PLA President's Report
Melanie Huggins, 2021–2022

The Public Library Association (PLA) envisions a future where public libraries serve at the intersection of vibrant communities and a strong democracy. Our association continues to work to strengthen public libraries and their contribution to communities by staying dedicated to our strategic goals of organizational excellence, transformation, leadership, advocacy and awareness, and equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice.

As the PLA board and staff look back on another busy year, we continue to be in awe of public libraries' ability to respond to their communities' evolving needs with speed, compassion, and creativity. Whether navigating long-term COVID-related concerns like health, safety, and equity of access, or fighting to protect the freedom to read during a massive increase in unpopular, politically-motivated book bans, public library professionals continue to manage an ever-expanding range of complex and sensitive challenges with professionalism and resilience.

Public libraries have met each successive challenge with a renewed commitment to some of our most deeply held values, including equitable access to information and services, diversity, intellectual freedom, and lifelong learning. PLA was able to highlight these accomplishments when hosting the first major in-person public library event since the pandemic—the PLA 2022 Conference. As we look ahead to navigating these uncertain times, we are hopeful that, together with the American Library Association (ALA), we will continue to grow and shape possibility for our members and the communities they serve.

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Organizational Excellence

PLA 2022 Election

In April, the PLA membership elected Sonia Alcántara-Antoine, director of the Baltimore County (Md.) Public Library, to the office of 2022–2023 PLA president. Alcántara-Antoine will serve a three-year term beginning this June. Alcántara-Antoine has served extensively in PLA, the ALA, and the Urban Libraries Council (ULC). Highlights include serving as a coach for PLA's Leadership Academy, as a member of PLA's National Conference Program Subcommittee, as an ALA Councilor-at-Large, and as a member of ULC's Antiracism and Digital Equity action teams. She also has served proudly in the Maryland Library Association and Virginia Library Association. Also elected to the PLA board, as directors-at-large, were Michael Colford, director of library services of the Boston (Ma.) Public Library, and Mary Ellen Icaza, CEO/executive director of the Stark Library (Canton, Ohio). PLA thanks all the candidates who stood for election, as well as all the members who voted. Special thanks to the 2022 Nominating Committee, chaired by Ramiro Salazar, for an outstanding slate of candidates.

EDISJ Exercises for PLA Board

This year, the PLA board implemented a new process for prioritizing equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice (EDISJ). PLA president-elect Dr. Maria Taesil Hudson McCauley has been leading the PLA board in EDISJ exercises at the beginning of each meeting. These exercises are designed to evoke thoughtful reflection and ideas sharing related to EDISJ work in public libraries, putting EDISJ at the forefront of the discussion and the minds of board members. Example exercises include: Volunteering to read the EDISJ goal and objectives from PLA's Strategic Plan; In thinking about our EDISJ commitment, where would you like more intention placed? What is a related wish?

PLA Staff

In 2021, PLA welcomed Mahogany Meeks as a full-time program coordinator dedicated to PLA's growing research capabilities and data-driven librarianship efforts. Meeks' hiring is an important step toward the association's planned expansion of this vital work capturing and interpreting national public library data. In 2022, PLA opened two additional coordinator-level positions, a communications associate position and program coordinator for continuing education, as well as two program manager-level positions. Despite these exciting additions, the PLA team faced a second consecutive year with critical positions unfilled, due to staff turnover and an ALA hiring freeze affecting most positions.

Transformation

Digital Literacy

In 2021, PLA and AT&T joined forces to improve digital literacy and promote broadband adoption among families and communities. Through the collaboration, PLA and AT&T developed a curated collection of courses intended to support those newly connected to the internet as they navigate home schooling, distance learning, remote employment, and other essential activities affected by the pandemic.

