

Motivating Probable and Super Supporters—testing the facts in the field

The quantitative research provided a new framework for understanding the dynamics that drive, or limit, library funding in the United States. The research suggests that the U.S. voting population can be segmented into three tiers of library funding supporters: voters with significant barriers to support, probable funding supporters and supporters whose funding support is virtually guaranteed. The attitudes, perceptions and behaviors of the Probable Supporters and the Super Supporters are differentiated and identifiable. A thorough understanding of the attitudes, perceptions and behaviors that define these two groups, and those that separate these two groups, will be essential for creating an advocacy program capable of turning the tide of declining support for public library funding.

While Super Supporters and Probable Supporters share many common attributes, a comparison of these two groups highlights an intensity difference in the commitment to library support. Super Supporters do not question the need to provide ongoing or increased funding support for the library. Probable Supporters see the library as important, but important relative to a set of other local services.

Super Supporters have an emotional connection to the library that transcends the practical function of the library. They do not view the library as simply a place to learn, but instead, see the library as a place that transforms them; a place where they become the person they've always wanted to be. Probable Supporters share the belief that the library can change lives and see the library's role in bringing the community together but are more likely to see the library's role in practical, less transformational terms.

The following chart compares the market size, demographics, attitudes and behaviors of the Super Supporters and the Probable Supporters.

Comparing Super Supporters and Probable Supporters

Super Supporters



Statistics

- Comprise 7.1% of the population
- Comprise approximately 12% of *local* election voters
- 80% would *definitely* vote favorably for a library levy
- 14% would *probably* vote favorably for a library levy

Attitudinal/behavioral characteristics

- Demographically average
- Most likely to express their opinions vocally and at the ballot box
- Avid readers who have a long-standing relationship with the library
- Library was important to them as a child

Involvement in community

- They are the most involved and influential in their communities
- Recognize the library's importance to the community and children's education
- View the library as a place that can bring a community together

Emotional connection to the library

- Their emotional connection to the library transcends the practicality—it's a place where they can better themselves intellectually and become the person they've always wanted to be
- Believe the library maintains its relevance to people through all stages of life
- 81% value the 'passionate librarian' as a true advocate for lifelong learning
- Only the fire department (86%) outscored the public library (83%) in definite support of increased local taxes

In their own words...

"To live in a community without a library would be similar to living in a community without air."

Super Supporter

Probable Supporters



Statistics

- Comprise 32.3% of the population
- Comprise approximately 45% of *local* election voters
- 47% would *definitely* vote favorably for a library levy
- 39% would *probably* vote favorably for a library levy

Attitudinal/behavioral characteristics

- A few demographic tendencies, identifiable by segment
- Appreciate the library's contribution to the 'greater good'
- Recognize that the research/information the library provides is superior to the Web
- Believe the library is a key partner in a child's education

Involvement in community

- Feel the library is an important asset to the community
- Often use the library to attend meetings
- Some are local business owners who use the library as their office
- Many are parents of school-age children

Emotional connection to the library

- Believe the library can change the world by turning people into thinkers and achievers, rather than passive participants in life
- Not always personally connected to the library, but believe the library is a noble place; important and relevant to their community
- 66% value the 'passionate librarian' as a true advocate for lifelong learning
- The library ranks comparably with the fire department, police and schools in definite support of increased local taxes

In their own words...

"If the library closed, it would deny many people access to basic information and Internet, as well as shutting down a valuable tool for intensive research."

