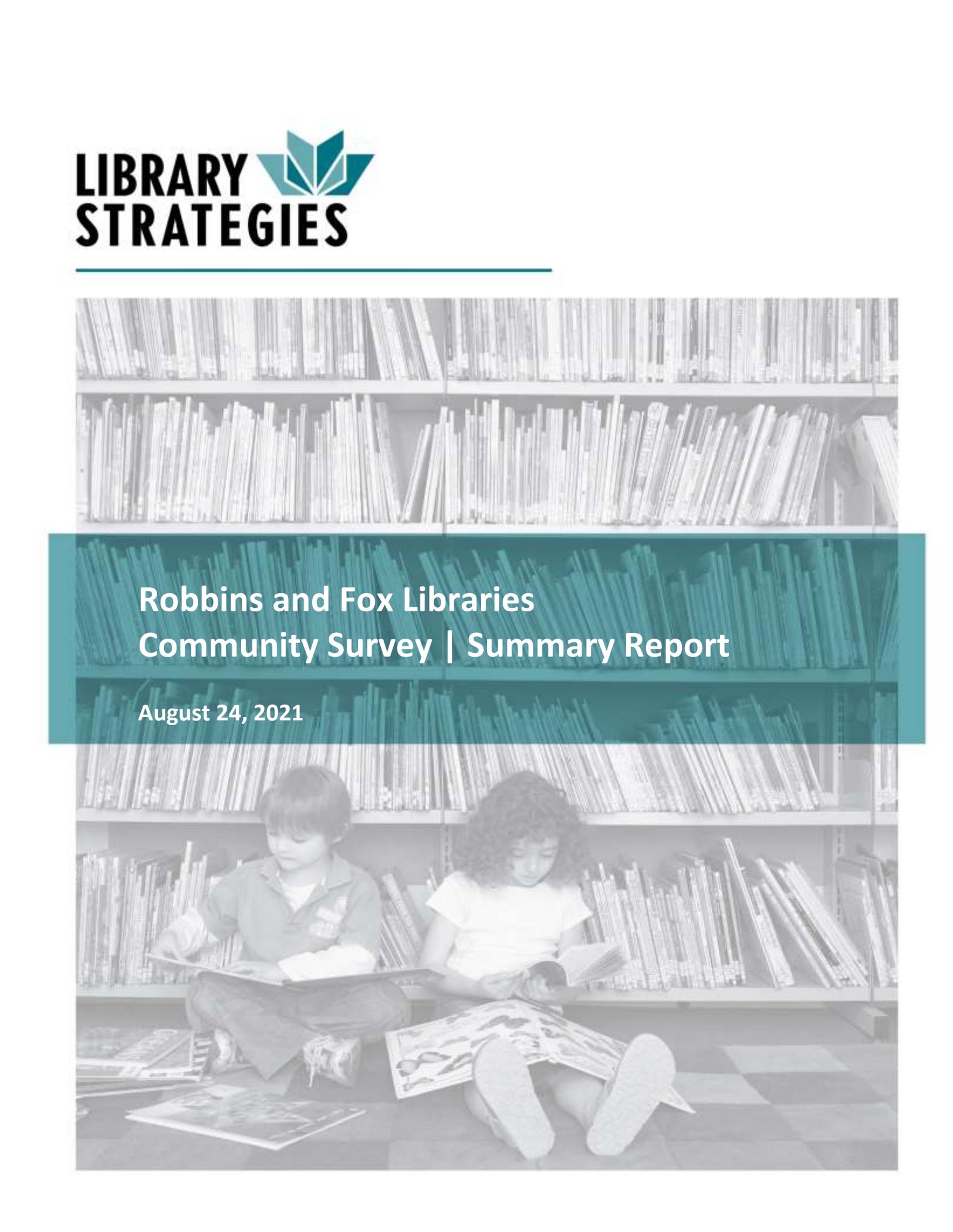


LIBRARY STRATEGIES



Robbins and Fox Libraries Community Survey | Summary Report

August 24, 2021

BACKGROUND

From May-September 2021, Library Strategies partnered with the Robbins and Fox libraries on the creation of a broad-based and long-range strategic planning process. As part of the community engagement phase of this work, Library Strategies designed and administered an online questionnaire in June-July 2021.

