

Finding Value in Unusual Places: Transforming Collaboration Workshop Data

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Abstract

Academic and public librarians, administrators, and other information professionals will appreciate research activities that tell the stories of participants from a recent Collaborating with Strangers (CoLAB) workshop conducted for a regional multitype library cooperative (MLC). This presentation describes the facilitated workshop and resulting qualitative analysis from which the research team presented solid evidence to the MLC leadership for informing a five-year strategic planning process and for suggesting advocacy initiatives led by the MLC member libraries. The team will share the process used to elicit useful data gleaned from CoLAB workshop materials created by participants.

The method used to analyze resulting data demonstrates the efficacy of CoLAB workshops for quickly extracting substantial amounts of qualitative data and insights, some of which may result in potential long-term impacts on specific communities such as libraries and patrons. CoLABs are intentionally designed to increase comfort in speaking with strangers. Future workshops for other academic library stakeholders, such as students and faculty, offer the potential to reveal what they value within the higher education environment.

Introduction

Academic library professionals are increasingly involved with the research community to fulfill their primary objectives of expanding digital collections, web-based discovery systems, and use of social media and mobile devices in information-seeking. Public library professionals are faced with requests for social service support and for more diverse information resources from communities for which libraries serve as anchor institutions providing equitable access. These demands require dynamic professional development where experts agree that “the informal network developed through many library leadership training programs is often the most valuable and durable benefit of training.”¹

Despite the long-term positive impact of facilitating new internal and external connections, engagement provided for professional development can be costly and time-consuming. To understand the professional development capacity among regional library professionals, with a view toward informing strategic planning processes, the Northeast Florida Multitype Library Cooperative (NEFLIN) enlisted the Collaborating with Strangers (CoLAB) workshop² team to facilitate a 45-minute CoLAB mini-workshop during the region’s 2017 annual meeting.

The conference workshop provided a structured environment where participants connected during one-on-one, three-minute speed meetings, using profile cards produced during the workshop to practice (1) conversing with others; (2) discovering untapped resources; and (3) initiating cooperative, collaborative, or mentoring partnerships. More than 100 participants generated qualitative data captured by the profile cards that included 11 demographic questions and inquiries about the participant’s role in the library, passion for their work, projects or interests, and a “hidden” personal fact.

The purpose in analyzing these CoLAB responses for the NEFLIN strategic planning process was to provide (1) information about the scope of NEFLIN library stakeholders’ competencies, interests, and needs, creating a stakeholder profile featuring identified individual assets; and, (2) ways in which the CoLAB participants intended to further engage with the information shared or discovered during this collaborative process. By understanding both the status of these stakeholders and their self-described future planned actions, NEFLIN leadership can better understand the scope of library professionals’ current interests and improve understanding of the “assets” already available in this library community of practice.

We examined the data to answer the following key questions:

1. Who are these stakeholders?
2. What findings are meaningful for NEFLIN leadership to act on and include in their strategic plan to fully support, foster, and sustain the library professionals working in this region?

The following analysis employed a structure based on nonprofit strategic planning concepts and provides background on the appreciative inquiry framework of CoLAB workshops.

Background

CoLABs offer methods for breaking down barriers, encouraging participants to share ideas and create new connections, resulting in productive and memorable sessions experienced in a conference setting. A challenge presented by first encounters³ is that most people avoid conversing or working with “strangers,” disrupting their ability to access other people’s assets, the basic ingredients necessary for innovation. However, the literature shows that discovering available individual or community-held assets in a library, classroom, or at a conference can dramatically lead to a greater sense of community and awareness of resources.

Using Bryson’s work in strategic planning for public and non-profit organizations, the CoLAB data provided a narrative describing some emerging themes structured as competencies, opportunities, and community assets.⁴ These findings: (1) tell a story about North Florida’s regional libraries; (2) identify librarian needs and interests; and (3) suggest desired training and professional development. The CoLAB study revealed substantial characteristics and interests of NEFLIN members, useful for both strategic planning and for advocacy initiatives led by the NEFLIN staff, member libraries, and other vested stakeholders.