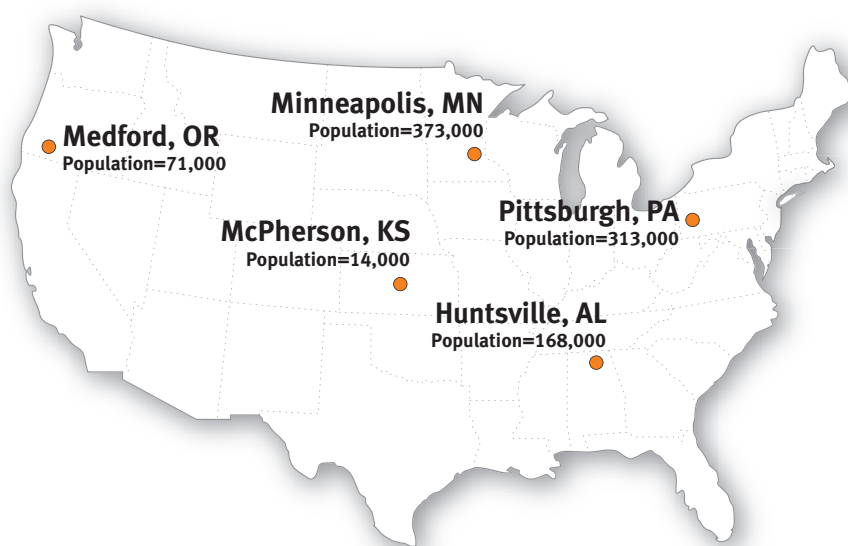
Probable Supporter

So, what most motivates Super Supporters to hold, and maintain, their solid and elevated level of support for the public library? The quantitative research indicates that it is not frequency of library visits or knowledge of library services. Can the factors and messages that drive this strong support be identified and then applied to increase the commitment of Probable Supporters? What factors can most influence both Super Supporters and Probable Supporters to increase their library funding support?

Testing the facts in the field

Qualitative round one

Phase two of the advocacy research project was aimed at learning more about the motivations and attitudes that guide, and separate, the library's Super Supporters and the library's Probable Supporters using a variety of qualitative field research techniques.



Ten focus groups of Super Supporters and Probable Supporters were conducted in April 2007 in Huntsville, Alabama; McPherson, Kansas; Medford, Oregon; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006

Ten focus groups composed of Super Supporters and Probable Supporters were conducted in five towns and cities across the United States. (Two focus groups were held in each location.) The field research explored a variety of attitudes, beliefs and motivations. The focus groups studied the perceived relevance of the library in this time of increased access to information via the Internet and more fully explored the motivations, and the barriers, that impact library funding support. The research explored reactions to 'life without the library' and aimed to better understand how perceptions of the library as a place for information, or a place for transformation, influence attitudes toward library funding.

Field research included the following three primary areas of exploration:

- **Early memories.** Past associations with the library were explored through a ‘first memory of the library’ exercise.
- **Current perceptions of the library.** Current associations with the library were explored through the development of individual collages.
- **Life without the library.** The importance of the library in the community was explored through futuring scenarios. Focus group participants were asked to envision their community if the library was permanently closed and to discuss the impact to themselves and to their community.

Early memories

The quantitative survey indicated that voters who perceive that the library has the ability to transform their lives and their communities are more likely to vote in favor of a library funding measure. During the focus groups, the Super Supporters and Probable Supporters spoke in more detail about how their perceptions of the library were formed.

Early memories, the library as a transformative force

There was a core emotional imprint of the library formed in early childhood that was shared by most or all participants. This early imprint formed the basis for the belief that the library is a transformative place.

While Super Supporters’ and Probable Supporters’ first memories of visiting the library were highly individual, there were important consistencies. Focus group participants typically attributed special significance to the person who accompanied them to the library, whether that person was a parent, grandparent, aunt or older sibling. Friends were also often present in early library memories.

The librarian, often remembered by name, also played a key role. Focus group participants noted that the librarian was a person who encouraged and guided, but who also let them find their own way and make their own decisions. The ability to select the books they wanted, not guided by an adult, was often noted as one of the first acts of independence in early childhood. A library card represented a rite of passage to adulthood and independence. A sense of individuality came with the ability to choose a topic and book for oneself. The responsibility of taking library books home made an impression on early memories. For some, this experience launched a love of reading and/or inspired an interest or even a career in a specific area. All shared a sense of the possibilities available at the library.

The library as a transformational place can be associated to this early act of responsibility and choice for many of the Super and Probable Supporters.

The library itself, the physical place, also made a strong and lasting impression on both Super Supporters and Probable Supporters. Memories associated with the

physical senses—sight, smell, sound, touch—were vibrant across most all focus group participants. The scale of the library building, both outside and inside, and the sheer volume of books sometimes inspired awe and sometimes ignited memories of the library as overwhelming. The need to be quiet in the library generated memories of responsibility, tension and respect.

Participants remembered a range of experiences at the library, including detailed memories of summer reading programs, puppet shows, story time and specific books they read or checked out. Reactions to these first library experiences were not always positive. Some focus group members recounted being intimidated by the size, seriousness and solemnity of the library. Others were excited by the fun, the adventure and the welcoming comfort of the children’s area. Many noted that their first library experiences introduced them to a sense of opportunity and fantasy that books can provide.

“The inside was warm; the chairs were the right height. You felt safe. It was quiet and happy. I had a favorite book I would check out over and over again. I remember being excited about being in the library, the potential there, the books and all the things you could look at. Being able to go into yourself and not worry about other people, but just be in your world and everyone else was okay with that.”