This questionnaire aimed to capture satisfaction with and perceptions of the public institution as it exists today, and to pinpoint unmet or undermet needs. Data shared for – and trends uncovered by – this survey influenced topics probed in the focus group step of community engagement activities (July 15-23). Survey input also directly informs many of the LSCG consulting team’s proposed goal areas for the strategic plan itself.

In total, **874** residents participated in the 23-question questionnaire. This exceeded by more than 50% the consulting team’s “stretch goal” hope for 500 completed response sets. That turnout is especially impressive when considered against the size of the community. According to the 2019 IMLS Public Library Survey, the Library’s legal service area is 48,815 (of which 29,014 are registered cardholders). Put another way, nearly 1.8% of residents eligible to participate in the survey did so.

High response rates notwithstanding, the broad distribution strategies employed preclude a truly “scientific” analysis of data. Nevertheless, such a large respondent pool allows us to extrapolate trends and perceptions with reasonable accuracy.

Note: Respondents were ensured anonymity, to encourage candor and a high response rate. However, questions and answer sets – including anonymous free-form responses to qualitative questions – are attached in full.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The following areas of concern or other takeaways emerged repeatedly, usually across more than one question:

- Many patrons – particularly parents with traditional “9-5” jobs – are dissatisfied with the Library’s current hours of operation (and program timing, as well). Parking challenges represent a second major flashpoint for discontent.
- In the coming years, users expect that they (and their families) will use e-resources at a greater rate than they do presently. In contrast, interest in none of the areas probed is forecasted to slacken *appreciably* over the next five years. (None decrease by $\geq 10\%$.)
- Respondents report that their use and enjoyment of the Library’s e-book resources are hampered by three factors: unintuitive and “clunky” user interfaces; a paucity of title choices on Hoopla, OverDrive, and especially Kanopy; and longer than expected wait

times, particularly on the Kanopy platform.

- Survey takers repeatedly voiced a desire for a library system that is reflective of, and which fosters, the diversity and growing desire for inclusivity found within Arlington. This starts with multicultural/DEI collections, but extends to other areas as well (ex., staff hiring and training practices).
- Many would like to see the Library’s repertoire of both educational and entertainment-oriented programming expanded through partnerships with others in the community. In such cases, staff would be called upon to facilitate, rather than “drive,” the class or program.
- When asked about the most acute issues facing Arlington today, residents cited six topics (some of which dovetail or overlap): economic stratification, classism, affordable housing, racial justice, public amenities, and climate change.

LIBRARY USAGE + DEMOGRAPHICS

Nearly three quarters of respondents (74.7%) self-report visiting Arlington’s libraries at least once a month. Conversely, only about 5% reported that they “Never” or “Rarely” visit.

Participation rates are roughly even among generational cohorts, excepting Millennials aged ≤ 29 and Gen Z, who represent a collective 3.2% of the respondent set.

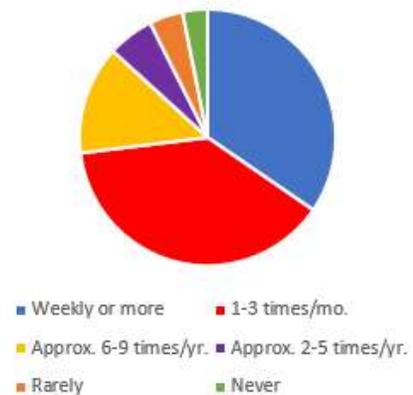
The data skews female, with other genders accounting for just one quarter of respondents. Fifty nine percent of respondents come from households with no children. Twenty six percent of survey-takers represent homes where *more than one* minor is present.

Sixty eight percent of participants report holding a graduate-level degree or higher. This unusual predominance is reflective of the unique composition of Arlington.

Cumulatively, communities of color and respondents who self-identify as multiracial make up 9.8% of the survey sample set. When compared against the racial/ethnic makeup of Arlington, the white community is slightly overrepresented, and the Asian community somewhat underrepresented.

**Sources: Library Strategies Survey [Questions 18-23]
“Data USA” API
U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts

Visit Frequency



QUESTION-BY-QUESTION BREAKDOWNS

Note: Question-by-question breakdowns are in some cases reordered, and in others joined together, for best flow and minimal redundancy.

In the last two years (including pre-pandemic) which of the Library's locations have you visited? [Q6] Why location do you use most frequently? [Q7]

Ninety-seven percent of survey takers report visiting Robbins Library at least once over the period in question. Eighty-five percent claim it as their “home” location. Approximately 47% of respondents have visited the Edith M. Fox Branch Library over the past two years; 13% of these consider it their primary location.

