



St. Louis County Library Data Report

Rebecca Norlander, Rupu Gupta, Joanna Laursen Brucker, Shaun Field,
& Elizabeth Attaway

Introduction

The St. Louis County Library (SLCL) serves St. Louis County, Missouri, a metropolitan area of roughly 1 million residents (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The library has 21 branch locations throughout the county. As part of the Urban Libraries Council and Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation's Libraries as Entrepreneurial Hubs initiative, the library provided Knology with data on attendance at business events, Book-A-Librarian requests, and surveys of program attendees. Knology researchers worked with SLCL staff to identify additional data collection activities, which included focus groups with participants in the library's Etsy Store program and a survey of SLCL staff. This Data Report summarizes Knology's analysis of these data.

Methods

Participants

SLCL shared data on attendance and feedback surveys from business event attendees, as well as a log of Book-A-Librarian requests between June 2018 and December 2020.

Knology conducted two focus groups (on Zoom) with participants who were graduates of the 2019 Etsy Craft Entrepreneurship Program or who had partially completed the program in 2020 (before the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted it). The goal was to understand program participants' experiences in the program, including how they were applying program lessons, what additional supports were needed, and what they considered its most valuable aspects. Each group comprised four participants and included a mix of people who had attended in 2019 ($n = 5$) and in 2020 ($n = 3$). Participants were given a gift card for their time.

Knology also conducted a survey with SLCL administrative and branch staff to assess familiarity with the business-related services the library offers and to understand how these resources were introduced to potential patrons. 52 people (13 administrative and 39 branch staff) responded to the survey. All quotes in this report have been edited for clarity.

The SLCL Logic Model

At the outset of the project, Knology led a workshop with SLCL staff to develop a logic model depicting entrepreneurial programming inputs, activities, audiences, outputs, and outcomes.

<p>Goal: To create a more inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem in which The Public Library is a key player in developing entrepreneurship capacity in the community.</p>						
INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	AUDIENCES		OUTPUTS		OUTCOMES
		Primary	Secondary	Short-Term	Long-Term	
Partnerships	<p>Entrepreneurship Classes / Workshops</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Series Classes Single Classes 			<p>Entrepreneurship encounters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> # of Attendees: Workshops Classes BAL Outreach Expos 	<p>Growth in Small Business Community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> # of business plans written/ NPO articles written by participants # of businesses/ NPO created/ registered by participants Increased funding for our patrons % Growth after a library training i.e., staff, sales, etc. 	<p>Increase in community knowledge of how to start and sustain a NPO or small business</p>
Trained Library Staff	<p>Book a Librarian (BAL) one-on-one sessions (in-person & remote options)</p>	<p>Entrepreneurs & Start-Ups & NPOs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women POC Underserved 	<p>Community Business Ecosystem</p>	<p># of Engagements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> # of programs offered and at which branches # of BAL requests # of topics covered in BALS 	<p>Increased confidence by library staff to support business development</p>	<p>Increase in minority and women owned businesses in community</p>
Meetings Space (Virtual / Physical)	<p>Outreach Visits</p>	<p>ESOs</p>	<p>General Library Staff</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> # of outreach engagements # of phone calls, chats, visits # of database uses 	<p>Increased community understanding of library as a business resource and partner in business education</p>	<p>Increase in minority and women owned businesses in community</p>
Collections & Resources	<p>Expos & Networking Opportunities</p>	<p>Library Staff Being Trained</p>	<p>Library Board and Administration</p>	<p>Program Reach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> # of social media mentions # of requests for outreach visit <p>Staff Engaged?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> # of staff trained # of displays created 	<p>Program Recognition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased budget from Admin/Board New partnerships formed # of new outreach sites that come 	<p>Increased confidence by library staff to support business development</p>
Technology	<p>Collaboration with other libraries across the system</p>					<p>Acknowledgement of library as business resource</p>
Promotional Materials	<p>Library Staff Training</p>					

Results

Summary of Pre-existing Library Data

Attendance

SLCL provided attendance statistics for in-library presentations (including the Small Business and Nonprofit Expo held in December each year), outreach events, and Book-A-Librarian (BAL) sessions. BAL data were recorded in units of 30 minutes/person.

The Expo is by far the most highly attended in-library event each year, drawing several hundred people. Other in-library presentations averaged around 20 attendees per event.

All events (presentation & outreach), including BAL session time, experienced an increase in attendance in 2016, a trend that has continued. The highest attendance on record was in 2019, and continued growth appeared on track in early 2020 before the library closed due to COVID-19.

