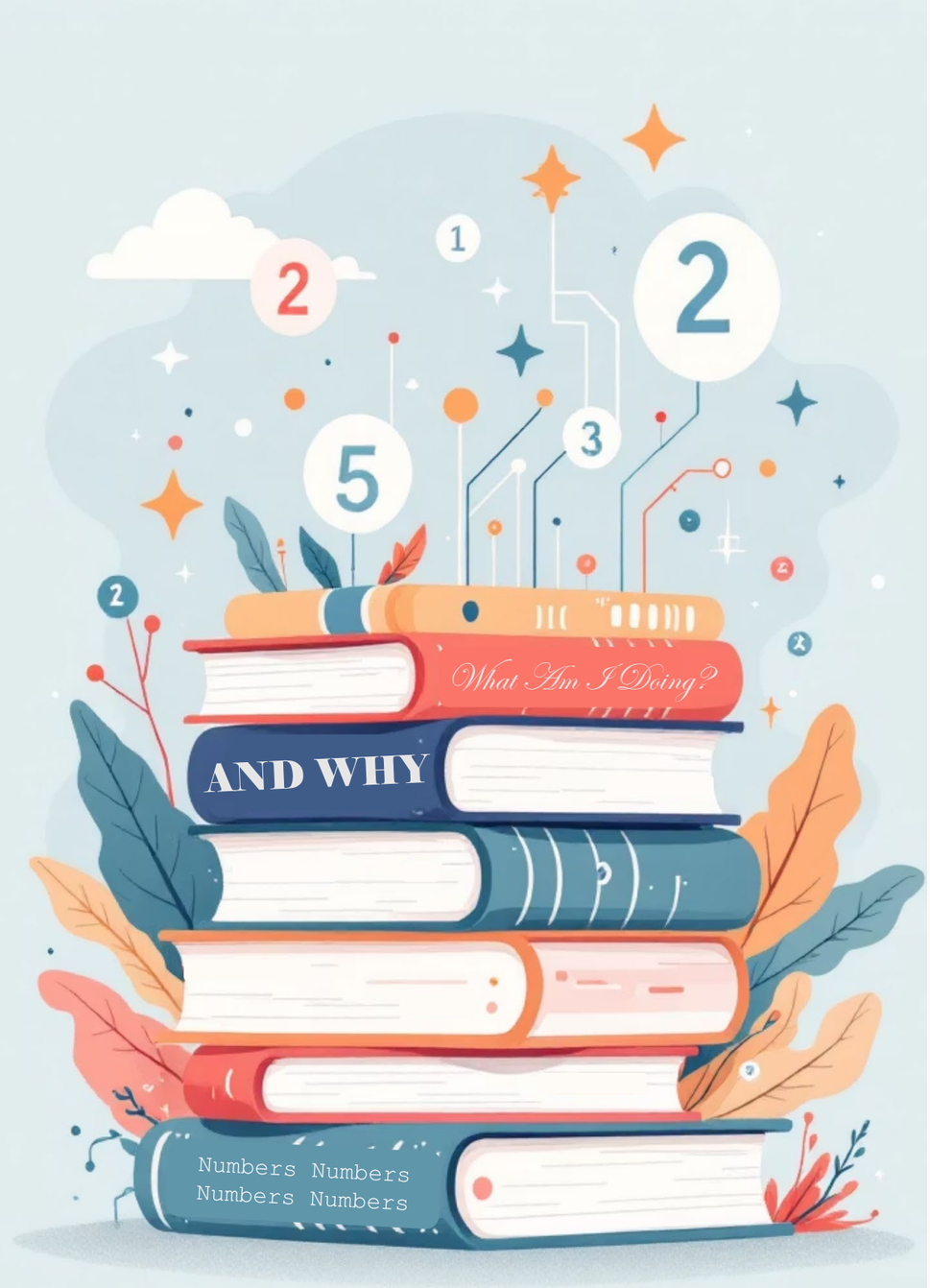

From Data to Decisions:

Monitoring and Evaluation Basics for Library Leaders

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SESSION ROADMAP

What We're Covering Today

Why M&E Matters

Build the case for evidence-based library management

Ask the Right Questions First

Define what you want to know before you collect anything

Track Attendance & Trends

Move beyond headcounts to meaningful participation data

Gather & Use Patron Feedback

Design surveys that produce actionable insight

Turn Data into Decisions

Close the loop so your numbers drive change

By the end of this session, you'll have a practical framework you can bring back to your library and put to work immediately.

THE WHY

The Case for Counting

"We Know Our Community"

You probably do. Your staff talks to patrons every day. But can you **prove it** to a grant committee, a city council, or a state funder? Anecdotes can give you great ideas, but trends can give you compelling evidence.

M&E Helps You:

- **Demonstrate community impact** with concrete evidence that resonates with stakeholders and funders
- **Make defensible decisions** about which programs to grow, modify, or retire
- **Replace "we've always done it this way"** with "here's what the facts say" — a far more persuasive argument!

THE WHY

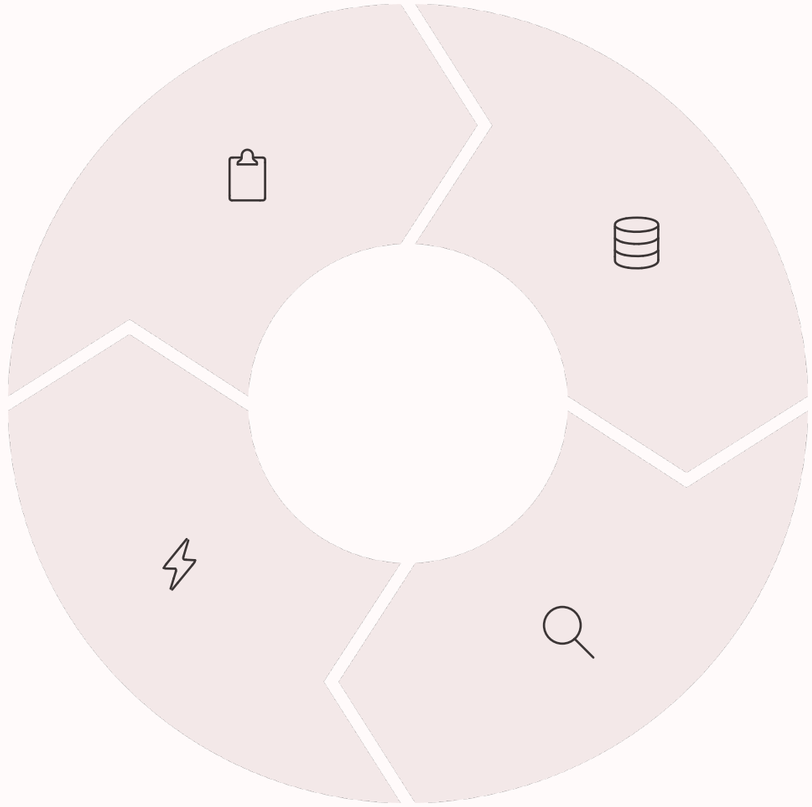
The M&E Cycle

Plan

Define your questions and what success looks like

Collect

Gather data using consistent, reliable methods



Act

Make decisions and adjust programs based on findings

Analyze

Look for patterns, trends, and actionable insights

Most libraries are already pretty good at the **Collect** step, but the magic is in completing the full loop. Data you never act on is just storage. Think of M&E less like an audit and more like an **ongoing conversation with your community**.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

What Do You Want to Know?

No Squishy Questions

The most common M&E mistake is starting with data instead of a **meaningful, answerable question**. If your question is vague, your data will be vague too.

❌ Squishy Question

"Do people like our new makerspace?"