Based on content from PLA's DigitalLearn.org training site, digital literacy courses were updated to address searching, navigating a website, using passwords, and avoiding scams. New content was also created to focus on using mobile devices and video conferencing. The online courses and training materials were launched in March 2022 and are available to everyone. The courses are being offered in person at public libraries, community centers, AT&T Connected Learning Centers, and other learning spaces. All courses and related materials are available in English and Spanish.

Following the release of the new courses, PLA launched the PLA Digital Literacy Workshop Incentive, supported by AT&T, which provides up to $7,000 worth of funding to public libraries to conduct digital literacy training in their communities. Applications closed June 10, 2022, and recipients will be selected by PLA in August.

Data-driven Librarianship

In alignment with ALA's pivot strategy of Data, Research, and Design, PLA has partnered with the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) to launch Benchmark: Library Metrics and Trends, the newest tool for data-driven planning and advocacy in libraries. Benchmark provides libraries with data visualizations that allow them to compare their inputs and outputs to peer and nationwide data, filling a gap in U.S. libraries' ability to understand their own performance as it relates to their peers. PLA will also use Benchmark to release annual surveys on a rotating roster of topics, replacing the Public Library Data Service (PLDS) surveys, reducing redundancy in data collection, and capturing information that complements the annual Public Libraries Survey (PLS).

All public libraries have free access to Benchmark that allows them to perform key functions, including completing surveys, viewing prior survey responses, and viewing summary pages with select data metrics and visualizations. Libraries may also subscribe to Benchmark to access additional features, such as a custom report builder that includes historic metrics dating back to 2002. Subscription pricing, an FAQ, and an on-demand webinar that reviews how Benchmark can support your library in everyday decision making is available on the PLA website.

The first survey conducted through Benchmark was the 2021 Public Library and Staff Diversity Survey. The survey collected data about staff salaries and hours, roles within the library, staff representation, hiring and retention strategies, and equity, diversity, and inclusion goals and activities. The results, which will be published later in 2022, will provide nationally representative data to inform and engage elected officials, the media, and funders to increase awareness of and support for library workers. They will also help PLA respond to requests for up-to-date, nationally-valid data about staffing and diversity from public library staff.

Prior to launching Benchmark, PLA published a summary report on findings from the 2020 Public Library Technology Survey. The survey gathered information from public library directors at the administrative entity level about their libraries' public access technology infrastructure, technology-related programming, and technology-related funding streams. While significant differences exist among city, suburban, and town/rural libraries, survey results show how libraries of all sizes continue to serve as hubs for digital equity in their communities. Key findings are available in the full survey report summary. A companion snapshot of public library technology lending provides the most recent and representative data related to U.S. public library circulation of technology to library patrons. Data from the 2020 survey has also been added to the Benchmark portal.

Health insurance education and outreach

2021 marked the third year during which PLA partnered with Community Catalyst and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to help libraries inform their communities about health insurance enrollment under the Affordable Care Act. In response to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, President Biden issued an Executive order opening a new COVID Special Enrollment Period (SEP) for individuals and families for federal Marketplace coverage with an additional three month extension. PLA's work in 2021 focused on helping libraries promote the COVID-19 SEP for federal marketplace coverage and promoting Medicaid all year long.

Conferences and Professional Development

PLA 2022 Conference

Due to ongoing health and safety concerns relating to the spread of COVID-19, 2021 brought continued uncertainty regarding in-person gatherings, especially large events like professional conferences. With the PLA 2022 Conference on the horizon, the PLA staff worked closely with its board to determine the best way to move forward with the information available. Together, staff and elected leaders decided to forge ahead with in-person and virtual options for its national conference, set to be the first major in-person library conference since 2020.

The PLA 2022 Conference was held March 23–25 in Portland, OR, and convened more than 6,000 library professionals in person and virtually. As a precaution against COVID-19, proof of vaccination or negative test before was required to participate in the in-person conference. With

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more than 100 programs, the conference highlighted and shared innovative and responsive best practices for public library programs and services that addressed evolving community needs—ranging from managing censorship attempts to enabling access to telehealth, entrepreneurship, and other vital resources for diverse communities.

