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ARTICLE

## Growing our vision together: forming a sustainability community within the American Library Association

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As long-standing keepers of democracy and information stewardship, library professionals are a natural fit for advocating and promoting sustainability within their communities. From seed libraries to Occupy Wall Street libraries, their view of sustainability extends beyond environmental concerns to include community activism, economic development, and social equity. Empowering people, facilitating dialogue, and providing resources for a more resilient future are at the center of librarians' vital and changing roles. These visionary professionals have powered libraries' work as outspoken advocates with well-founded initiatives. For a long time, however, there was no cohesive sustainability-focused venue for sharing best practices, collaborating, and contributing to the profession. In 2013, after one year of focused research and promotion, the American Library Association (ALA) approved a new group, the Sustainability Round Table (SustainRT). This article describes how library advocates built SustainRT over the years and gained momentum with a pivotal webinar series. Clear signs of SustainRT's early success are a testimony to the critical need for a sustainability-related Community of Practice (CoP). The article shows how the steps taken to achieve this national group's standing can serve as a model for fostering dialogue and collaboration (often through virtual means) that allows for wide participation.

KEYWORDS: advocacy, co-creation, community, education, environment, library, stewardship, webinar

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### Introduction

A rich and colorful tapestry of innovative and sometimes daring library practices, services, and engagement emerged in response to the unpredictable dynamics of the twenty-first century, not least of which were the explosion of technology, the Great Recession, and a growing environmental imperative. In a world struggling for sustainability, libraries continue critically evolving to embrace their communities' successes and adversities. Library associations bring together professionals to co-create solutions, share expertise, and bolster resilience through learning and community building. This article reports on the early stages of development of the American Library Association (ALA) Sustainability Round Table (SustainRT) in 2013, the result of an urgent "call to action" for a unified effort to address the new millennium's environmental, economic, and social sustainability challenges within the library profession in the United States and Canada. We identify the technologies, processes, dynamics and other factors that led to the formation of SustainRT as a functional Community of Practice (CoP)—"a group of people who share a concern, set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al. 2002). From the initial large-group webinars to the identification of leaders, from the acceptance of the Round Table into ALA to the decisions

involved in forming committees and prioritizing work, the establishment of this CoP offers a model for engaging in dialogue and collaboration within the library profession to better foster community resilience.

In an article entitled "To Remake the World," Paul Hawken (2007) refers to hundreds of thousands of sustainability-related groups as constituting "the largest coming together of citizens in history." He describes these groups as being without a center, codified beliefs, or charismatic leader and as cutting across economic sectors, cultures, and regions. Arising from research institutes, community-development agencies, village and citizen-based organizations, corporations, networks, faith-based groups, trusts, and foundations, they all share the goal of creating "a just society conducive to life on Earth."

Andres Edwards (2005) synthesizes the intentions and objectives of such sustainability-oriented groups with the three E's, "concern for the environment, the economy and social equity," and recognizes sustainability as "a common language that links the central issues confronting our civilization as well as its potential to bring social change values into the mainstream." This article outlines SustainRT's place within the global context separately described by Hawken and Edwards and how it was established as a professional forum for ALA members to exchange ideas and opportunities regarding sustainability in order to move toward a more equitable, healthy, and economically viable society.



## Libraries and Commitment to Community

Library resources and services are generally accessible to all members of a community, regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, political views, race, religion, and other differentiating characteristics. Libraries are distinct in the types of communities served, such as a municipality, school, university, hospital, or business. As hubs of information, intellectual exploration, and community, libraries offer a synergy of space, services, and resources that create dynamic learning environments, while their open-door ethos facilitates partnerships with a wide range of organizations and individuals. However, to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world, libraries must reflect the concerns, needs, and realities of their communities, as well as spark inquiry, develop innovative opportunities, and serve as a bastion of free knowledge and lifelong learning. This strong advocacy for equality of access and learning is reflected in ALA's "Library Bill of Rights," which states that "all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community. Furthermore, libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view and challenge censorship and make their space available on an equitable basis" (ALA, 1996). By creating a focused community of practitioners, SustainRT embraces and strengthens ALA's vision of libraries as forums for information and ideas available on an equitable basis.