In addition, 81% of the 837 respondents to answer this question report using the Library's website and e-resources.

If you rarely or never visit the library, why not? [Q3]

When asked why they do not visit the Library, nonusers and sporadic users cite a preference to buy their own materials as the foremost reason why (57%). This is followed closely by an ability to find everything they need online (53%). Rounding out the list, 47% of this subset assert that the Library is simply never top of mind for them.

Note: Only self-reported sporadic and nonusers saw this query. Given the low response rate among this subset, only 46 individuals saw this question – and only 30 answered. Skip logic forwarded all other respondents to Q4.

Pre-pandemic, did any of the following conditions keep you from seeing the Library as a comfortable and safe place? [Q2, cf. Q4]

Sixty-four percent of regular users (510 ct.) assert that the Library meets all of their comfort expectations and safety needs.

Limited and difficult parking is the biggest flash point for discontent – and by a significant margin. One quarter of survey-takers (204 ct.) report this as a major obstacle at Robbins, and another 10% (81 ct.) say the same of Fox.

In the open-ended comments section of this question, respondents volunteer a range of factors not specified by the question, including: poor lighting, uncomfortable or otherwise inadequate furniture, and cleaning concerns.

In the last two years, for what reasons have you visited the library? [Q8]

A preponderance of survey respondents visit the Library for traditional, transactional reasons. Ninety-one percent (748 ct.) check out physical materials. While the holds shelves are well used (81.7%, 671 ct.), browsing the stacks is a popular practice as well (71.6%, 588 ct.).

Also high among the offerings listed on the survey, and in descending order, patrons report using the Library to: download e-books or other items (40.2%, 330 ct.); read or study (28.1%, 231 ct.), seek assistance from library staff (19.1%, 157 ct.); attend meetings (18.2%, 149 ct.); and attend in-person adult programs (18.2%, 149 ct.).

Note: A cross-analysis within SurveyMonkey finds no statistically meaningful difference in these habits between generational cohorts or based on any other demographic criterion.

In addition, 117 respondents took the opportunity to expand the provided list with free-form answers. Most commonly, these individuals reported relying on the Library to print, scan or fax documents; visiting the Fox & Robbin Shop; and volunteering at the libraries in some capacity.

How satisfied are you with each aspect of library operations at your “home” library location (pandemic conditions notwithstanding)? [Q9]

With a sample set this size, Library Strategies flags operational areas that meet or pass the 5% threshold for dissatisfaction, and is *most* interested in areas that exceed the 10% yardstick. Two of the 12 listed elements surpass 10% dissatisfaction.

- Parking (21% / 161 ct. somewhat dissatisfied + 5.9% / 45 ct. very dissatisfied)
- Restrooms (9.2% / 70 ct. somewhat dissatisfied + 1.7% / 13 ct. very dissatisfied)

Two additional areas have a dissatisfaction rate between 5-10%:

- Open Hours (6.3% / 48 ct. somewhat dissatisfied + 1.1% / 8 ct. very dissatisfied)
- Reading/Study Areas (3.9% / 30 ct. somewhat dissatisfied + 1% / 8 ct.)

Each of these topics will repeat and be explored in greater detail as part of subsequent questions.

In addition, 155 respondents took this opportunity to round out the list provided with other operational considerations of concern. Prominent themes include distracting ambient noise noises, and discourteous or otherwise off-putting interactions with select members of the Robbins staff.

How satisfied are you with various aspects of Library collections/resources? [Q10]

Patrons are, in the main, content with the Library's current slate of resources. "Opt outs" notwithstanding, a majority of survey respondents report being satisfied with (or simply personally indifferent towards) each of the 15 elements listed. None even approaches the 10% threshold, or even 5% yardstick, for dissatisfaction.

As the 174 open-ended comments make clear, however, the picture is nuanced for many patrons. For example, many take this opportunity to express appreciation for the Library of Things – but also wish to see its selection expanded and access extended to the Fox Branch. Likewise, a significant number report that their use and enjoyment of the Library's e-book resources are hampered by three factors: unintuitive and "clunky" user interfaces; a paucity of title choices on Hoopla, OverDrive, and especially Kanopy; and longer than expected wait times, particularly on the Kanopy platform.