Selected Relevant Literature

Appreciative Inquiry

One of the guiding principles employed within CoLAB Workshops is the customization of profile-card questions to suit the anticipated participants—designing questions using appreciative inquiry (AI). AI focuses on developing awareness of knowledge and interests as elements of social innovation rather than as a method of problem-solving.⁵ The goal is to pose questions that yield information readily available to participants that describe their current goals, professional passions, projects, skills, partners, or aspirations of future projects. The sharing of these answers produces appreciative inquiries during speed meetings. “What about this project excites you?” or “How have you been able to develop that skill?” are questions commonly asked during the speed meetings that point to more positive and practical information and resources that otherwise would remain hidden.

These interactions thus focus on participants’ strengths. As participants meet each other, they begin to feel at ease while accumulating new sources of inspiration and resources as they focus on learning about others. Participants, as agents of their environments, experience appreciative inquiry for its potential to initiate “... collaborative change, [that] erases the winner/loser paradigm in favor of coordinated actions and closer relationships...” employing a process of “systematic discovery” to reveal untapped assets.⁶ AI is a seminal framework used in action research by researchers along with community stakeholders to “actively forge co-generative relational processes and outcomes.”⁷

AI facilitates communication naturally, producing asset-based collaboration, which is an effective method of eliciting information from stakeholders used in community and organizational development. CoLAB workshops present questions that evoke reflection of assets in which participants have the opportunity to reflect “on their gifts, passions and talents, rather than their deficiencies.”⁸ Like the asset-based community development McKnight and Kretzmann describe in the 1970s, in this study, CoLAB participants’ contributions were assessed for their self-described assets and their reactions to sharing these with others,

thereby developing ways to appreciate the assets in their library community while planning to connect these assets in new ways.⁹

Strategic Planning

AI also complements strategic planning, enabling participants to be forthcoming about their knowledge, their assets, and their aspirations, as “they are the experts about their lives and communities and are aware of what is working and what is not.”¹⁰ While a strategic planning team may have its own understanding of how to judge the organization’s performance, it can be “instructive and politically useful to ask stakeholders.”¹¹ Creating a stakeholder analysis from the CoLAB data provided NEFLIN the opportunity to gain a better “understanding of the relationships—actual or potential—that help define the organization.”¹² Bryson recommends that an analysis identify what is important for stakeholders, as this is a criterion by which the organization—and those stakeholders—assess how well the organization performs “from the stakeholders’ point of view.”¹³

Given that librarians “are notoriously poor at networking and marketing themselves”¹⁴ and considered to be bookish and introverted,¹⁵ the CoLAB structure and appreciative inquiry method was examined to determine its effectiveness as a method to gather stakeholders’ viewpoints, especially since librarians do not typically see themselves as key stakeholders.”¹⁶ Specifically, the CoLAB process does not seek to provide answers to any particular problem but instead creates an environment in which participants self-identify assets and engage in interactions in which the shared information results in synergized, new assets with which they can interact, collaborate, connect, or appreciate as moments of self-discoveries.

Method

CoLABs typically average two hours in length, providing structured facilitation during which the centerpiece features one-on-one, three-minute speed meetings with 14 pairs of partners. The CoLAB team developed an abbreviated workshop, with an anticipated seven rounds of speed-meetings (during a 25-minute period). CoLABs aim to reduce barriers among participants, including students, faculty, administrators, and staff.

Upon arrival, participants are given a profile card that poses questions soliciting personal and professional information about the participant. To facilitate the abbreviated session, participants received orientation email messages in advance from NEFLIN, including the three questions participants would be answering on their profile cards (Appendix A):

- What is your current role and why are you passionate about this work?
- What projects or interests have you been focusing on recently?
- What is one thing most people don’t know about you?

During the plenary session, participants received a brief introduction, completed any missing elements on their cards, and were given instructions of finding a partner, conversing for three minutes, and then immediately moving on to repeat the speed-meeting process. Partners could stand or sit or move to a quiet area during their speed meetings and were encouraged to capture brief notes on a checklist as a way of remembering their partners, conversation themes, or next steps to follow-up.