The event provided an economic boost to Portland's economy, as attendees picked up more than 8,760 total guestroom nights and took advantage of local businesses, restaurants, and bars. According to Travel Portland, the event provided substantial revenue to Portland businesses, with an economic impact of an estimated $4.4 million in revenue.

The conference brought back its popular career center, which offered attendees one-on-one appointments for résumé review, interview coaching, and mentoring. It also hosted a career fair for job seekers and hiring libraries. A collaboration between PLA and My People's Market offered attendees the unique opportunity to shop locally within the exhibits hall and support Portland business owners of color. The beloved How-To Stage taught attendees new skills such as how to play the ukulele and how to be an ally.

The general session speakers drew in a packed auditorium and featured: *New York Times* best-selling author, podcast host, and professional troublemaker Luvvie Ajayi Jones; author and lawyer Brittany K. Barnett; *Jeopardy!* champion Amy Schneider; and actor, writer, producer, and former associate director of the White House Office of Public Engagement Kal Penn. Additional authors and audiobook narrators included Clothilde Ewing, Willy Vlautin, Brian Selznick, Jordan Ifueko, Sonia Manzano, and Alex Gino.

The next national conference will take place April 3–6, 2024, in Columbus, OH. The PLA 2022 Virtual Conference broke registration records with over 1,000 public library professionals signing up. PLA doubled the amount of programming and special events provided previously, but staff will continue to explore expanding the virtual conference to accommodate the needs of this virtual growing audience.

ALA Annual Conference

Through its call for proposals process, PLA's Annual Conference 2022 Program Subcommittee selected 14 educational sessions for presentation at the 2022 ALA Annual Conference. PLA resumed its annual Members Welcome Breakfast, a complementary event for PLA members to network, socialize, and hear from White House Correspondent April Ryan.

Advancing Family Engagement in Libraries

Based on PLA's Family Engagement framework, Advancing Family Engagement in Libraries is an eight-session series that enables public library professionals to expand their current family engagement programming, refine related strategies, and plan for new programs and services. Each session is led by experienced facilitators from the PLA Committee on Family Engagement. During the series, participants engage in small-group work and facilitated discussions with their

peers, complete work outside of virtual sessions, and submit a final project for their library. Two cohorts participated in this series in 2021; sessions for the second cohort concluded in March 2022, reaching 100 learners from 56 libraries. PLA will continue to assess how to utilize the resources and training materials developed for this series in future continuing education offerings.

PLA webinars and workforce development series

PLA continued to build on its established success with online learning this year. Five webinars selected by member reviewers from proposal submissions reached nearly 500 participants, while an additional 18 free webinars on PLA priority topics attracted over 6,000 participants.

PLA also partnered with Libswork, a national networking group on workforce and small business development in libraries, to host the Public Libraries: Partners in Workforce Development six-part webinar series. This free series provided practical tools and resources for libraries to plan, deliver, partner, and advocate for workforce development services to advance equitable economic opportunity. Topics covered included: Boosting Youth Workforce Readiness; Bridging Workers' Digital Skills Gaps through Libraries; Supporting Patrons to Obtain In-Demand Credentials That Boost Employability and Career Mobility; Strengthen Patron Workforce Opportunities with Labor Market Information; Partnering to Meet Community Workforce Needs; and Supporting Formerly Incarcerated Individuals with a Fresh Start @ Your Library.

Advocacy and Awareness

Defending the freedom to read

In response to 2021's dramatic increase in book challenges in libraries, the PLA board joined with ALA's executive board and the boards of directors for ALA's seven other divisions to release a joint statement. The statement condemns coordinated attempts at censorship and removal of library materials that focus on the experiences of, or are written by, LGBTQIA+, Black, or other BIPOC individuals. ALA and its divisions also condemn attempts at intimidation and threats targeting library workers, educators, and board members, and commit to continuing to defend the constitutional rights of all individuals of all ages to use the resources and services of libraries.