Surveys

Feedback on Book-A-Librarian sessions and library events was resoundingly positive, with an average rating of 4.71 out of 5 ($n = 66$). Out of 93 total respondents to post-event surveys, over half were women ($n = 57$), and around one-third ($n = 32$) described their business (or potential business) as minority-owned. Most had started or planned to start a for-profit business, but nonprofit (potential) owners also attended. In response to a question about the greatest assets for their organization, 64 respondents included "Free resources (the library, business plan templates, mentoring services, classes)" among their selections.

Among the largest challenges respondents reported were Business Plans ($n = 50$), Marketing/Advertising ($n = 43$), Business Growth ($n = 39$), and Funding ($n = 35$). Networking, Time Management, and Accounting were also selected by between 20-30 respondents.

Participants in Book-A-Librarian sessions (a total of 189 feedback forms between April 2018 and October 2020) gave glowing reviews of the librarians they had spoken with and the advice they had received.

Book a Librarian

A researcher identified business/nonprofit related Book a Librarian requests and coded them for content: 88 requests were found from June-December 2018; 305 from January-December 2019; and 127 from January-December 2020. (The number of BAL requests does not correspond to the number of 30 minute/person "blocks" recorded in the business programs data sheet, as time spent varied according to individual needs).

Most requests mentioned one or more specific reasons for requesting a session. Around 40% of BAL requests concerned market research for a business/nonprofit using the library's databases. Other common requests were help finding grants or funding (around 20% in 2019, and around 28% in 2020) and help with a business plan (around 10% mentioned this).

Over the course of the entire request period, 474 requestors answered the question “How did you hear about BAL?” Nearly half ($n = 207$) answered “Library Staff,” while another 25% ($n = 117$) chose either “A Program at the Library” or mentioned one of the library’s partner-programs (WIBO, SCORE, etc.).

Etsy Craft Entrepreneurship Focus Groups

Interest in the library and library programming

Most participants expressed interest in wanting to learn how to start a business to sell items that aligned with their artistic interests. One of them had tried Etsy on their own but wanted to learn how to use it better.

Another person who was interested in Etsy as an option for their family business used SLCL’s Ask a Librarian service to learn about it. That library staff member then told them about the library’s plans to offer an Etsy program.

One person was hoping to gain an “*intro to small business*” that they hoped would also be applicable to other options like Facebook Marketplace. Another became interested in the program because “*people were talking about it.*”

One person mentioned being intrigued by entrepreneurship ideas and felt that the program was an important way to test the waters.

Entrepreneurial background

Participants came to the program with varying levels of experience. Some participants had attended multiple workshops across the city (one participant mentioned learning about legal issues related to arts programming), while others were new to entrepreneurship. One person mentioned starting a nonprofit and later closing it, which proved to be a learning experience. Another person already had a business website, was familiar with the pricing of goods, and had attended a business program offered by a local technology focused center. Another person knew the basics of branding and how to figure out cost of goods from their work at a non-profit that had recently rebranded. However, most participants reported that they lacked experience with marketing their products and understanding the step-by-step processes involved.

Two participants were already familiar with Etsy, one as a buyer and one as a seller. The person who was already selling goods on Etsy described the decision-making process involved in choosing between Etsy and eBay as platforms.

Social experiences

A key takeaway for participants, especially the 2019 attendees, was the social experience of engaging with other “*like-minded people.*” This was described as uplifting, helpful, and energizing. Participants appreciated the shared learning that happened through the collective wisdom of the program. As one person described below:

“What I appreciated about the classes was listening and learning from other people. I did a lot of nodding in that class. Randomly people would share their mistakes. I learned a lot from people’s comments and what the presenter shared too.”

Entrepreneurial understandings

Participants from both the 2019 and 2020 cohorts mentioned *learning about the various aspects of running a business*. This occurred even for a participant who already had a business registered as an LLC. For them, selling was the hard part and the class had successfully filled that gap. Another person felt she had developed a mindset to “*begin where you are,*” not to expect perfection at first, and to persist in their actions. The accountability of having a class to attend made a big difference in their motivation to continue.

Some described learning about the Etsy platform specifically, including how selling on Etsy works and how to set up a profile. This was the main takeaway for those in the 2020 cohort, who had only attended one introductory class before the rest were cancelled because of the pandemic.