Moreover, while only 25 survey-takers voiced dissatisfaction in the Library's repertoire in languages other than English, the holes and limits in these collection are a topic that crops up repeatedly throughout the open-ended comments. Languages named include Korean, Arabic, Italian and French – but most common appears to be a desire for more Spanish-language materials.

How satisfied are you with the Library's programming, marketing, and outreach? [Q11]

Here again, the majority of patrons have a positive opinion about the programs and priorities put forward by the survey – or else report not having a basis on which to meaningfully evaluate (with "I don't know" percentiles as high as 86.7%).

Beyond the quantitative data points, the 91 open-ended comments to this question flag three themes for attention.

Newsletter. Many respondents expressed surprise that this communication channel exists, and/or confusion about how to sign up. Others confirm receiving it, but feel that it can feel incomplete and rote. Representative comments:

- "A Robbins library e-newsletter would be nice. If this already exists, I don't know how/where to sign up for it. (Our family does not use social media.)"
- "You have some great opportunities I don't hear about, so I am thinking the newsletter could be more visible."
- "I find the newsletter to be uninspiring. I read it and it appears to be the same every month. I know it is not the same, but that is the impression I have."

Children's programs. While only 14 respondents reported themselves as somewhat or very dissatisfied with children's programming, comments offered here are reiterated by many people throughout the community survey. Foremost, families with adults unable to bring their

children to the Library during regular weekday working hours lament that the majority of children's events occur during these same hours. They would like to see more evening and weekend offerings. Others are dissatisfied with or confused about the sign-up requirements around more popular programs.

- "The children's activity hours are always during daycare for my young child. It would be great to see something that WAS NOT on weekdays between 9-5."
- "As a working parent household, we are shut out of nearly all children's events, as they seem to always take place during working hours. Including ALL of the book giveaways this summer."
- "I am a working parent and can't attend programming with my daughter at 10 am. I would love more options that are either on the weekends or during after school hours – which for me means 4-6 p.m."
- "Kid's events are hard to get into because of limited capacity."

Staff interactions. Here and throughout the survey, respondents report a range of impressions and experiences around staff helpfulness and demeanor. Several staffers are called out for specific praise or criticisms.

Which library services are currently important to you and your family? [Q12] Which services do you expect to be important to you or your family in five years? [Q13]

It is valuable to pair and contrast these questions. While the first is straightforward, the second probes patrons' aspirations and reasonable guesses about their family's evolving needs as they will look in half a decade. As a rule of thumb, Library Strategies flags any +/- ≥10% difference for attention.

Differences, where they exist for the Robbins and Fox libraries, revolve primarily around digital access. At present, some 63.5% (485 ct.) report value in ebooks and e-audiobooks, and 31% (237 ct.) in downloadable/streaming movies. In Q13, both rates jump meaningfully – to 73.8% (561 ct.) and 47.8% (363 ct.), respectively. Expected interest in virtual adult programs also sees an uptick of 11.4% – from 17.8% (136 ct.) to 29.2% (222 ct.).

In other words, in the coming years, patrons expect that they (and their families) will use e-resources at a greater rate than they do presently.

Last, interest in *in-person* programs geared towards teen/tween audiences is also expected to grow (from 11.9% to 23.7%). [This is a trend common to the majority of communities where Library Strategies polls, and can be attributed partly to parents who can easily conceptualize their young children "growing into" library programming geared towards teen/tween audiences.]

In contrast, interest in none of the areas probed is forecasted to “slacken” appreciably over the next five years. (None decrease by $\geq 10\%$.) However, the need for both library grab bags (21% vs. 17.8%) and contactless pickup (20.4% vs. 15.5%) are expected to soften *somewhat* once pandemic conditions have passed.

How can the Library’s services, materials, and processes be made more meaningful and accessible for you – or others within your community – in the next few years? [Q14]

Thirty six percent of survey-takers (316 of 874) responded to this optional and open-ended query. Several themes predominate.

Hours. More than any other theme – in Q14 and throughout the survey – Arlington residents call out the limited building hours and the imposition this poses. In particular, many clamor for hours on Thursday mornings and at least some access on Sundays. Parents also regularly cite a desire for expanded evening hours to supplement the existing Thursday schedule.