In early March 2022, PLA hosted a virtual town hall, Facing the Challenge: Intellectual Freedom in Libraries, which drew over 1,400 registrants. During this event, speakers participated in facilitated conversations that explored effective responses to the coordinated attempts at censorship currently sweeping the nation.

At the PLA 2022 Conference, PLA hosted an Intellectual Freedom Forum, which offered attendees the opportunity to share resources and build connections in support of intellectual freedom. Sessions included "Ask a Lawyer," peer-sharing roundtable discussions, and one-on-

one consultation appointments with staff from ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom. The Virtual Conference audience had the option to participate in a live virtual town hall program, Standing Up for Intellectual Freedom, or view the recording of Facing the Challenge: Intellectual Freedom in Libraries.

Four public librarian honorees win I Love My Librarian Award

In January, ALA announced the 10 winners of this year's I Love My Librarian Award, nominated by patrons for their expertise, dedication, and profound impact in their communities. Out of more than 1,300 nominations, this year's public librarian honorees included: 1) Yuliana Aceves, community programming librarian, Arlington (TX) Public Library; 2) Renee Greenlee, children and family services librarian, Marion (IA) Public Library; 3) John Paul Mahofski, correctional librarian, Eastern Correctional Institution in Westover, MD; and 4) Tammi Moe, director, Octavia Fellin Public Library in Gallup, NM. Honorees receive a $5,000 cash prize, a $750 donation to their library, and complimentary registration to ALA's 2022 LibLearnX.

Emergency Connectivity Fund

Established as part of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) program offers $7.17 billion in funding for libraries to purchase connected devices and broadband internet connections for off-site use by patrons, students, teachers, and staff who otherwise lack internet access. The ECF presents an unprecedented funding opportunity for libraries to expand broadband equity to those who need it most beyond the confines of library walls.

The first round of applications for ECF funding were accepted June 29–August 13, 2021. In collaboration with PLA, ALA promoted this opportunity and created an ECF webpage with a toolkit including five scenarios with step-by-step guidance modeled on examples collected from libraries across the country.

ALA led library advocacy efforts for emergency funding as part of the American Rescue Plan Act, which includes the ECF and other library-eligible funding opportunities. During the ECF design process, ALA urged the FCC to develop ECF program rules that protect library patron privacy and minimize barriers to library participation. PLA is proud of these advocacy successes and has urged its members to apply for ECF funding in 2022.

Publications and Media

Publications from PLA's Social Worker Task Force

In early 2022, ALA Editions, in collaboration with PLA, published *A Trauma-Informed Framework for Supporting Patrons: The PLA Workbook of Best Practices*. This workbook was written by PLA's Social Worker Task Force and provides a collection of powerful tools to add to any public library's customer service toolbox. It includes prompts, exercises, and best practices that shed light on how trauma can affect people, helping libraries build confidence in their ability to support patrons. In the Public Libraries Online article, "Guidance for Social Work Positions at the Library," task force members share considerations that public library systems should review before determining if a social work program could be a good fit for the library and community.

Research-based strategic planning support

In September, PLA released a new book, *Strategic Planning for Public Libraries*, addressing the key areas of strategic planning that public library professionals care about most. This instructional publication provides a framework that libraries of all sizes can use as a basis for their strategic planning. The content is supported by research conducted across more than 200 public library professionals and in-depth interviews with more than 20 library directors and leaders throughout the country. *Strategic Planning for Public Libraries* is available as an eBook or print/eBook bundle. Each purchase also comes with downloadable, supplemental materials, including reusable templates, worksheets, and real-life examples to help guide the reader through the strategic planning process.