At the end of seven partner conversations, NEFLIN participants were guided to view three additional questions posted on Idea Boards (i.e., easel paper) at the back of the conference room. Each sheet featured a different question and participants were instructed to write and affix their completed Post-it answers to the corresponding question. This activity generated almost 400 Post-it notes.

During analysis, data was pulled from two collection points: Section One, the participants’ profile cards, and; Section Two, their Idea Board responses. The profile cards identified participants’ self-described competencies, the motivation for their librarian positions, and their professional and personal interests. The Idea Board posts identified synergies or connections made, lessons learned, and next steps each participant planned to take based on the CoLAB experience.

Responses on the profile card and the Idea Boards were analyzed using open and axial coding, drawing themes and categories from the data with which to review and code each response.

Findings

Profile Cards

Section One

The first section of the profile cards collected demographic information, listing 91 unique hometowns, from Algeria, Africa, to Lake City, Florida, with most respondents naming Jacksonville, Florida, as their hometown. Forty-eight unique libraries or library systems were represented, with 48 academic library participants, 60 from public libraries, four from public school libraries, two from the state library, and one from a private school, representing 31 cities throughout North Florida. Forty-two unique positions were listed, including deans, directors, branch heads, managers, coordinators, reference collections/technical services librarians, and “Person of many hats.” NEFLIN’s service area covers 550 libraries from 24 counties in Northeast Florida.

The median length of tenure as library employees was 14 years, with a high of 44 years and a low of less than one year. The most frequently reported length of service was 10 years; most of the participants with more than 30 years of service listed their positions as dean, director, department head, or manager. Ten participants listed themselves as current students. Thirty-one listed at least one type of social media account on various platforms including Facebook, Instagram, WordPress (blog), and most notably, Twitter.

Section Two

The profile cards presented four questions that asked participants to list their current role, description of their “passion” for their work, current projects or interests, and a detail about themselves that others did not know. Question one posed a two-part question, asking, “What is your current role?” The second question asked, “Why are you passionate about this work?” The roles indicated by participants resulted in 70 unique responses.

The category of “librarian” was unsurprisingly the most frequent description, but it was qualified by descriptions of librarian type, including coordinator, IT, reference, cataloging, ILL, research and instruction, access services, and youth services. Thirty-four participants also provided descriptions of “duties” ranging from manage (8), instruction, programs, circulation, and reference (three each), and children, outreach, marketing and promotion, and youth services, each with two responses.

Forty respondents self-reported both roles and duties as those typically found in a management or supervisory positions, with a wide range of responsibilities. When asked about “passion,” this group was more likely to answer with terms that relate to interaction skills, such as “leadership,” “encourage,” “empower,” or “impact.” Over 20 individuals used the word “empower,” and the terms “help/helping” were used 11 times. This indicates a focus on getting results and having an impact on others within the context of their work. More than half of the responses indicated that “variety of workplace” was a key to their devotion.

Part two of the question queried participants about their work in libraries, asking, “Why are you passionate about this work?” The most frequent terms that occurred in the responses included: love (37), library (29), students (28), libraries (19), enjoy (16), new (18), community (17), people (16), work (16), helping/help (24), and learning (13). The responses included just seven answers that mentioned books.

Not surprisingly, “library” or “libraries” were the most frequently occurring terms (48). Using collocation analysis to view the words adjacent to these terms, participants commented about library as place, the library story, as a key element in a childhood, library resources, library as living organization, a place that patrons own, a source for meeting community needs, a source for technology, and as a critical part of helping people navigate the “time of exploding information/new technology/and educational changes.”

The second question asked, “What projects or interests have you been focusing on recently?” and resulted in a total of 167 codes, broken down into projects (88) and interests (79). Projects featured 17 unique categories, as displayed in Figure 1. Participants were most involved in running programs, literacy instruction, technology instruction and/or implementation, youth advisory, marketing and spaces (teen spaces, new spaces), and makerspaces, among others.

Figure 1. Participants’ Current Projects.