(Probable Supporter, Medford, Oregon)

“From outside, the building was like the White House—that’s what it reminded me of. Then going in and walking through these big doors. They seemed so big.”

(Super Supporter, Minneapolis, Minnesota)

“I had already started my love of reading. It was a good place to be. That would be the first time I ever got to check out a book. I was feeling so individual ... this is the one thing I’m doing for myself that no one else is involved in. My decision. It’s a big part of growing up; that opportunity to be independent.”

(Super Supporter, Huntsville, Alabama)

The emotional impact of early library experiences was strong for both Super Supporters and Probable Supporters. The lasting impressions of these early associations with their libraries and librarians were reflected in their current perceptions of the library.

Current perceptions of the library

Current associations and perceptions of the public library reveal that the imprint left by early memories of the library still affects a deeply held, lasting belief that the library is a transformative place where anyone can realize their potential.

Current beliefs and attitudes about the library were revealed through a set of projective exercises. The research was constructed to ensure that findings identified current and future-looking attitudes about the library, not simply past associations or top-of-mind perceptions.

The focus group discussions revealed that current associations with the library can be best described by reviewing perceptions and beliefs across three dimensions: the resources offered by the library, the context in which the resources are offered (i.e., the place) and the benefits of the resources.

The resources

Focus group participants described the library as a place of rich resources. Libraries are seen by both Super Supporters and Probable Supporters as a community service providing almost unlimited resources and inspiration, from access to computers, research support, books for story time, art and music. Participants viewed the library as a source of knowledge to explore and learn about almost any topic, from travel destinations to hobbies like gardening and music, to medical conditions and treatments.

The place

The library is seen by most focus group participants as a physical place that provides residents with an oasis and a sanctuary. The environment, which they described as quiet, calm and orderly, makes a great place for relaxation, a place to renew the body, mind and soul. The library provides an opportunity for mental escape from daily concerns or activities.

The public library is also seen as a neutral territory where anyone can feel safe. Probable Supporters and Super Supporters recognize that the library plays a role in building the social fabric of the community. Participants repeatedly note that the public library serves as a community gathering place. Families spend quality time reading together and participating in library programs. Community groups come together at the library. All walks of life meet and interact in the natural process of sharing the library resources and facilities.

The benefits

Participants perceived that the benefit of the library and its resources is a broadened world view. The library was described as a place that ‘opens up windows to the world,’ a place to gain perspectives on other cultures, places and people. For many participants, this broader view provides an ability to broaden their own personal perspectives. The benefits of library services include providing a sense of enlightenment—the ability to grow beyond the reaches of one’s day-to-day reality. Many described the ability to expand their horizons as the heart of the library’s value.

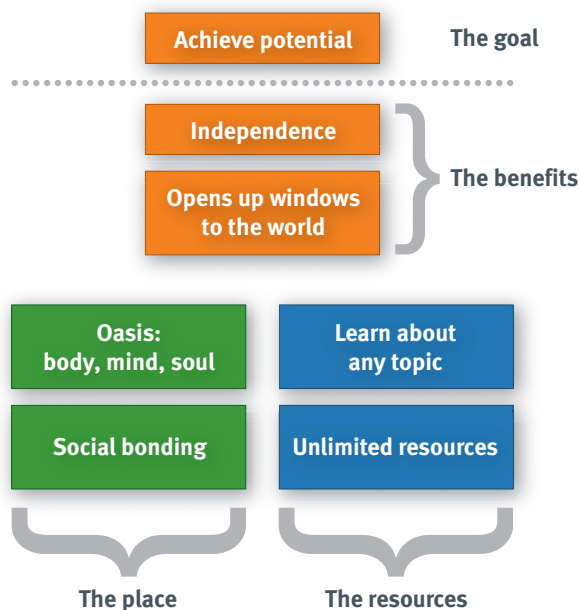
Independence to explore and develop individual beliefs, values and priorities without intervention or judgment was often described as another benefit derived from the library and its resources. Reflections on early childhood experiences of choosing books without following a curriculum or direction from an adult create the basis for the belief that the library offers independence. Participants noted that as they grew, the library provided exposure to topics or perspectives they had not previously considered or imagined.

Participants recounted how they discovered a passion for a topic that formed the start of a new career or hobby and ultimately helped them achieve their potential. They discussed how they were able to access resources otherwise unavailable to them that broadened their world view or helped them set their sights on a specific goal. They credited the library with helping form who they are and what they have achieved as adults. Many credited poignant interactions with their childhood librarians as impacting the direction of their lives. Some indicated that the library gave them the vision to do better and go further than they might otherwise have been destined for.

