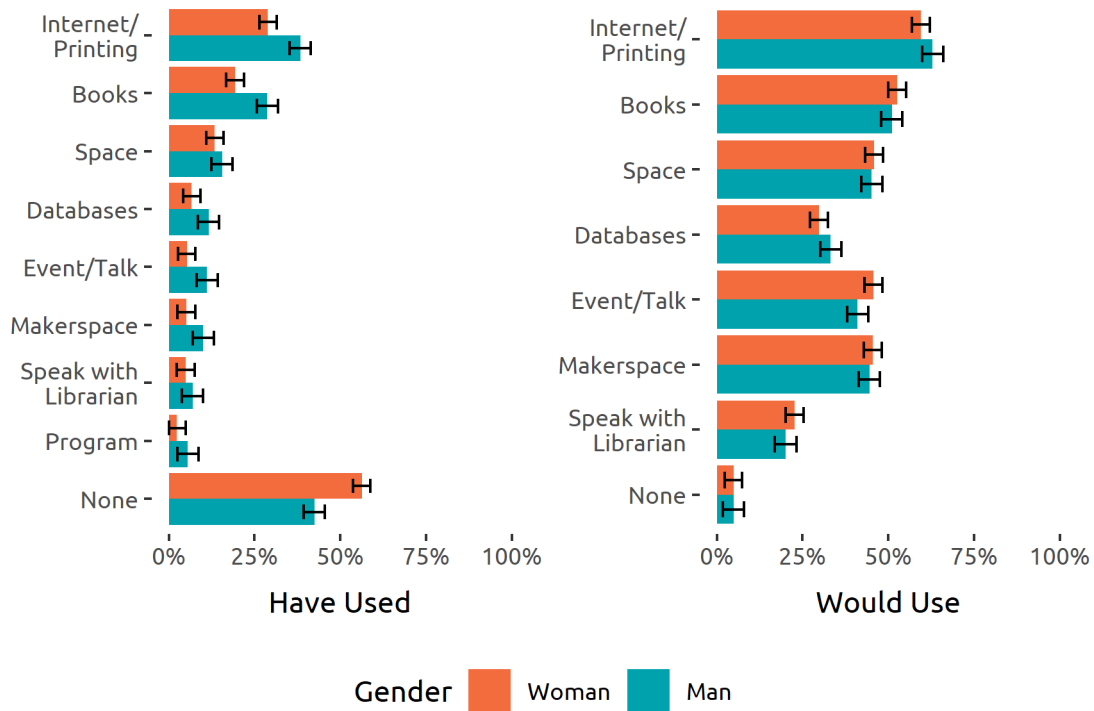


Figure 3. Use and interest in library resources/services, disaggregated by gender.

Men were more likely to indicate they had used each of the library resources/services listed than women (although not always to a statistically significant extent), and women were more likely to indicate that they had not used the library at all. However, there were not significant differences by gender in willingness and intention to use each resource/service if they were available at a local library.

When looking at the reasons women and men who did not use library resources selected, most did not show differences by gender. However, women were more likely than men to indicate that they had never thought of looking for business-related help/resources at a public library (72% of women who did not use resources chose this as a reason, compared to 61% of men).

Figure 4 displays the types of library resources used, disaggregated by the four racial categories large enough for meaningful comparison.

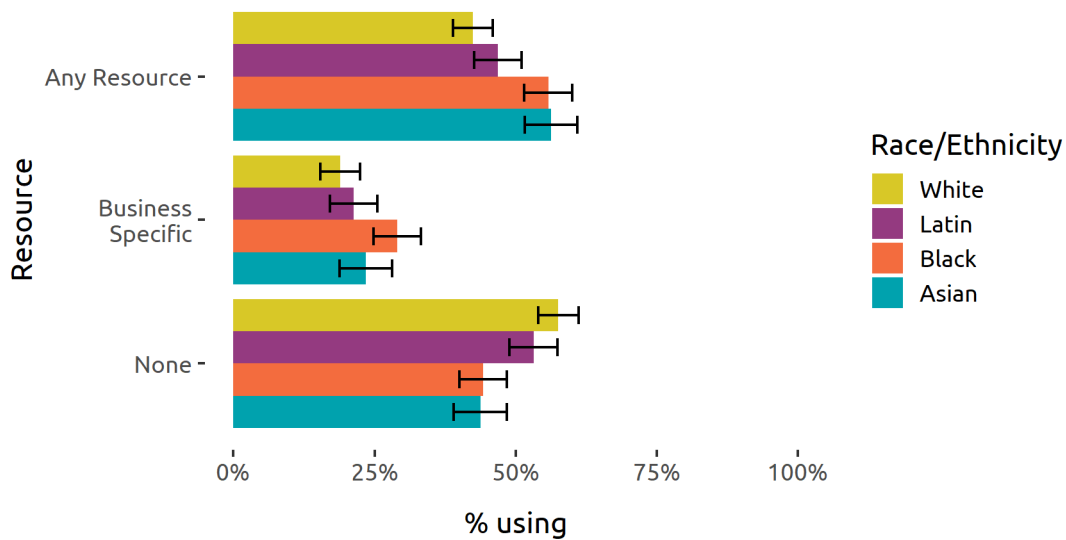


Figure 4. Types of library resources used, disaggregated by race for categories large enough to provide statistically meaningful comparisons.