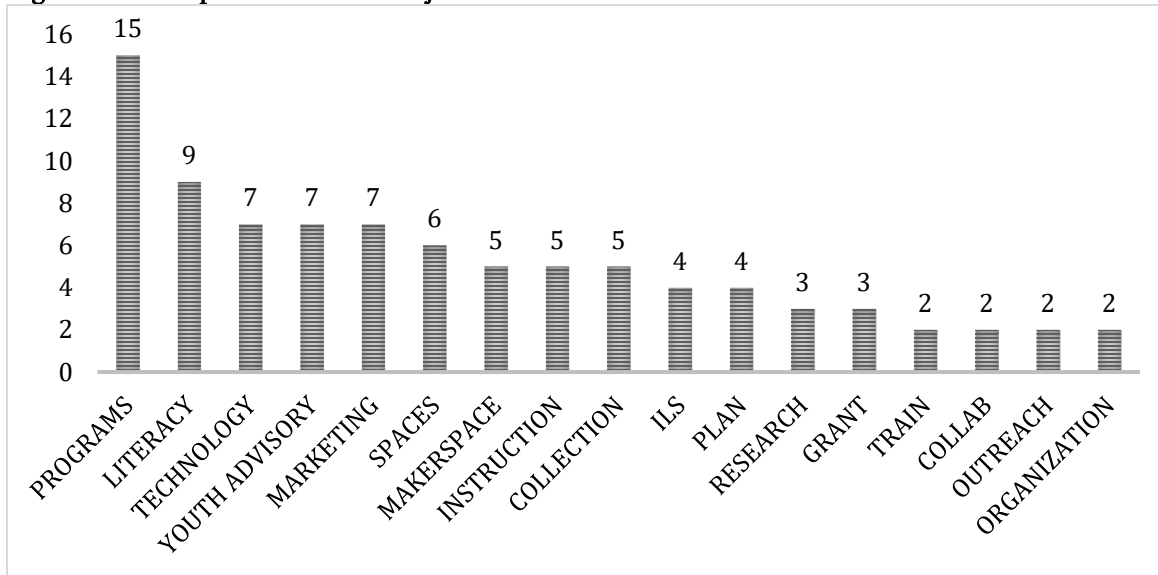
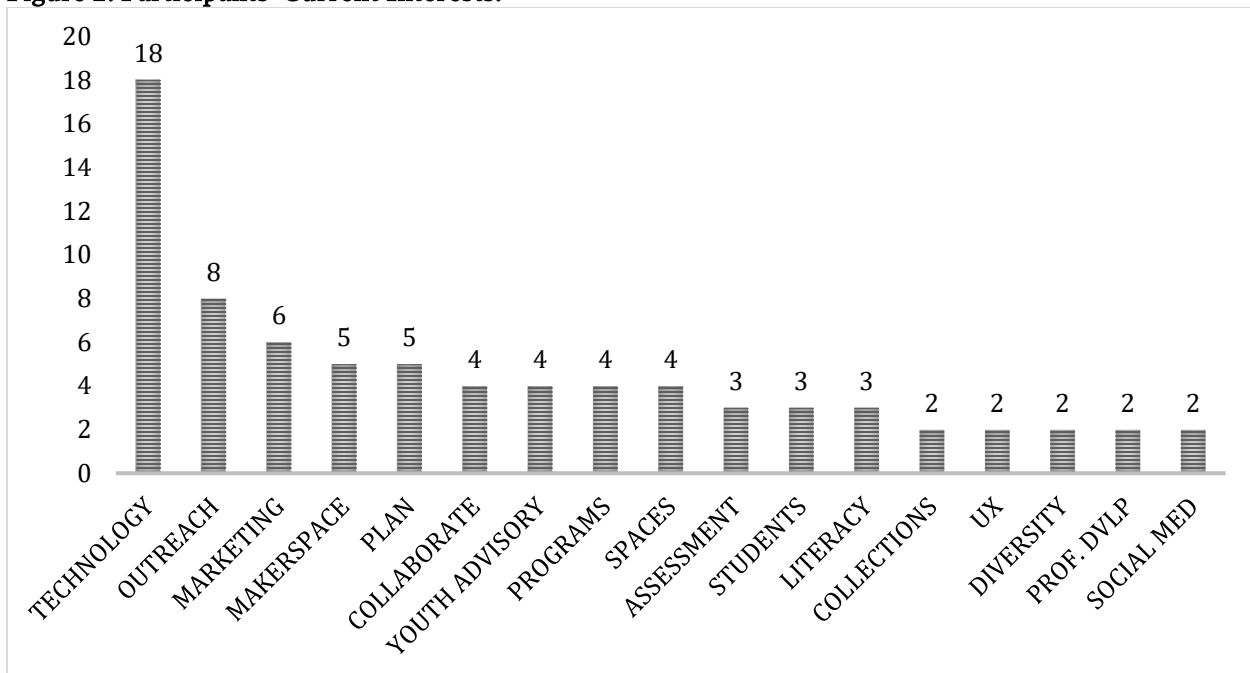


