

Executive Summary

In today's technology-driven world, meaningful participation in the marketplace of ideas is built on reliable and affordable broadband internet access, digital resources, and above all, the digital literacy skills to employ those tools for opportunity and personal empowerment. Texas libraries are often a community's first introduction to the Internet, and library staff play a central and consistent role augmenting Texans' digital skills.

At their core, libraries are instruments for learning and equipping people with information resources and technologies they need. In addition to providing free access to the internet and devices, libraries excel at delivering educational options. Texas libraries are a trusted community partner dedicated to the well-being and vitality of those they serve.

At a time when almost 60% of Texans experience some sort of digital distress, libraries hold a unique and powerful role in helping to bridge the digital divide.¹ They can undertake this work through strategic activities to support people and communities, especially those most in need, in having access to information technologies and possessing the capacity to use them. Digital literacy skills are essential for individuals to possess and communities to embody.

Over the last two years, national and state policy makers have worked aggressively to implement legislation to support the work of increasing digital access. These stated priorities mirror the longstanding work of libraries and align with The Texas State Library and Archive Commission's (TSLAC's) strategic goals. Through support from the Institute for Museum and Library Services from funds provided through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, TSLAC sponsored this research into the state of digital literacy training in Texas public libraries.

This report that follows, **Texas Public Libraries: Serving Communities to Enhance Digital Literacy**, describes the substantial primary data that was collected from main and branch (or neighborhood) libraries in Texas. In-depth interviews were conducted with 51 librarians, and two statewide surveys of library directors and branch managers obtained information from 171 library directors and 80 branch managers. In total, more than 300 librarians participated.

¹ Roberto Gallardo and Benjamin St. Germain, "Digital Distress: What Is It? – Purdue Center for Regional Development," Purdue Center for Regional Development – Purdue Center for Regional Development, April 20, 2022, <https://pcrd.purdue.edu/digital-distress-what-is-it/>.

This comprehensive research effort found that most Texas public libraries are providing needed digital literacy training that should improve the ability of their patrons to become familiar with and thrive in a digital world. This study has further documented successful digital literacy training initiatives throughout the state. Prudent new investments and programming are recommended to equip additional citizens with the tools to pursue current and future digital employment, health, educational, and social opportunities available in Texas.

The outcome of these research goals and excerpts from their findings appear below; the full report includes detailed research methodology, substantial quantitative data, and profiles and case studies of individual libraries.

Research Goals and Findings

Goals 1 and 2: Assess the current practices of Texas public libraries in offering digital literacy training, services, and assistance; determine how current practices in digital literacy training and services differ by size of populations served.

Findings: One-on-one assistance at main and branch libraries is the most common form of digital literacy training, far surpassing onsite and online class offerings. Large proportions of main libraries and branch libraries currently help patrons with basic computer skills, email and chat, office productivity, searching the internet, and with user-owned devices. Smaller numbers assist with social media, online safety, and in languages other than English. Few public libraries are offering classes or one-on-one assistance on advanced content subjects.

Goal 3: Identify if there are particular segments of residents who are seeking assistance and if there are common requests about assistance.

Findings: Older adults/senior citizens are the largest demographic group seeking digital assistance followed by patrons with lower incomes, adults in general, second language learners, and patrons with job-related requests.

Goal 4: Assess the barriers to, and necessary resources for, expanded training and support of community digital literacy.

Findings: Approximately two-thirds of Texas librarians believe there are unmet digital literacy needs. Twenty to 30 percent of librarians say they do not know if such needs exist, although more than half of the librarians in smaller communities say they do not know. The most pressing needs according to library directors were for more trainers, classes, and methods to deal with the low computer skills within their community. Three other needs were: digital literacy materials in other languages, space to conduct training, and spaces to access free wi-fi and computers.

Goal 5: Identify collaborations with community partners, specifically schools, institutions of higher education, local workforce development boards, chambers of commerce, and non-profit groups, both locally and nationally.

Findings: The majority of main library partnerships are with state agencies such as the Texas Workforce

Solutions boards of the Texas Workforce Commission. About 20 percent of main and branch libraries currently have partnerships of various kinds.