Another person appreciated learning about the realities of running a business, including what was needed for minimum profits and how to make a living. In the process they realized entrepreneurship was not a strength of theirs, and they appreciated gaining a realistic understanding of what it means to be an entrepreneur. They owed this learning to library services overall, as they described below:

“What I like most about it was not what I learned from the teacher, but what I learned from the library, and how all these services they offer to the Small Business program and how they could get in touch with lawyers, and how they can help you with research for marketing. So, you can find your SEOs and things like that that I found really interesting, because I knew that I could take that information into other fields. And not just for Etsy. And I think that’s what I learned.”

Others described *developing skills for the future*, as one respondent described here:

“Overall, what I value most was being able to do it, and learn it, and know that I have that in my wheelhouse for the future. As I move in and out of trying different things, I might yet come back to it. And I’ll know how to do it. And I’ll be able to use that as an experience just to help as I try to find ways to supplement my income.”

The *instructor’s guidance* was central to participants’ learning. A 2019 participant described the instructor as “*a serial entrepreneur*” with lots of experience who brought the curriculum to life and was an “*unending fountain of knowledge.*” The instructor was credited with advice about not aiming for perfection and acknowledging that they would get better in time as their work and understanding progressed.

The instructor’s transparency and realistic depiction of small business ownership was appreciated by people from both cohorts. One participant especially appreciated the instructor’s knowledge about market systems, and how marketing and advertising were essential to success. Another mentioned that the instructor was especially knowledgeable about copyrights and protecting one’s store.

Although packets of information were shared as part of the program, a couple participants from both cohorts felt that the instructors’ advice on how to prioritize information was more memorable.

Programming challenges and supports

Those in the 2019 cohort described a *need for continuity and a community*. Once the course ended, they felt cut off from its supportive environment and would have appreciated opportunities to reconnect and continue to communicate together. Similarly, interest was expressed in continuing to connect virtually after the course was over.

Those in the 2020 cohort expressed a similar concern after the class got postponed. One of them had reached out a few times to check if it would go online, but didn't receive any communication about options for follow-up.

Two 2019-cohort participants (one considering small business ownership and one who already had a small business) described finding it hard to decide how they wanted to portray their work on Etsy. They felt the instructor's input and encouragement to experiment was helpful, but that the final decision was left up to them.

Despite the instructor's help with information on copyright and protecting one's store, a couple of participants felt it would have been great to have a copyright lawyer fill in the information gaps and provide definitive answers to questions.

Two participants found the timing and schedule difficult, as they were balancing child care or other employment while taking the class. One of them suggested breaking the class into two three-week segments with a check-in for accountability in between, rather than six consecutive weeks. However, they also acknowledged that while having class every week was difficult for them, it might make it easier for others to "get momentum."

Entrepreneurial ecosystem

Compared to SLCL's Etsy program, other classes and programs participants had attended were more focused on marketing, including leveraging social media. These *other programs offered helpful features*, including more information on legal issues, specifics on accounting, and opportunities for peer feedback through a Facebook group. Although SLCL's program offered a Facebook group, it included people from different classes, and engagement was limited.

Nonetheless, participants valued the Etsy program for the *knowledge provided about the Etsy platform*, including how the platform worked and how to create a brand for one's business. Participants described it as a niche program and a "slam dunk" for Etsy-specific information. Some reported that their experience met their expectations.

One participant thought it was especially helpful for those who had a product ready and had the time – in this case, they could "*could go from no store to a finished store in this course ... it's a specific class about how to create a brand and promote yourself on this site.*" This was reinforced by another participant who, despite not having a product to sell, appreciated what they learned about Etsy.

Participants appreciated that the library program was a *free introduction* to Etsy. They mentioned similar programs they were aware of that required payment.

Implementing program lessons

Across the two cohorts, most participants described not moving forward on their entrepreneurial journey at the time of the focus groups for *personal reasons* (e.g., work-life balance), *lack of resources* (e.g., time and money), or *by choice*. The challenges were concisely summarized by a participant: *"You're starting at the bottom and you want to go to the top and right now you don't have that ability."*

One person felt they would have been able to use what they learned about Etsy if there had been more classes, but they were moving to a different platform. A 2020 participant reported that they were not yet ready to move forward, especially while adjusting to life during the pandemic, but that in a year they might be able to spend some time every weekend to advance their entrepreneurial goals. They specifically mentioned that *"external inspiration"* would be helpful.

Another participant had learned that entrepreneurship was not for them once they realized how much time and effort was required. The market for the craft they were interested in was already oversaturated, and they felt they could not focus on creating a niche product without the time or financial support that they did not have.