Tackling issues in the media

PLA president Melanie Huggins has been busy this year with press and media requests to talk about key issues facing libraries, including eBook access, social work, book bans, and the PLA 2022 Conference. In December, Huggins joined Brewster Kahle, founder of Open Library and The Internet Archive, and John Bracken, executive director of Digital Public Library of America, for a panel discussion on NPR's *1A*, hosted by Jenn White. In this episode, "The Future of the Public Library," Huggins discusses how public libraries have pivoted during the pandemic, including eBook access and licensing and digital equity.

In January, Huggins spoke about the rise in number of libraries partnering with and hiring social workers, and the many barriers that come with it. Shortly after, Huggins was busy promoting the excitement around 4,000+ public library professionals gathering in Portland for the PLA 2022 Conference. In Portland's KGW8 coverage of the conference, Huggins notes, "We love being in Portland, the way that Portland has this really great grassroots community and this heart for activism is a really great match for what public libraries do."

Most recently, Huggins responded to the rise in book bans within her own state. In "SC public library leaders fight proposal banning sexual books from children's sections," Huggins is one of many public library leaders speaking out to defend the freedom to read. In an email blast sent out April 28, Huggins urged readers to contact their local House member "by phone, social media, or email, or any way you can" to ask them to keep [the budget clause that aims to prevent children from picking up sexually explicit books in their local library without their parents' consent] out of the final budget to "protect the freedom to read for all South Carolinians."

Public Libraries Magazine, website, and podcast

Public Libraries Magazine is published bimonthly and sent to nearly 9,000 PLA members and almost 500 subscribers. In 2020, to be more sustainable and in response to supply-line issues caused by the pandemic, *Public Libraries* introduced digital issues. In the 2021 volume year, three digital issues were planned (September/October, May/June, and July/August) and two digital issues are scheduled for the 2022 volume year. In FY2021 PLA saw a cost savings of approximately $54,000 because three issues were digital, and we expect a cost savings of $28,000 for FY2022.

During the past twelve months, *Public Libraries* has addressed trending and challenging topics for public librarians through themed issues, listed below:

Issue	Topic
May/June 2021	Partnerships
July/August 2021	Antiracism/Social Justice
September/October 2021	Library Safety
November/December 2021	Staff Training
January/February 2022	Legal Issues
March/April 2022	2 Years Since Covid-19 Pandemic Began
May/June 2022	Service to the Justice-Involved

In January, *Public Libraries* Magazine announced the winners of its 2022 Feature Article Contest. Feature-length articles published in 2021 were eligible to compete for two cash prizes. The articles were evaluated by members of the Public Libraries Advisory Committee and the winner of the Feature Article Contest receives $500. The committee also identified a winner for the Honorable Mention Award, which includes a $300 cash prize.

First prize was awarded to Katie Horner, head of circulation and reference, Lake Bluff (IL) Public Library, for her article "We Can Do Better – Best (and Worst) Practices for Manager Responding to Sexual Harassment Claims," which was published in the September/October 2021 issue of *Public Libraries*. The honorable mention prize was awarded to Tamar Kirschner, library technology program lead and instructor, job skills for library careers: access and technical services in libraries, Diablo Valley College, Pleasant Hill, CA, for her feature article, "We All Win—Training and Advancement for Non-MLIS Library Workers" which was published in the November/December 2021 issue.

Like the print iteration, Public Libraries Online focuses on issues and topics that matter to public libraries and public librarianship. Updated several times per week, the site features selections from the print magazine and unique content. PL Online has approximately 35,000 individual users per month. The top three published posts from the past year were:

- Are We Reaching the End of Library DVD Collections?
- Gaining Patron Cooperation on Mask Wearing
- Why Do We Think Library Services Are Free?