White respondents were less likely than BIPOC respondents to have used internet/printing or books from the library, and more likely not to have used the library for business reasons. When asked what resources they would use if available, they were less likely to select internet/printing, but not significantly different in how often they selected books and were more likely to indicate interest in single-session events/talks.

Disaggregating responses by race/ethnicity for the groups which were large enough to report on for general trends in library use, White respondents were less likely to say they had used one or more library resources than Black or Asian respondents. Black respondents were most likely to say they had used one or more business-specific resources at the library.

Looking at reasons people gave for not using the library gives large margins of error, as the number of responses is lower. We did not see any differences by race/ethnicity which reached statistical significance.

Library Experiences

Reasons for Use

Table 10. Responses to the question: *Why do you use business-related resources/services at the library? Select all that apply.* (n = 1246).

	n	%
They are free/low-cost	1142	92%
They have a large collection of resources/services I need	773	62%
I can get advice/guidance specific to my situation	487	39%
I can network with other people planning/running their own business	433	35%
I feel comfortable interacting with library staff	416	33%
It is the only way I can access these resources/services	172	14%
My library has resources/services in a language I prefer over English	50	4%

Notably, 40% of respondents who reported networking with other entrepreneurs as a reason they used library resources had *not* used business-specific resources, only books/space/internet.

Some options were chosen together frequently: Networking and specific advice/guidance (correlation = 0.46), preferred language and networking (0.43), and preferred language and “the only way I can access these resources/services” (0.35) and comfort interacting (0.33).

Among the subgroup of respondents who had used business-specific resources, these correlations remained present, but the correlation between networking and specific advice/guidance dropped to 0.29. A possible explanation is that some business-specific resources (such as databases and one-on-one conversation with a librarian) involve specific guidance but not collaboration with other entrepreneurs, while others (such as events/programs) involve more entrepreneurs but can be less individually targeted.

Among people who had used library resources, men were more likely than women to give networking with other entrepreneurs as a reason to use library resources. There were no statistically significant differences in the reasons White and BIPOC respondents gave.

Most Valued Aspects

The open-ended question asking what respondents found most valuable about library resources/services received answers consistent with the multiple-choice question. The most common theme among responses was that resources that would otherwise require funding were accessible and free at the library. Around 40% of the people answering the question (505 of 1237) included this as part of their answer. Some of these respondents named a specific resource or service, such as software programs, internet access, or books. Others described the value of having a wide range of free/low-cost options in one place: *“I think the most valuable thing about the resources is that they are all in the same place and are available for a very low cost or even for free.”*

Just over 10% of respondents ($n = 135$) mentioned library staff in their description of what they valued most. While a few of these responses mentioned discussing their business with a librarian, it was more common for them to describe staff as knowledgeable and helpful for finding resources. One respondent shared that *“If you don't know how to find it, someone there will.”* Another mentioned that *“The library staff is something that we've found to be an invaluable resource and that online resources cannot compete against.”*

Slightly more than 33% of respondents ($n = 434$) had used some form of resources or services outside the library for business-related purposes. Some simply indicated that they had used other locations for printing or co-working, which were different mainly in that they required payment. In terms of non-library programming, online courses/webinars and in-person networking were most frequently mentioned. Respondents tended to describe the information they received from these sources as “more specific,” which is consistent with multiple-choice answers indicating that most library users were not speaking individually with librarians or attending business-related events/programs.

Discovery and Usage

Table 11. Responses to the question: *How did you find out about the library resources/services you used? Select all that apply. (n = 1246).*

	<i>n</i>	%
Online search	729	59%
Word of mouth (From a friend, family member, etc.)	695	56%
Library website or email from library	557	45%
Materials at the library (posters, brochures, etc.)	505	41%
Recommended by a different program or organization (SCORE, Small Business Development Center, etc.)	173	14%
Community events/fairs	165	13%
Entrepreneur conference/convention	85	7%
Other	19	2%

As this question was only answered by respondents who had used library resources, margins of error are large when disaggregating. Men and women showed no statistically significant differences in the reasons they gave.

White respondents were more likely to say they had learned about library offerings through word of mouth than BIPOC respondents, and less likely to say they had found out through materials at the library. Black, Latino, and Asian respondents were all more likely to select “materials at the library” than White respondents, although not all differences were statistically significant.

Table 12. Responses to the question: *At what points in the process of starting/running your business did you use library assistance/resources? (n = 642).*

	<i>n</i>	%
Prior to starting my business (for research, feedback on ideas, etc.)	467	73%
While launching my business (for help with paperwork, finding customers, etc.)	359	56%
After starting my business (for help with growing business, continued learning/support, etc.)	284	44%

Notes. This question was asked only to respondents who had used library resources and had already started a business.