“People who’ve been exposed to libraries realize that there are a lot of other cultures and things out there that a small town of 4,000 doesn’t provide access to. The library is literally a window on the world.”

(Super Supporter, McPherson, Kansas)

Current associations with the library



Ten focus groups of Super Supporters and Probable Supporters were conducted in April 2007 in Huntsville, Alabama; McPherson, Kansas; Medford, Oregon; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
Source: *From Awareness to Funding*, OCLC, 2008

Life without the library

Super Supporters consistently expressed the transformational power of the library throughout the focus group exercises. Probable Supporters articulated these same beliefs and perceptions, but often with less intensity. Although both groups were active and engaged research participants, it was not until the discussion moved to an exercise that considered the loss of the library that their real passion for libraries surfaced.

Focus group participants were asked to consider a hypothetical loss of public libraries. Descriptions and attitudes about the impact on the community and members of that community allowed focus group participants to explore their associations with the library beyond their own personal experiences.

Participants were asked to imagine ten years into the future and think what their community would be like if the public library had closed. Participants imagined a range of consequences to their personal lives, to the lives of their children and to their communities if their library had shut down. The exercise revealed significant levels of passion from participants, and two important new findings:

- A belief, held by even the most ardent library supporters, that the library is losing relevance in today's world; and
- A realization that the Probable Supporters' passion for the library is latent and does not fully surface until they are made aware of the real possibility of a decline of library services.

This research activity surfaced two very distinct camps of thought about the future if the library were to close:

- Pragmatic acceptance of the emerging digital tide; and
- Passionate predictions of disaster.

Pragmatic acceptance of the emerging digital tide

The first group of Super and Probable Supporters were emotional about their relationship with the library but pragmatic when it came down to the possibility that the public library could be closed in their community, or ultimately cease to exist as an entity at all. Questions were raised about the relevance and necessity of the public library in an age of technology. During the course of discussion it surfaced that, even for the most passionate lovers of the library, the library is becoming less relevant. Access to information from other sources, often the Internet, is changing the relative importance of the library. Many assumed that usage of the public library is down as ‘other’ people are increasingly turning to the Internet for information.

Visits to U.S. public libraries increased 19% from 2000 to 2005.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]

Even when focus group members did not see a decline in relevance of the public library in their own lives, they perceived that their children or their grandchildren were using the library and its resources less. There was a sense that as the availability of information in digital form increases, the public library would become less and less necessary. They wondered if, as the digital world continues to evolve, the library might ultimately evolve to become a purely virtual experience.

The pragmatic library supporters were disappointed, but ultimately comfortable, with the fact that the public library could potentially be replaced by other sources of information.

A view of the library as an ‘institution’ of ‘information’ more important to residents in the ‘past’ than into the ‘future’ was at the heart of the relevancy question for this group of library supporters.

“I don’t think the library means the same to my children or grandchildren as it did to me. My son goes on the Internet and gets all the information that he wants. A library was a different time ... a slower pace.”

(Probable Supporter, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

“Something in my mind just thought, ‘Will that become a thing of the past?’ With the availability of the Internet, will they just go to an Internet café that has nice seating and it will take the place of the library because they will be connected. Kids don’t seem to mind that. It scares me.”

(Probable Supporter, Minneapolis, Minnesota)

Passionate predictions of disaster

The second group of supporters had a very different and emotional point of view. For the most passionate library supporters in the focus groups, life without the library was described as a series of losses that would create a domino effect, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the residential community as we now know it. The group cited many specific losses that would lead to weaker communities if libraries closed.

They believed that children would be most adversely affected by the closing of the library and participants imagined a community of less-educated youth. This fiercely passionate group feared that without a public library, children would never acquire a love of reading or the sense of adventure that provides a broadened world perspective. Older children would lose a valuable research resource that the school system would be unable to replicate.

This group was not only concerned about the loss of educational opportunities to children if the public library closes but to all community residents. Focus group members from smaller communities were particularly concerned and felt that their entire communities would begin to slip into what they described as a community with a lower IQ. They reasoned that a less-educated population is less intelligent and that community intellect would decrease over time.

The loss of the community gathering place or social center was also cited as a critical loss if the library were to close. The result, they feared, would be an increase in isolation within their communities. Participants perceived that a world without the library would suffer from a reduction in social interaction, a trend they attributed to the rise in use of the Internet. Focus group members articulated concerns that their community would lose a safe, neutral and open meeting place if the library were closed. This loss would lead to a reduction in the community's moral and social values. The elderly and the youth would be particularly impacted. Many imagined that the loss of the library would result in an increase in crime.