In 2016, PLA started *FYI: The Public Libraries Podcast* as another way to explore a variety of library-world topics in-depth. To date, PLA has recorded 58 podcasts and have accumulated over 11,000 subscribers. The most popular episodes from this past year were:

- FYI 49 – Digital Author Events with Stesha Brandon (2,218 plays)
- FYI 50 – PLA Benchmark and Library Staff Diversity Survey (1,324 plays)
- FYI 53 – A Trauma-Informed Framework for Supporting Library Patrons (1,155 plays)

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Social Justice

PLA 2022 Conference Scholarships

PLA awarded 30 scholarships for public library professionals and students to attend the PLA 2022 Conference. As part of PLA's commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion in the library profession, scholarships were distributed among three categories: Early-career Library Staff Scholarships, Non-Salaried or Unemployed Library Staff Scholarships, and Library School Student Scholarships. Each scholarship included complimentary conference registration, one year of ALA and PLA membership, and a $500 stipend for travel and housing. PLA was very excited to offer these opportunities to attendees who otherwise would not have been able to participate in the conference.

> "As a future librarian of color, I want to ensure that I have the most up to date information on how to best reach out more vulnerable communities. My work as Outreach Coordinator allows me to have a say in new projects that target specific communities

that might not be engaging with library resources, and I have already seen from online webinars that other library systems have amazing initiatives and ideas. Being able to hear about new projects would be helpful, as would connecting with other librarians from different systems, in achieving my goal of creating a truly welcoming and equitable library." – Early-Career Library Staff Scholarship recipient

PLA hosted fourth Inclusive Internship Initiative

PLA's Inclusive Internship Initiative (III) welcomed 40 host libraries for its fourth summer of introducing high school students from diverse backgrounds to careers in librarianship, providing mentor and leadership opportunities for library staff, and helping host libraries reach new audiences by engaging local young people in outreach and program planning. The 2021 cohort participated virtually due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In alignment with PLA's strategic goal of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Social Justice, III was created as a pathway program to increase diversity in public librarianship. Since its inception, 198 high school students at 119 libraries in 44 states have participated. III is supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Justice at Work in Public Libraries training

In 2020, the pandemic caused PLA to pause its in-person training, Social Justice and Public Libraries: Equity Starts with Us, facilitated by coach and trainer Mia Henry. Since then, PLA's Committee on Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice worked with Henry to develop a new virtual course for public libraries. In March 2022, PLA helped promote the launch of Freedom Lifted's Justice at Work in Public Libraries, which teaches libraries to move from surface talk about diversity and inclusion to real, honest conversations about justice and develop action plans that advance equity. As a thought partner, PLA receives a portion of the proceeds from this training.

Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity Framework

In September 2019, PLA, along with ALA's Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services (ODLOS); ACRL; and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) announced the formation of the Building Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity Framework Task Force. The task force was charged to create a framework for cultural proficiencies in racial equity that can be used in public and academic libraries through: scanning the environment, including review of relevant documents to identify literature and similar statements and frameworks related to racial equity; drafting the framework; seeking comment from stakeholders and the library community on the draft; and revising as needed. In the first quarter of 2022, PLA helped spread the word about the open call for feedback on the framework and the informational webinar for public libraries.

Looking Ahead

PLA is hopeful about the year ahead. With four new staff members joining the team this summer, PLA looks forward to growing our capacity and continuing to move our strategic goals forward. Dr. Maria Taesil Hudson McCauley will assume the PLA Presidency on July 1, 2022. As the first Asian-American president of PLA, McCauley looks forward to using her new role to inspire a diverse group of individuals to work in public libraries, to grow professionally, and to consider administrative and association leadership roles. She will work to further PLA's equity, inclusion, and antiracism work and offer solidarity for her Asian, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx colleagues.

This summer, PLA will be working closely with our partners at AT&T to award funding to public libraries through the PLA Digital Literacy Workshop Incentive, supported by AT&T, and highlight the important role libraries play in closing the digital divide.

In the wake of COVID and national social justice work, the PLA board is also revisiting and refreshing its strategic plan. The refreshed plan will strengthen PLA's commitment to EDISJ, both as an area for member professional development and internal operations. During the coming year, members can expect to see popular PLA programs and services aligned to the plan and new offerings in priority goal areas. Look for updates and a rollout of our refreshed strategic plan in the coming months.