Table 13. Use of and interest in library resources for specific aspects of entrepreneurship (*n* = 2520).

	Have used		Would use if offered	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Developing a business plan	696	28%	1294	51%
Identifying potential customers, market research	509	20%	1286	51%
Advertising/marketing my business	414	16%	1412	56%
Building a website/setting up an online store	383	15%	1090	43%
Budgeting, accounting	314	12%	1046	42%
Being part of a community interested in small business ownership	312	12%	1127	45%
Finding potential grants/funding sources	245	10%	1076	43%
Filing to register business	151	6%	915	36%
COVID-19 related support (CARES Act, PPP Loan, etc.)	109	4%	514	20%
Other	103	4%	49	2%

On average, respondents who had already used library resources selected 2.60 of the options presented here (the median number selected was 2). They were interested in assistance in more areas if available (mean = 4.14; median = 4).

The distribution of areas that people were interested in receiving help with differed from what most respondents had received help with. This may be due to libraries not offering all the options listed, but also to the stage respondents' businesses had reached. Someone who had not yet launched their business might be interested in help applying for funding and filing to register their business in the future, but not be ready to do so yet.

For most of the listed areas in which libraries with business services can help entrepreneurs, close to 50% of respondents were interested in making use of this help if it was offered at their library.

Figure 5 displays these data disaggregated by gender.

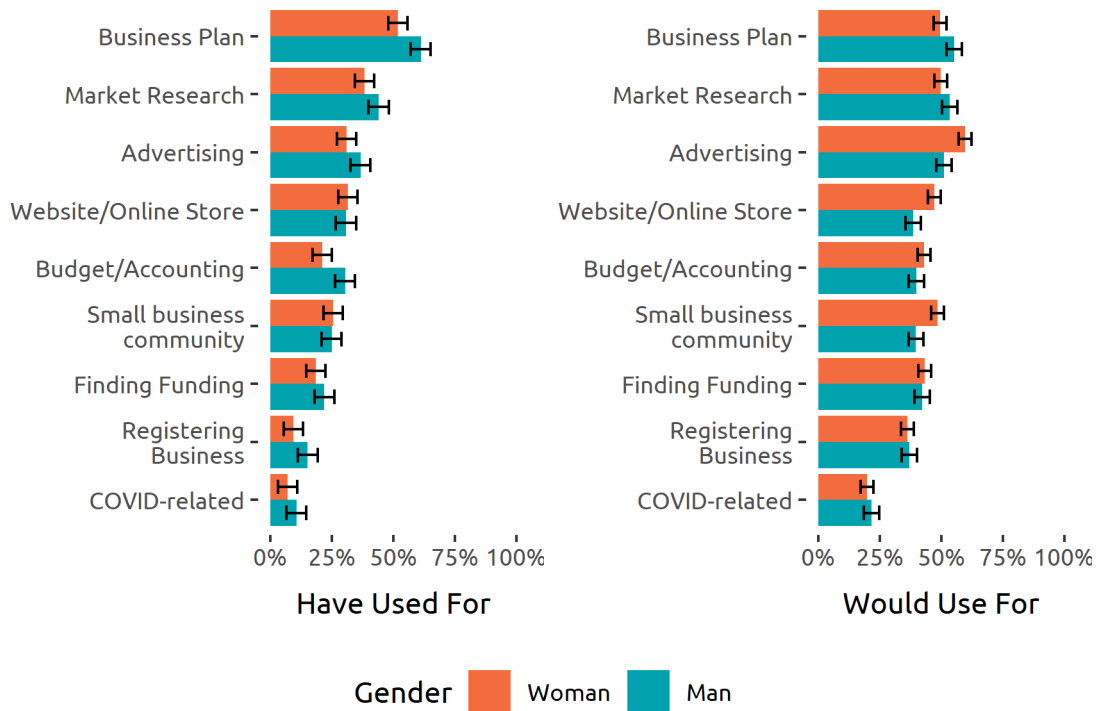


Figure 5. Use of and interest in library resources for aspects of entrepreneurship, disaggregated by gender.

Among people who had used the library, men were more likely than women to say they had used library resources for several of the possible aspects of entrepreneurship listed. In particular, this difference was significant for “developing a business plan” and “budgeting/accounting.” Given that men were also likely to have used more types of resources, including business-specific ones such as talks and databases, it makes sense that they would have addressed more aspects of entrepreneurship through these activities.

Interestingly, the proportion of respondents who said they would use the library for various aspects of entrepreneurship also varied with gender. While men were more interested in using the library for business plans, women were more likely to be interested in library help with advertising, setting up a website/online store, and being part of a small business community.

We did not see any statistically significant differences in responses to these questions between racial/ethnic groups.



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Culture

Media

Wellness

Systems

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