Shifting economic, social, and environmental dynamics of the 21st century have created an environment for radical reimagining of libraries. First, and perhaps most transformative, is the ongoing explosion of technology as a means for learning, creating, and sharing information. The widespread use of computers, digital devices, digitization of materials, electronic books, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), digital repositories, globalization, and the open access movement are all recent heightened phenomena and direct results of the expansion of technology. As a consequence, the role of libraries has profoundly changed, from centers that primarily house collections and lend books to vital multi-dimensional spaces for collaborating, connecting, and learning.

Within academic and research libraries, the internationalization of higher education has also contributed to extensive changes in library services and outreach. Dewey (2010) summarizes the impact of this new environment, in which the academic library "must, in a global way, create, collaborate, and connect scholarship for and with users at a level never seen before to ensure lifelong learning and the ability to solve the world's continuing challenges inclusive of all

cultures, time periods, and approaches." Sustainability as a global challenge is being addressed within our institutions and requires large- and small-scale collaboration and networking.

Following profound technological changes, the next significant twenty-first century challenge for libraries was the 2007–2009 Great Recession, which increased library use in response to economic pressures including layoffs, foreclosures, and strain on communities. During these hard times, public libraries offered new services, which played a key role in helping people connect with each other and helped them find employment and launch new ventures. While use of libraries increased and their vision expanded, many municipalities drastically cut personnel, which resulted in closures, reduced hours, and dissolution of programs. School libraries, in particular, saw sweeping cuts to funding which led to elimination of media specialists in many locales despite the infusion of technology. Academic libraries were similarly challenged with funding constraints and budget cuts. In an effort to reduce costs and consolidate services, many universities closed small special-branch libraries and restructured services. The economic downturn was coupled with an increasing awareness of the threat posed by humanity's excesses, including population growth, and their effect on global climate change. The notion of sustainable development became a core concern of society, and consequently of libraries. When communities respond to environmental disasters, think critically about their environmental impacts, and seek answers to complex and interrelated economic, environmental, and social-equity issues, addressing the three E's of sustainability, libraries remain firm cornerstones for free, essential, and timely assistance.

## Libraries Respond to Economic and Social Community Pressures

As community hubs and centers of change and learning, libraries absorb their shifting environment to co-create spaces and services for a sustainable future. While the fundamental role of the library as a gateway to knowledge remains intact, the ways in which this is accomplished are rapidly changing. Free public access to computers and the Internet at libraries, now considered a core service, has helped to bridge the "digital divide" for people who do not have these privileges in their workplaces, homes, or schools. According to the *Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study, 2010–2011*, public libraries "serve as 'first responders' for people in need of technology training and online resources for employment, continuing education and access to online government services...Libraries serve as a 'toll free' bridge over the great divide" (Hoffman et al. 2011). Another important report, *Opportunity for All: How the American Public Benefits from Internet Access*



at *U.S. Libraries* (Becker et al. 2010), is the first large-scale investigation of the ways library patrons use this service, why they use it, and how it affects their lives. This report demonstrates the critical role of the public library in the digital landscape.

Libraries have begun offering new types of collections and services, lending items along with books and media. Seed libraries have been sprouting up in response to a need for affordable, healthy food; to foster understanding and knowledge of sustainable food systems; and to support local interest in environmental-sustainability efforts (Seed Libraries, n.d.). Economic pressures caused people to reconsider investing in costly equipment, and thus tool-lending libraries increased to support people with gardening, repair, and home-improvement projects. In conjunction with tools and classes, libraries loaned educational materials to assist in learning new skills and reducing costs, thus creating a credible sharing economy and building community. Examples include the Grosse Pointe Michigan Public Library Tool Collection (GPPL, n.d.) and the Ann Arbor Public Library's Unusual Stuff to Borrow (AADL, n.d.), which includes musical instruments and energy meters. Adding to the list of community-building offerings are outdoor movies, festivals, community gardening, fitness classes, picnics, and bilingual story and craft sessions (PPS, 2015). These services reinforce social equity and address economic sustainability by providing free resources to all. Project for Public Spaces notes that, "When you put all the ingredients of a great library together, you end up with a public institution whose influence extends far beyond its physical location. The best libraries anchor communities. Because they are highly visible centers of civic life, these libraries instill public confidence in their neighborhoods and catalyze further investment from both the public and private sectors" (PPL, n.d.), strengthening community resilience and sustainable environments.