Goal 6: Compare current practices of Texas public libraries with libraries nationally

Findings: Fewer Texas libraries are providing digital literacy training than libraries elsewhere in the United States: roughly 84 percent of Texas libraries versus 88 percent of libraries in other states. Texas libraries and U.S. libraries also were compared by size or populations served. Small Texas libraries provide less training overall than small libraries in other states. Texas medium-sized libraries also provide less training than medium-sized U.S. libraries. Large Texas libraries surpass the training levels of U.S. city libraries in numerous comparisons.

Goal 7: Compare findings of Texas main public libraries with those from branch libraries.

Findings: Branch libraries uniformly provide more of each type of training and assistance than do main libraries. For example, every branch library offered some type of digital literacy assistance, while 15% of main libraries currently do not. These libraries tend to be smaller, with more than one-fifth of Texas smallest libraries, those serving population of fewer than 5,000 residents, currently not offering any type of digital literacy assistance.

Goal 8: Develop case profiles and case studies of best practices that could assist Texas librarians in implementing more effective and efficient digital literacy services and assistance.

Findings: To illustrate the diversity and richness of the roles public libraries have in facilitating digital literacy within their communities, more than 30 case studies and case profiles were developed. Some illustrate how libraries have helped with specific types of training and assistance. Others show how libraries have helped their patrons with online assistance for job seeking, job training, and workforce development. Several describe services and assistance for specific types of patrons such as older adults and teens. These case profiles may be viewed as best practices and worthy of adoption by other public libraries.

Goal 9: Develop an estimate for public library digital literacy costs.

Findings: Based on the responses to the two statewide surveys and a database about public library expenditures, a preliminary estimate of annual costs was developed. Although an exploratory analysis, in fiscal year 2021, the range for total digital literacy training costs by Texas public libraries was estimated to be between \$70 million and \$90 million.

These findings serve as the foundation of recommendations for policy or administrative actions. These recommended actions are needed to address critical issues confronting Texas library staff who want to augment their patrons' digital literacy knowledge and skills. With a few exceptions, implementing these recommendations will require additional resources for implementation.

Recommended Actions at the State and Local Levels

Recommendations included in the report focus on potential actions at the state and local levels:

- Initiate new state grant programs to support digital literacy that could focus on one or more of the following areas: sharing best practices; adding capacity for one-on-one assistance; a facilitated peer-to-peer program between small and large libraries; assistance for small libraries; effective communication between branch managers via networking and

- professional development; and encouraging innovation through piloting new approaches and sustaining effective programming.
- Increase outreach and awareness of existing tools and curriculums for teaching digital literacy, such as promoting the TSLAC Digital Literacy toolkit, evaluating pre-existing digital literacy curriculums, and promoting best practices from Texas libraries.
 - Develop new programming or expand activities that focus on older adults and seniors.
 - Identify, procure, or develop advanced digital literacy training modules.

Areas that Require Additional Research and Evaluation

Throughout the research process, several issues were identified that require additional research and evaluation:

- Helping librarians assess individual patron digital literacy needs—TSLAC may wish to review periodically various diagnostic tools that could be used by librarians.
- Gathering statewide data on the digital skills of Texas residents—a statewide survey of Texas residents should be conducted to better assess patron needs, allow comparisons to other states, and provide a baseline for future program evaluations.
- Improving attendance for digital literacy classes—more attention should be devoted to identifying successful methods for improving and achieving attendance goals.
- Determine appropriate metrics for equipment option programs—an analysis is needed to summarize previous studies and provide guidance for Texas librarians about the value and the operational pros and cons of the various equipment option approaches.
- Further work should be performed on cost estimates—systematic, reliable, and objective data on the costs of digital literacy training and services are lacking.

This report was made possible by funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Findings and recommendations from this report are presented to the Texas State Library and Archives Commission to help with its roadmap for future efforts. The report may contribute in some small way to helping TSLAC show the librarians of Texas what are the best measurements and practices in building full digital access, so that all Texans are fully participating citizens in the 21st century.