Apart from the 2020 cohort whose classes were cancelled, two participants from the 2019 cohort described *how the pandemic factored into their future entrepreneurial work*. One felt the knowledge they had gained about running an online business would be helpful in a time when a lot of work was happening virtually, but that setting up an Etsy shop would require them to figure out storing and shipping items. The other person felt they could have been better prepared to cater to new online consumers during the pandemic but were unable to focus on growing their business at the time.

Future entrepreneurial goals

Participants were enthusiastic about implementing what they had learned from the program in the future. They identified *information on copyright issues and advice about the seasonal variation in selling products, knowing your audience, and creating a brand* as valuable to their long-term efforts. One participant cannot quit their day job at the moment and described needing to figure out *how to keep their business strategy small and simple*. They reported that the resources provided as part of the Etsy program would help with this. Another person felt they could apply what they had learned about branding and audiences in their full-time job, as well as their own business.

Those with existing businesses (across both cohorts) described slightly different experiences. One of them has *"big dreams"* for their Etsy business and hoped it would be able to support their parents in retirement. The course had *informed their pricing strategy*, and they revisited every aspect of their product and reconsidered its true cost to ensure the product would be profitable:

"For example, one of the exercises was about figuring out your pricing, and really being clear on the cost of all the materials that go into the item. And I remember after that class, I went to the craft room, and I put sticky notes on everything. I was, like, when I use this pack of paper, it costs this, so then divided by ... I went crazy. I put the prices everywhere, so that I could have a better

understanding. And it actually helped me be a little bit more realistic. Like, 'Okay, if I really want to make money, I need to rethink some things!'"

Another existing business owner was enthusiastic about how they would **now be able to revise their marketing strategy, including advertising**. It was a major lightbulb moment for them in the class and they know now that they cannot *"sell without advertising. Because without being able to go in person to markets, you have to do social media. Advertising is definitely part of the money."*

Perceptions of the library

In general participants felt that the library operated as a support system. This included a general sense that the library was a helpful resource providing online classes, mobile hotspots, books, and printing, and that the catalog system allowed them to search other libraries for items not available at SLCL.

Future library support

Those in the 2020 cohort were especially interested in **virtual classes for the Etsy program** and picking up where they left off after the course had been canceled. Several were surprised to learn that the library had, in fact, moved classes online, and one referenced a positive experience getting research help from a librarian online as an example that this format was effective in addressing program participants' needs.

Participants provided suggestions for ways the library could increase support for them and similar entrepreneurs. They were interested in **classes around specialized topics** and gave examples of business-related concerns for startups, including courses about promoting people of color and women entrepreneurs.

"I was thinking about how, during the Zoom call, we are all diverse, and we're all women. And I think having classes and sessions talking about women and diversity in business, specifically, would be fantastic. I think that promoting diversity in entrepreneurial spaces, as well as promoting women in business, would also be fantastic."

Other **topics and resources of interest** included accounting, branding and marketing, social media, managing inventory, managing people, and access to IP lawyers for basic introductory information as well as answers to specific questions. There was consensus in one of the focus groups that the program had not explored opportunities to highlight the range of social media options, as one participant explained:

"There are way too many platforms coming out that people don't know how to use for their business. The library sticks to the basics of business but we're missing this huge thing. Google loves to come in and teach you anything, free of charge. I'm sure Google and Facebook would partner with you. Advertising and marketing with social media is a huge thing."

There was strong interest in being **connected to others in their cohort group** for learning, networking, accountability, and peer support in general. One participant echoed others' comments in their focus group, offering this concrete suggestion:

"If there was some standing meeting that any Etsy alum can just attend - like the first Saturday of the month, we reserved a room for you, if you just want to come hang-out and get some

inspiration. Even just having some dedicated space and having some accountability would be helpful. I do things when I'm in a social group, like a cohort. So, if I told that person [that] I was going to do this one thing, then the next time I see her I want to have done it, you know what I mean. This could just be a simple way for them to keep it alive."

Another person had a suggestion for virtual connections - a starter question could be posed to initiate conversation with other people in similar circumstances.

Library Staff Survey

Overall, around half ($n = 27$) of the 52 respondents to the survey were familiar with the library's entrepreneurship resources and services but had not been directly involved with them. Two supported entrepreneurs directly. Among the 13 administrative staff, 8 were familiar but not directly involved, while one was directly involved in the library's entrepreneurship programming. Among the 39 branch library staff, 19 were familiar but not directly involved, while one was directly involved in the library's entrepreneurship programming. The other 18 did not know much about the entrepreneur programming. Table 1 presents data on overall staff familiarity with library programs and services.