Figure 2 breaks out the variety of current interests a participant described, demonstrating intention for future professional development. There was a great diversity in the interests and current projects of these participants, and interests offer areas for development, especially in technology, marketing and outreach, makerspace implementation, and collaborations.

Figure 2. Participants’ Current Interests.



Using [Voyant](#), an open-source digital text analysis tool, the term “new” was revealed to be frequently occurring in these responses. Participants described a search for a new job, new responsibilities in completing accreditation tasks, hiring new employees, crafting a new strategic plan, developing a new makerspace, and “teaching in a new position.”

The last field on the profile card asked, “What is one thing most people don’t know about you?” This question yielded the greatest number of unique responses and did not lend itself to simple categorization. Participants shared personal facts that fell into seven categories, including family, career, personality, origin, education, health, and former residences. These personal facts illustrated a great amount of diversity among the participants as they described odd habits, diets, citizenship, unusual past careers (sign language interpreter, dog sledder), and physical and personal traits. Participants shared some sensitive, personal information such as family members with cancer and the intent to use the CoLAB workshop to network in search of a new job.

Section Three

Idea Board Comments

The first of the Idea Board questions asked participants to name “synergies or connections... you discover(ed).” The analysis of these comments was based on agreed-upon definitions for each—synergy, connection, and discover—and, using these three terms as frameworks, we coded 59 responses for **synergy**; 37 responses for **connection**, and; 45 responses as a **discovery** for a total of 141 responses.

Synergies: Using open and axial coding, **group similarities** and **group identities** emerged as categories used to assess each response. Thirty-nine responses referred to group similarities—skills, knowledge, abilities—that participants share; 14 responses referred to group identity—a description of a personal characteristic that all participants were said to share. Finally, five responses were positive observations of types of synergies experienced within the group. All responses were coded for sentiment—positive, negative or neutral—and most were positive or neutral; only one sentiment was coded as negative. Participants focused on the similarity of challenges, helping people, focus on innovation, love of learning, providing access and service, and most notably, passion for the type of work they do.

Connections: The responses describing connections were coded for sentiment and for the nature of the connection described. Comments were either positive (16) or neutral (21); only six responses described a personal connection, while 32 participants indicated their discovered connections were professional.

The connections focused on their service, helping people, love for libraries, the type of work they do (e.g., academic, public; administrative, service), their love for learning, and their shared experiences. These experiences ranged from travel to same locations, working in similar departments (youth services), shared hometowns, and experiences in leadership. Notably, multiple comments occurred about how close geographically some libraries are to those that consider themselves to be rural.

Discoveries: Ideas, knowledge, thoughts, and revelations characterize these comments. All comments were either positive (20) or neutral (23). Only three were personal discoveries while the remaining 42 were professionally oriented. Seven comments referred to the experience of the workshop itself, either commenting that sharing hometowns is a good conversation starter, and the revelation that “these people are interesting.” Several of the comments indicated the participant was learning about rural and small libraries, both public and academic, noting, “As an academic lib, I am intrigued by the variety of interests and work being done by public libraries.” Another discovered “how small-town libraries work,” learning that some librarians define themselves by the multiple roles they assume, multitasking often to an extreme that contributes to poor results. Finally, several participants commented on how diverse the technology is in different libraries but how important it is to all of them.