✅ Operationalized Question

"How has the introduction of the makerspace affected the number of new library card registrations among residents aged 12–18?"

The second question defines **who** you're measuring, **what** success looks like, and **how** you'll count it. A stranger could collect that data for you. If you can't operationally define your question, you're not ready to collect data yet.

“Is the community benefiting from our makerspace?”

“Are we reaching underserved populations?”

“Is the community benefiting from our makerspace?”

- What does “benefiting” mean? Learning skills? Employment outcomes? Social connection?
- Which parts of the community?
- How would benefit be measured?
- Over what timeframe?

“Are we reaching underserved populations?”

- How is “underserved” defined? Income, geography, age, disability status, internet access?
- What does “reaching” mean? Library card registrations? Attendance? Awareness?
- Which services or programs are being evaluated?
- What benchmark determines success?

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Validity and Reliability

Are You Measuring What You Think You're Measuring?

Validity = Accuracy

Are you capturing the right thing? Sending an **online-only survey** to measure "community interest in digital literacy" misses everyone who isn't already online. That's a validity problem; your instrument doesn't match your target population.

Reliability = Consistency

Would you get the same result if you ran it again next month? Asking staff to estimate wifi users is unreliable. Pulling a **standardized router traffic report** every day at the same time is reliable.

Ask yourself three questions before any data collection:

1

Defined?

Have I defined my terms so clearly a stranger could collect this for me?

2

Valid?

Does this data actually represent the problem I'm trying to solve?

3

Reliable?

Would this process stay consistent if I repeated it?

Research Design:

A library converts part of its building into a quiet study zone and wants to know whether the change improved patron satisfaction. Staff compare overall building visits before and after the renovation and conclude the quieter space was successful because visits increased.

What’s the problem?

Research Design:

A library converts part of its building into a quiet study zone and wants to know whether the change improved patron satisfaction. Staff compare overall building visits before and after the renovation and conclude the quieter space was successful because visits increased.

What's the problem?

Validity

Why?

Overall visits may be influenced by lots of things: seasonal usage, a new bestseller release, expanded programming, school exam periods, even weather. Increased foot traffic does not *necessarily* mean patrons value or use the quiet study area specifically.

Research Design:

Facilitators are asked to report how many participants were “actively engaged” during workshops. Some count verbal participation only, while others include note-taking, attentive listening, or small-group discussion.

What’s the problem?

Research Design:

Facilitators are asked to report how many participants were "actively engaged" during workshops. Some count verbal participation only, while others include note-taking, attentive listening, or small-group discussion.

What's the problem?

Reliability

Why?

The criteria for "active participation" are unclear and subjective. Different facilitators may interpret the same participant behavior differently, making the measure unreliable across sessions.

Research Design:

A library measures awareness of services by asking patrons entering the building whether they know about the library's online tutoring resources.

What's the problem?

Research Design:

A library measures awareness of services by asking patrons entering the building whether they know about the library's online tutoring resources.

What's the problem?

Validity and Reliability

Why?

Validity issue: Current library visitors might not be representative of the broader community, especially non-users who are unaware of services.

Reliability: Staff members ask the question differently, and sometimes explain the service before patrons answer, influencing responses inconsistently.

TRACKING PARTICIPATION

Tracking Attendance — The Foundation

Attendance is your **baseline** for program evaluation. Everything else builds on it. But raw headcounts aren't the only thing to consider!

1

ILS Integration

Many modern integrated library systems can link event attendance to patron records for anonymized demographic analysis. If yours can do it, **use it**.

2

Gate Counters vs. Program Counts

Foot traffic ≠ program participation. Keep them separate. Mixing them is a data hygiene issue that will muddy every analysis downstream.

3

Require Registration

Even for free events. No-show rates tell you whether you have a **demand problem** or an **engagement problem** — two very different issues requiring different solutions.