“If they close off the libraries, you don’t have to worry about a Brain Drain. You’ll close off the mental capabilities of the people.”

(Super Supporter, McPherson, Kansas)

“The library shows that a town is better off. That hurts the town’s image ... that we don’t care about how much we know or the children if we let the library close.”

(Super Supporter, McPherson, Kansas)

“I have this picture of everyone on their computers at home alone. There is a real lack in community. That’s very scary.”

(Probable Supporter, Medford, Oregon)

These library supporters also envisioned that the divide between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ would widen without a library. The loss of universal access to the library’s resources would create an even greater disadvantage for those without money to

purchase information elsewhere. Participants were especially concerned about reduced access to the Internet, a resource they felt is crucial for success in today's world.

Ultimately, the group projected, the fabric of their communities would disintegrate because the heart of the community, the library, would be gone. Discussion often followed that this loss would lead to a decline of their community's relative stature to other towns and cities with a library. "Who would want to live in a place without a public library?" "Are we backwoods?"

Pragmatically, this group was also convinced that the domino effects that would result from the closing of the library would eventually result in a negative economic impact to their community.

"It would hurt most as a separating factor. Lots of people don't have home computers. It would be a real disadvantage to have anything less than wealthy parents. There would be a dumbing down for the lower class."

(Super Supporter, Minneapolis, Minnesota)

"I'm suspicious of a community that won't fund intellectual or cultural pursuits."

(Probable Supporter, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

The belief that closing the library would impact everyone in a community, or just certain residents of a community, varied between smaller communities and large metro areas. In smaller towns and rural areas, participants focused more on the 'we' of their community. They believed the potential negative consequences of closing the library would be shared by all, their neighbors and friends, and that the reputation of the entire community would be diminished. In large metro areas, participants were more tuned into concerns about losses to 'others' in their community than themselves. The loss of the library would impact the children, the elderly and the 'have nots.' They typically stopped short of imagining that the entire community would fall apart. Their top community-wide concerns were the potential negative impact on children and the danger of increased crime.

Would an alternative to the library emerge? The focus group participants were not consistent on this view. In certain geographies, the focus group members could not envision an alternative. In other geographies, in Minneapolis and Pittsburgh particularly, residents assumed that ultimately the lost benefits provided by the library would be replaced by new services that would evolve.

The library's relevance was questioned

A belief that the library may no longer be relevant to many residents was expressed in the field research. There was a fear, even among the greatest library supporters, that the library's place in the community is becoming more nostalgic than essential. Concern about the library's relevance was expressed across a range of perceptions about the library.

Information

Institution

Nice to have

Past

Altruism for others

Information: The library is one of many sources of information. It could potentially be replaced by a combination of bookstores, schools, coffee shops and the Internet.

Institution: The library is an institution sometimes associated with an out-of-date building, aged materials and limited accessibility. (The library has limited hours, the Internet is available 24/7.)

Nice to have: Availability of so many other options for information and learning make the library a 'nice to have' service, rather than a necessity.

Past: The library is an important part of supporters' lives, but they question whether it is still relevant for their children and grandchildren.

Altruism for others: The library is less important to them, but it is important for 'other people' in the community.

Supporters' love for the library is latent

Even for some of the most committed library supporters, the library is becoming less relevant.

The field research findings from the ten focus groups reinforced and amplified what was discovered about Super Supporters and Probable Supporters during the quantitative research. Both Super Supporters and Probable Supporters appreciate the library's contribution to the greater good. They believe that a strong library is good for them and good for their communities. Their core emotional imprint of the library was formed in early childhood and that imprint continues to reinforce their belief that the library offers a rich set of resources and services. It is a place where people can realize their potential.

While Super Supporters and Probable Supporters share many characteristics, the level of intensity of support divides them. Super Supporters are proactive in articulating their support of libraries. Probable Supporters hold a shared belief in the power of the library, but their views are not top-of-mind. Their love of the library is latent and must be activated through conversation and awareness.

The qualitative research revealed another important finding: even for some of the most committed library supporters, the library is becoming less relevant. Many supporters are concerned that the library is being used less and will be even less important for their children and their grandchildren. As vital as the library was, and is, for Probable Supporters and Super Supporters, they know that the library must continue to keep pace. The library cannot be allowed to be seen as an institution of the past. It must be viewed as a vital place for community and personal transformation.

There is a core group of supporters whose 'latent passion' for the library is powerful, once ignited. This group was dismayed at the thought of the loss of the local public library and its members were vocal about their fears of what society would become should that eventuality come to pass. The question is whether this group can be moved to action.

