

## Library Advocacy: Ecosystem Concepts Can Provide a Strong Foundation for Library Advocacy

by Jennifer Alvino Wood

It's clear from the last few years that we need more tools in our toolbox to fight adverse legislation. Ecosystem work can positively affect library or association advocacy by helping groups speak with one voice. One voice is the overarching concept of ecosystem work. When libraries work together, across library types and with other invested stakeholders, and speak with one voice, advocacy messages are stronger.

The word ecosystem is typically applied to environmental concepts. The work centers around how different environments are interconnected and how they work together to make up the earth and its various climates and habitats. According to the Merriam-Webster definition, ecosystems are “the complex of a community of organisms and its environment functioning as an ecological unit.”<sup>1</sup> But, what does it look like to apply this term to other networks and what are the benefits? How do ecosystem concepts apply to libraries and what are the outcomes?

To begin, we need to define what a library ecosystem is. According to the ALA Ecosystem Initiative,

A library ecosystem is the interconnected network of all types of libraries, library workers, volunteers, and associations that provide and facilitate library services for community members; families; K-20 learners; college and university communities; local,

state and federal legislatures and government offices; businesses; nonprofits; and other organizations with specific information needs. A patron of one library is the potential patron of any other library at a different time of life or location. No library exists independent of the library ecosystem. When we stand together in mutual support using common messaging themes that demonstrate this interconnectedness, every library is stronger.<sup>2</sup>

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the library ecosystem.

Former American Library Association (ALA) President, Jim Rettig, coined the ecosystem term for libraries in 2008 and shared that “If one or part of the library system is threatened or suffers, the entire system is threatened and suffers.”<sup>3</sup> However, if different library types come together when they are facing controversial issues or community support is waning, the ecosystem can greatly benefit these situations with combined expertise and experience. ALA first began working on the ecosystem concept as it applies to libraries in 2015 when a need arose to support school library inclusion in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for funding. ALA hosted a meeting with

librarians from across the country, from all types of libraries, to discuss issues that they held in common and that needed support and advocacy. Attendees were sent home with action steps to continue talking to each other and to other stakeholders in their state in the hopes that they would continue working together. Out of this meeting and the calls for support for school libraries, a group began working on a toolkit. ALA's *One Voice: Building a Strong Library Ecosystem* toolkit provides guidance for librarians and library supporters from all types of libraries, associations, and other groups on working together to build an advocacy network.

Maine is fortunate to have a lot of public support for libraries and the work that libraries and librarians do. However, there has been some recent adverse legislation from copycat bills like LD 123 (An Act to Eliminate the Educational Purposes Exception to the Prohibition on the Dissemination of Obscene Matter to Minors) and LD 1008 (An Act to Establish a Rating System for Books in School Libraries). Even though detrimental bills have been defeated in the past, over the last few years, the number of bills adverse to libraries has increased and proponents of the bills have become more aggressive in their tone.

Maine's library leaders realized we needed a new strategy to fight and defeat the most recent bills. Working with a library advocacy group, leaders of Maine Library Association (MLA) and Maine Association of School Librarians (MASL) began meeting to discuss the adverse bills and how they can work together to defeat them. MLA and MASL were quite successful in their work and were joined by several other

organizations as they formed a strong coalition of defenders of library core values. However, the work isn't done. The next wave of adverse legislation is surely on the horizon. These groups must continue to work together following the One Voice toolkit guidance to ensure future success.

The toolkit outlines these areas where library groups can continue working together and gives examples of what to do. According to the ALA's *One Voice: A Continuum for Stronger Library Ecosystems* (ALA n.d.), the four pillars of the work are

- Leadership—"building a state-wide library ecosystem is dependent upon an awareness of and active collaboration with various and diverse library partners. Leadership must facilitate connections across library types as the multiplicity of library types is the ecosystem. Leadership refers to the expertise of representatives from participating groups, intentionality around building an inclusive model for participation, and the skills participants offer in communication and collaboration towards a sustainable ecosystem effort" (n.d.: 4).
- Communication—"clear, intentional sharing both internally and across participating organizations. Communication builds a unified voice and advances a shared advocacy and legislative agenda that reflects the goals of diverse stakeholders" (n.d.: 6).
- Collaboration—"a unified advocacy and legislative agenda and consistent messaging requires careful and consistent coordination among all participants that reflects the overlapping needs of all the contributing organizations" (n.d.: 9).

- Sustainability—"the ecosystem requires equitable access to participation as well as ongoing attention to simple and essential aspects of teamwork" (n.d.: 12).

Several states are exploring and creating a library ecosystem. Each state has a different makeup for their group and how their stakeholders work together. Some state associations have public, academic, and school librarians under one association. Others like Maine have separate associations for each library type. Each pillar within the toolkit has actionable steps that the ecosystem can undertake. Over the last two years, Maine librarians have explored ways that we can continue to work together so we are prepared for future crises. Our past successes are examples of the great teamwork across library types. We had shared messaging, great communication, and stood together in opposition to legislation that we knew would negatively affect all libraries and librarians in the state. Some other ways we've worked together are creating a power map of library supporters that we can reach out to when needed. We've also put together a contact list and explored liaison positions on association boards.

Conversations continue within MLA as to how the ecosystem work will continue. We know that this work can positively affect statewide advocacy efforts. We now need to focus on how we sustain the group and continue breaking down silos and working together.

## NOTES

- 1 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-Webster.com/>
- 2 American Library Association, "ALA Ecosystem Initiative," <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/ala-ecosystem-initiative>
- 3 Jim Rettig, "Library Ecosystem at Work," American Library Association, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230706124632/www.ala.org/tools/research/librariesmatter/additup/library-ecosystem>.

## REFERENCES

ALA (American Library Association). n.d. *One Voice: A Continuum for Stronger Library Ecosystems*. <https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/advocacy/content/stateandlocal/Ecosystem/Library%20Eco%20Continuum%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

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