TRACKING PARTICIPATION

Identifying Participation Trends

Trends Are Truthier Than Single Data Points

A single attendance number means almost nothing in isolation. One packed storytime doesn't prove demand, and one empty workshop doesn't prove failure. **Look for patterns:**

Audience Segmentation

Break attendance down by age bracket, card type, or neighborhood. Who are you reaching, and who's missing?

Seasonal Dynamics

Correlate attendance with school calendars, weather patterns, and local events. Program with the rhythm of your community, not against it.

Topic Categories

Tag your programs (health & wellness, financial literacy, makerspace, etc.) to see what subjects and which presenters draw people in.

If you only look at total annual attendance, you're missing out on valuable insights.

TRACKING PARTICIPATION

Data Collection Tools

Consistent processes matter much more than fancy software. The best tools are those your staff will regularly, consistently use.

Event Management Software

Registration, automated reminders, and no-show tracking in one place

Interest & Outcome Surveys

Standardized pre/post instruments for participant data

Local Context Data

School calendars, census demographics, and community event schedules

Your ILS

Are you underusing the system you already have?

PATRON FEEDBACK

Survey Design — The Basics

Surveys Are Easy to Do Badly

A few principles that will save you from collecting useless data:

1 Avoid Leading Questions

❌ "How much did you *enjoy* today's program?" → ✅ "How would you *rate* today's program?" Neutral wording produces honest answers.

2 One Idea Per Question

Don't ask "Was the program useful *and* easy to understand?" That's two questions. If someone found it useful but confusing, they can't answer honestly.

3 Use Consistent Scales

If you use 1–5 today and 1–10 next month, you can't compare results. Pick a scale and stick with it across all programs.

4 Keep It Short

Response rates drop sharply after 5–7 minutes. Respect people's time and you'll get more, and better, data.

5 Pilot It First

Ask a few colleagues to take your survey before you send it out. You will often find a confusing question.

PATRON FEEDBACK

Measuring Impact, Not Just Satisfaction

Stop Asking If They Liked It

Satisfaction data ("Did you enjoy the program?") is the **least useful data** you can collect. Shift to **impact and change** metrics that measure deeper effects:

❌ Satisfaction Questions

"Did you like the craft?"

"Was the presenter engaging?"

✅ Impact Questions

"Did you learn a new skill today?"

"How confident do you feel using this skill on your own?"

Look for measurable changes in **knowledge, confidence, behavior,** or **intent**. That's what makes a compelling case for continued investment to your board, your funders, and your community.

PATRON FEEDBACK

Feedback Collection Methods

Right Tool, Right Time

1

Point-of-Service Survey

Short (3–5 questions) at program exit. High volume, immediate sentiment. Great for quick reads on a new program while the experience is still fresh.

2

Longer-Form Outcome Survey

Sent post-event via email. Captures reflection and behavior change. Give it 24–48 hours so the experience has had time to sink in and you can measure what stuck.

3

Qualitative Focus Groups

Once a year, bring in your super-users *and* your non-users for a moderated conversation. The non-users can provide excellent insight.

Mix your methods. *Quantitative* data tells you **what's going on;** *Qualitative* data tells you **why it's happening**.

PATRON FEEDBACK

A Word on Qualitative Data

Don't Be Afraid of the Words

Numbers are clean and easy to present, but a quote from a patron who says, *"This was the first time I felt like this library was for me,"* tells a story no bar chart can.

Best Practices

- **Use consistent prompts** so responses are comparable across programs and time periods
- **Look for themes** across responses, not just memorable one-liners
- **Include critical feedback, too**; cherry-picking only positive quotes undermines your credibility
- **Pair quotes with quantitative data** for maximum storytelling power

ANALYSIS & ACTION

Basic Data Analysis — You've Got This

You Don't Need to Be a Statistician

Start simple and build confidence. These four techniques will get you surprisingly far:

Counts & Totals

How many attended? How many completed the survey? Start with the basics.