Table 1. Overall familiarity with programming and services ($N = 52$)

Answer Response	n	%
I don't know much about these.	22	42%
I know about these but have not been directly involved.	27	52%
I have directly supported entrepreneurs in some way at SLCL	2	4%

Note. One respondent selected "Other (Please describe):" but did not add any additional information.

Supporting potential entrepreneurs

Respondents were asked an open-ended question about how they would support patrons in a variety of situations. If approached by a patron who *"tells you they are considering starting a business and are looking for resources that might help them,"* 12 of 46 responses mentioned making attempts to help the patron directly, while 35 described directing the user to a different information source in the library.

The most common resources respondents said they would recommend to users were the Small Business Resources section of the library's website ($n = 27$) and the Reference Department ($n = 14$), which houses the Small Business Resource Center. Four respondents said they would mention the Book-A-Librarian service, which is the library's main avenue for business support during the pandemic, while eight mentioned directing patrons to print materials in the library. Table 2 presents data on the ways a respondent would support a patron interested in entrepreneurship.

Table 2. Ways in which a respondent would direct someone who is *considering starting a business and looking for resources*. (N = 46)

	<i>n</i>
Direct them to the SLCL online website (programs, resources, etc.)	27
Direct them to the reference department	14
Direct them to print materials (books, etc.)	8
Direct them to "Book a librarian"	4
Direct them to nonspecific/general resources	4

Similarly, in response to a patron who *"is interested in learning how to use the library to find information about starting a business"* most staff members were able to provide help or tell the patron where to look. The library's website remained the most common place recommended to users (*n* = 25), followed by the Reference Department (*n* = 17) or Book-A-Librarian (*n* = 7). Table 3 presents these data.

Table 3. Ways in which a respondent would direct someone who is *interested in learning how to use the library to find information about starting a business*. (N = 47)

	<i>n</i>
Direct them to the SLCL online website (programs, resources, etc.)	25
Direct them to the reference department	17
Direct them to "Book a librarian"	7
Direct them to print materials (books, etc.)	5

Examining Table 3, those who were less familiar with the programs and services were more likely to refer patrons to print material (*n* = 4). Those who knew about the entrepreneurial programs were unsurprisingly more likely to refer to the online website or reference department.

Finally, in response to a patron who *"is considering starting a business and looking for resources,"* 28 of the 48 respondents would send them to the Reference Department and 13 would recommend Book-A-Librarian. An additional eight respondents said they would send the user to a Small Business Ambassador - a staff member trained several years ago to handle business-related requests. Table 4 presents these data.

Table 4. Ways in which a respondent would direct someone who is *considering starting a business and are looking for resources*. (N = 48)

	<i>n</i>
Direct them to the reference department	28
Direct them to "Book a librarian"	13
Direct them to the Small Business Ambassador or the individual/department responsible for small business work	8
Direct them to HQ	6

Overall, data from Tables 2-4 indicate a staff that is knowledgeable about where to refer patrons, with a small cohort who is able to directly help on entrepreneurial needs.

Critically, even staff members who were unfamiliar with the library’s business services demonstrated that they were aware of how to support patrons who came with business questions. Although those who knew about the services were more likely to suggest the “Book a Librarian” option. Table 5 presents these data.

Table 5. Responses based familiarity with programs and services at SLCL.

Answer Response	Don’t know (N= 20)	Know (N= 25)
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
Direct them to the reference department	14	13
Direct them to “Book a librarian”	3	9
Direct them to the Small Business Ambassador or the individual/department responsible for small business work	3	4
Direct them to HQ	4	2

Note. Not including those who originally selected I have directly supported entrepreneurs in some way at SLCL or selected Other (Please Describe): as shown in Table 1.

Commitment to provide entrepreneurial support

Respondents were also asked to indicate their level of agreement, on a scale from -1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 1 (*Strongly Agree*), with six statements about SLCL’s commitment and their own personal commitment to support entrepreneurship in the community. The six statements were:

- Supporting the small business community in St. Louis is a vital part of what the library does.
- I am personally committed to supporting entrepreneurs and small business owners as part of my role at SLCL.
- I am interested in learning how I can better support potential entrepreneurs as part of my role at the library.
- I would like to learn more about the various ways SLCL supports entrepreneurs and small business owners.
- I am interested in the possibility of professional development related to entrepreneurship and small business resources.
- I am confident in my ability to support a library user who wants to start a business.