What Participants Learned

The second Idea Board question, “What did you learn?” generated 142 responses that were analyzed for (1) Content; (2) Response Type (Personal/Professional); (3) Sentiment, and; (4) Lesson Learned (new information versus reinforcement of existing knowledge). The content of responses elicited 153 codes in three categories, including library information (74), observations about participants (58), or comments about the process of the workshop.

Content: The library information shared among the participants included 15 types of content references to technologies, diverse library types, diverse hometowns, and the challenges of rural libraries.

Response Type and Sentiment: Responses were coded for professional (104), personal (15), or both types of comments (18). The bulk of the professional comments referred to library types (rural, urban, academic, public, large, and small), programs running for children, youth, and adults, with a desire to know more about unique services. Personal comments referred to various trivia or “random details about strangers.” Most expressed positive comments about their fellow participants, such as how nice people are, their interesting hobbies, and the enjoyable nature of sharing with strangers.

Lessons Learned: Most of the observations suggested that participants acquired new information (105). Some of the revelations included information about programming (for millennials, people with mental disabilities, and children), technology being used at other locations, and the diversity of hidden assets in libraries. The many comments about diverse backgrounds and skill sets suggest that these participants value this type of knowledge as a form of professional development, stating that a lesson learned was, “How other librarians found their niche—previous work experiences + MLIS degree.”

Participants’ Next Steps

For the final question, participants provided 121 responses to answer, “What are your next steps?” These responses were analyzed for the category of “next step”—professional action, personal action, or both—and for the type of action—collaborate, connect, learn, or implement—that participants intend to pursue.

The majority of responses were professionally related actions (105). Many respondents planned to seek technical expertise, such as implementing passport services or a “cataloging idea,” learning more about another library’s strategic planning process, learning more about digitization projects, or getting grant-writing help to fund makerspaces. Professionally related actions were further coded into five categories—Connect (41), Technical (30), Programs (25), Self-development (9), Makerspaces (5) and Library Visits (4)—based on the frequency of explicit statements in those categories. Responses coded as “connect” primarily indicated intent to contact a specific individual and follow up on a program or some technical detail discovered during the speed meetings, so some of these actions overlap. “Technical” responses were focused on specific details sought about library operational issues such as cataloging, specific services, staff training, social media, or makerspaces.

Type of Action—Collaborate, Connect, Learn, or Implement: The actions under Next Steps were coded for the type of action, using definitions for Collaborate (shared program or project with one or more other individuals); Connect (brief contact via phone, visit, or email, to request information); Learn (seek information), and; Implement (to carry out an idea or newly acquired information). Sixty-eight responses expressed desires to learn about something and 55 responses indicated the intent to connect with someone specific.

Discussion

The responses to both the profile card and Idea Boards provide a way to understand the characteristics of these stakeholders, how they view the things they do, and why they do them. These NEFLIN participants comprise a combination of supervisory (~30%) and non-supervisory (~70%) library positions. Thus, their needs for training, development, and support are different. Supervisors indicated that their positions require them to lead, empower, and have impact; non-supervisory positions were focused on specific department

functions and these activities require hands-on experience with technology, digital applications, social media, and, notably, makerspaces.

These results illustrate that participants in the NEFLIN CoLAB comprised early career professionals and those in higher-level positions with much greater length of service (median = 19 years). Participants' responses indicate a wide variety of professional needs that support both the demands of leadership and supervision but also personal needs such as a desire for workplace variety. Notably, the supervisory group indicated responsibilities for changing organizational structures (e.g., ILS migration, vendor changes), grant writing, and implementation.