Multicultural/DEI materials. Dozens of survey-takers used this opportunity to voice (or reiterate) their desire for a library system that is reflective of, and fosters, the diversity and growing desire for inclusivity found within Arlington. This has several facets. Perhaps most tangibly, many ask for a concerted collection development focus on BIPOC voices. That includes both nonfiction written by, and fiction centered around, people of color. Secondly, a number of respondents note that Robbins/Fox staff feel homogenous to a degree that is at odds with the ethnic and racial diversity that is now the norm in Arlington.

Access points. Residents of neighborhoods distant from the Robbins and Fox libraries (particularly Arlington Heights) point to challenges associated with *getting to* the nearest brick-and-mortar library. The hassle is exacerbated by factors such as rush hour congestion and limited public transportation options. The issue is acute enough that many report patronizing other Middlesex County libraries to save time and effort. Short of a third branch and all its attendant costs, some respondents suggest delivery lockboxes, home delivery, or some other service along these lines.

Marketing. Here and throughout the questionnaire, many residents comment that they were completely unaware of amenities or opportunities named by the survey. Others posit that, while they are familiar, the community at large may lack awareness. Examples include Kanopy, contactless pick-up, and the Library’s museum pass program.

What (if any) classes, events or Library services do you think could be provided that are not currently offered? [Q15]

Thirty percent (262 ct.) of survey takers responded to this optional and open-ended survey. Seven thematic areas recur throughout.

- Health and wellness, ex.: mindfulness, yoga, dieting
- DIY / home economics, ex.: gardening, basic vocational skills
- One-on-one tutoring, ex.: ESL sessions, immigrant support, college preparedness, small business consultations
- Tech skills, ex.: video editing, coding
- Literary, ex.: writing workshops, poetry salons
- Global citizenship, ex.: global warming and environmentalism, anti-racism
- Arts, ex.: watercolor, knitting/croquet

Program ‘Co-Creation.’ In the words of one respondent, “Arlington has such an impressive community of knowledgeable and experienced people that I think could be better tapped.” This sentiment is one voiced repeatedly. Many would like to see the Library’s repertoire of both educational and entertainment-oriented programming expanded through partnerships with others in the community. In such cases, staff would be called upon to facilitate, rather than “drive,” the meeting or program.

Book clubs. Book clubs, and other participatory literary events like them, are called out specifically in at least 25 instances. (Most references, but not all, came in relation to Q15.) Patrons appreciated and miss those book clubs which the library offered “pre-covid.” Others go farther and suggest new focus areas for *additional* book clubs. Specific ideas run the gamut from clubs geared towards homeschooling families and/or tween patrons, to groups focused around specific themes (ex., anti-racism, cooking/cookbooks).

Are there any other ways that your satisfaction with the Library could be increased? [Q16]

Thirty one percent (271 ct.) of respondents offered input to this last “library specific” survey question. While no new subjects rise to the fore as important, several introduced in previous questions are repeated here.

1. Hours of operation, and the limitations these present for parents and “9-5” workers
2. Parking, including the general lack and difficulty of parking, and a desire for a 15-minute parking zone
3. Co-created programming, with local experts teaching or tutoring in partnership with the Library
4. Multicultural/inclusive collections, including both DEI/anti-racism resources and cultural/linguistic ones

What do you feel are the biggest challenge(s) facing the Arlington community at this time? (Your answer does not need to revolve around the Library.) [Q17]

Forty percent (350 ct.) of survey takers offered commentary as part of this last open-ended question. Several telling topic areas emerged.

Economic Stratification. Residents perceive a growing disconnect between the economically comfortable and socio-economically disadvantaged subsets of the community. This divide is exacerbated by high cost of living, including...

Affordable Housing. High rent rates - and property tax increases - disproportionately impact Arlington's already marginalized communities. In many cases, cost of living considerations such as these drive families of lower means out of Arlington altogether.

Classism. Residents point to both overt and subtle signs that these economic conditions are adversely affecting how residents think of and interact with one another ("old vs. new" Arlington, or "haves vs. have nots.")

Racial Justice. There is a strong awareness that the public institutions and other characteristics of the Township are built on a bedrock of systemic injustices. There is a public hunger to right these wrongs, and cement for Arlington a reputation as a truly inclusive community.

Public Amenities. Some feel that the Township's available public spaces, and its public transit infrastructure, are unsatisfactory for a community of Arlington's size. Recent growth and construction trends make this issue all the more palpable.

Climate Change. There is an extremely strong public awareness about global warming and the threats that climate change poses for Arlington.