Averages

Mean satisfaction score, average attendance per session, tracked over time.

Percentages

What share of respondents reported a knowledge gain? Percentages translate well to any audience.

Trend Lines

Is attendance growing, flat, or declining over 3 years? Direction matters more than magnitude.

The most important question to ask your data: Compared to what? A single number is a fact. A number compared to a benchmark, a goal, or last year is *insight*.

ANALYSIS & ACTION

Visualizing Your Data

Make It Easy to Read in Seconds

Your board, your funders, and your director colleagues are busy. Visualize clearly so the point lands fast:

Bar Charts

Best for **comparisons.**
Attendance by program type, participation across branches

Line Graphs

Best for **trends over time.**
Monthly attendance, year-over-year growth

One Big Number

When you want something to **land hard,** put it big and bold front and center!

Avoid chart clutter. If someone has to study your visual for a long time to understand it, it needs to be redesigned. And use pie charts **sparingly**! Please only bake a pie when parts-of-a-whole is truly the point.

ANALYSIS & ACTION

Turning Data into Decisions

The Feedback Loop — Where M&E Gets Real

You've collected and analyzed, now **use your findings** to drive real decisions:

The Sunset Rule

Three consecutive years of declining engagement *plus* low impact scores = objective evidence to retire a program and redirect resources.

Resource Allocation

If 60% of your attendance comes from 20% of your programs (weekend family events, anyone?), you now have the data to justify hiring part-time weekend staff.

Grant Justification

Funders don't fund vibes. Robust M&E data showing measurable community impact makes your library a **far more competitive** grant candidate.

SUSTAINABILITY

Common M&E Pitfalls

What to Avoid (Learn from My Mistakes)

Collecting Data You Never Analyze

Set a calendar reminder to look at it. Data without analysis is just digital clutter taking up space on a server.

Changing Methods Mid-Stream

You lose the ability to compare. Consistency is more valuable than perfection! stick with your approach for at least a full cycle.

Measuring Outputs Instead of Outcomes

"We held 40 programs" is an output. "72% of participants reported gaining a new skill" is an **outcome**.

Surveying Only the Happy People

Response bias is real. Make collection accessible to everyone and put in the effort to reach patrons who aren't already cheerleaders.

Waiting Until Grant Deadline to Find Your Data

Build the habit now. Scrambling at the last minute leads to weak applications and missed opportunities.

SUSTAINABILITY

Building an M&E Culture on Your Team

This Doesn't Work If Only One Person Cares

Sustainable M&E is a **team practice**, not a director's side project. If it lives in one person's head, it dies when that person goes on vacation.

Train Your Staff

Teach your tools and data entry standards so collection is consistent across every program and every branch.

Share Findings Openly

Let staff see how their work is making an impact. Transparency builds trust in the process and motivation to help.

Celebrate Data Wins

"Our teen attendance is up 34%!" Make data a reason to celebrate, not just a reporting burden.

Build M&E Into Regular Meetings

Weave check-ins into staff meetings rather than just annual reports. Frequency builds fluency.

Start Small and Build

One program, one question, one cycle. Getting started is the most important thing ☺

SUMMARY

Key Takeaways

What to Take Back to Your Library

Start with a Question

Define your terms before you collect anything.

Validity & Reliability

Crucial quality checks for every piece of data you gather.

Trends Beat Raw Numbers

Context and comparison are critical. A single datapoint is lonely.

Measure Impact

"Did they learn something?" beats "Did they like it?"

Close the Loop

Data that doesn't inform a decision is wasted potential.

Consistency Over Perfection

You don't need perfect systems, but ones you use consistently.

Thank You & Questions

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> "The greatest value of a picture is when it forces us to notice what we never expected to see." — John Tukey

> "Visualization is often used for evil — twisting insignificant data changes and making them look meaningful. Don't do that crap if you want to be my friend." — John Tukey (and me)

Questions? Let’s talk!