In using these data for developing an organization's strategic plan, appreciative inquiry—inherent within the CoLAB process—generated “what is at stake” for library professionals who are generally considered to need help marketing and promoting themselves and their assets. CoLABs identify and leverage user assets (the use of extant successful knowledge and practices) rather than user needs, emphasizing the access and use of community expertise, knowledge, skills, abilities, spaces, and other resources already available but hidden to most except those who possess them. In addition, the safe environment created by both the NEFLIN conference convener and the workshop facilitator was revealed to be a hidden asset in itself, with the inclusion of the CoLAB into the annual conference producing social capital, those interactions that generate trust, reciprocity, and cooperation.

Recommended Plan for NEFLIN

Guided by the strength of common “next steps” among participants and the desired learning expressed by participants as derived from the analysis, the CoLAB research team suggested priorities for NEFLIN leadership to adopt:

Facilitated Field Visits: Many participants indicated that they plan to visit other libraries or that visiting other libraries is important and this activity could become a structured NEFLIN program. NEFLIN leaders can establish a library field visit professional development fund—micro grants—where a group of library employees could identify in their application other libraries that provide services or methods that they are interested in learning first-hand. The program could support this cross-fertilization of ideas and practices, while awarding those who seek these types of learning experiences.

Mentoring: Comments related to connections for future conversations to discuss specific programs or approaches can be interpreted to mean that participants are seeking mentoring relationships about very specific topics and expertise. For instance, a simple asset survey distributed to all members asking for information about areas of expertise will yield a menu from which members could select possible mentors. A digital map could be produced where these assets are associated with physical libraries in which the participant with the asset works. Through this virtual map, NEFLIN member libraries would expose their collective assets, inspiring others to make site visits, either as part of the newly sponsored library field visits program or independently.

Makerspaces: Fourteen comments about current implementation of makerspaces featured a focus on the challenges in implementation, the need for training, the need for train-the-trainer programs to conduct makerspace programs, and types of makerspaces that are mobile and can be used in branch libraries. These comments suggested that the programs are new, implementation is challenged by library logistics and funding, and many are in developmental stages for which the participants need greater support.

The comments made by participants cut across library types, academic or public, large and small. The research team's recommendations represent some of the notable aspects of the participants' comments but are not exhaustive of the potential uses and development of the revealed assets of the NEFLIN library community members.

CoLAB Workshops: Future Applications

The large amount of comprehensive data collected on a wide variety of participants in just 45 minutes in a CoLAB workshop was analyzed for use by a southeast regional library cooperative to inform a recent strategic planning process. While the cooperative had already engaged a consultant to conduct a traditional stakeholder needs assessment, the available data confirmed the findings that were generated by the needs assessment process. However, the CoLAB data were more detailed and much more efficiently collected in comparison to the consultant's assessment process that comprised five focus groups of three hours each, with just 32 members participating. While the CoLAB profile card can be tailored precisely for a variety of discovery purposes, this analysis was a post-hoc task.

Although the primary purpose of CoLAB workshops is to empower workshop attendees to reveal and discover information, provide opportunities to share assets, and create new collaborations, this process worked well as a stakeholder analysis that can be used in any planning process. The CoLAB workshops are an efficient way to collect a sizeable amount of data in a short timeframe. The use of appreciative inquiry within the CoLAB workshop facilitates a safe environment and promotes agency for participants to realize asset-based collaborations and experience surprising and fruitful conversations.

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Endnotes

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2. De Farber, Hines, and Hood, *Collaborating with Strangers*.
3. Talk to Me Global, *It's Good to Talk*.
4. Bryson, *Strategic planning for public and nonprofit organizations*.
5. Cooperrider and Srivastva, "Appreciative inquiry in organizational life," 129–169.
6. Whitney and Cooperrider, "Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution," 276.
7. Kevany and MacMichael, "An appreciative inquiry into rural wellbeing," 34–51.
8. Snow, "Assets, innovation and academia," 33.
9. Snow, "Assets, innovation and academia."
10. Kevany and MacMichael, "An appreciative inquiry into rural wellbeing," 34–51.
11. Bryson, *Strategic Planning*, 138.
12. Bryson, *Strategic Planning*, 138.
13. Bryson, *Strategic Planning*, 138.
14. Nault, "Weasels and Honey Badgers," 17–28.
15. Strand, "Networking for Introverts," 28–29.
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