On average, respondents indicated moderate agreement (> 0) with all but one statement (*I am confident in my ability to support a library user who wants to start a business*). This shows that library staff have shared goals around supporting entrepreneurs, and although most individual members are not trained to provide this support themselves, they are interested in learning more and supporting patrons. Figure 1 presents the distribution of agreement from -1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 1 (*Strongly Agree*).

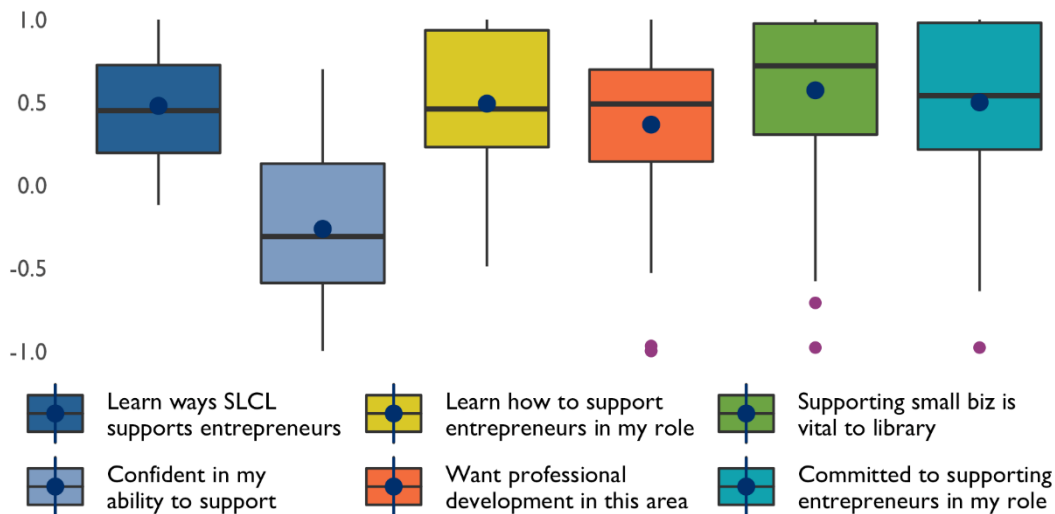


Figure 1. Distribution of agreement ratings for statements about supporting entrepreneurs. Points indicate means, boxes indicate quartiles. Scale from -1 (Strongly Disagree) to 1 (Strongly Agree).

Respondents were asked if they would *like to provide additional information or clarification on any of your answers* to the slider questions on commitment to support entrepreneurship. The most common response was that entrepreneurship is removed from their current work and that they are not sure if how it would intertwine with their work ($n = 7$). One respondent explained their answer in this way: *I'd like to learn more about what we have to offer, but I'm not sure how often I'd use the information. We don't get many small business-related questions. Still, it would be useful to know just in case.*

This is followed by six respondents noting they would like more information on the subject, while four suggested that their patrons are not asking about this. One respondent emphasized that even though their patrons don't often make entrepreneurial requests, they would be a better librarian and *a better library advocate in my personal life* if they had a greater understanding of what resources the library offers to support entrepreneurship: *I don't directly work with patrons who make these requests, but I firmly believe that if I had a better understanding of what we offered, I would be better prepared to refer patrons to our resources when those occasions do arise. (I would also be a better library advocate in my personal life, as I would be able to promote our services to people in my personal life who are, or are interested in becoming, small business owners.)*

Finally, respondents were asked *what would better enable them to support a thriving small business ecosystem in St. Louis*. We received 37 responses to the question. Twenty-eight mentioned need more *training* or *information about resources*. One respondent suggested a full professional development program that covered, in depth, the skills necessary to help patrons find the information they need and the full range of entrepreneurial resources the library offers. Others suggested shorter training options, including a refresher course (webinar or in-person activity) on library resources and helpful talking points that staff can use when supporting entrepreneurial patrons. Two respondents suggested spending time with one of the respondents who is currently trained in this field.



Practical social science for a better world



Norlander, R., Gupta, R., Brucker, J.L., Field, S., & Attaway, E. (2021). St. Louis County Library Data Report. Knology Publication #NPO.180.636.09. Knology.

Date of Publication

December 15, 2021

Knology Publication #

#NPO.180.636.12

These materials were produced for the Libraries as Entrepreneurial Hubs initiative, a project funded by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. The authors are the independent external evaluators for the project and are solely responsible for the content in this report.