Libraries as community-oriented repositories for social sustainability sprang up in unexpected ways. For example, September 2011 saw the launch of Occupy Wall Street, a "people-powered movement" that fought back against "the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process, and the role of Wall Street in creating an economic collapse that has caused the greatest recession in generations" (OSN, n.d.). A critical part of this movement was the People's Library—also referred to as the Occupy Wall Street Library—which provided, "a space for dialogue, creativity, intellectual and cultural exchange and personal growth" (Scott, 2011). The People's Library sparked valuable and passionate debates about the role of "guerrilla librarianship" within the profession as a response to the strictures of the status quo (Henk, 2011). Mandy Henk (2011), a librarian involved in the People's Library, sees the occupation

movement as the shape of things to come. "We have to keep serving the information needs of the protesters," she says, "and of other communities being hit by the economy" (McLemee, 2011). Libraries need to continue addressing economic issues as part of the three dimensions (environment, economy, and equity) of creating and supporting sustainable communities.

Since the start of the Great Recession, libraries have increased their partnerships with critical community services. Examples include a healthcare partnership between the Arizona Public Library in Pima County and the Pima County Health Department, which resulted in a library-nursing program (Johnson et al. 2014). In Rochester, New York, the CLIC-on-Health (2015) collaboration of hospital, public, and school libraries provides the community with healthcare information and resources. In 2009, the Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon received the National Medal for Museum and Library Service from the Institute of Library and Museum Services (IMLS) for the positive impact of its programs for non-English speakers (IMLS, 2009). The Alachua County Library District in Gainesville, Florida received the IMLS medal in 2011 for their "Thinking Outside the Book" approach, which helped open the door to community partnerships that provide "health and legal services, rent and utility subsidies, tax assistance, counseling for substance or domestic abuse, and a host of other social services," including a mobile outreach clinic (IMLS, 2011).

When crisis and disasters strike, libraries provide services and a safe haven so that citizens can rebuild their lives. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, New York City libraries stayed open throughout the day, offering space for citizens to gather as the tragedy unfolded. Subsequently, many libraries provided programming and brought community members together to discuss the significance of these events. Similarly, after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005, libraries welcomed evacuees, held story-time programs for children, provided books to shelters and contact information for local service organizations, and established missing-persons bulletin boards (Albanese et al. 2005). As climate change worsens environmental disasters, the need for these services is likely to intensify.

### Libraries Respond to Environmental Pressures

Examining the environmental aspect of the three E's of sustainability, we notice that libraries have worked in two different ways: 1) through internal management and procedural changes to create sustainable buildings and practice and 2) through education, collaboration, and community dialogue. Libraries are by their very nature "green" in that their resources avoid the environmental impact of unnecessary duplication. Building on libraries' innate qualities, other efforts seek to minimize resource



consumption in library construction and operations. As trusted community institutions and with shared consensus about local needs and goals, libraries have embraced environmental responsibility and become models for sustainability. A notable example is the New York City Bronx Library Center, which became the first municipal green building in the city in 2006 (Harripersaud, 2013). A plethora of efforts to improve the environmental performance of libraries have been written about and shared in library professional journals and books, on social media, and at library-association conferences. Illustrative examples include the *Going Green* initiative, which took place at the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) 2007 conference (ALA, 2007) and the 2008 *Knowledge to Go Green* initiative of the Special Library Association (SLA) (SLA, 2008). Monika Antonelli (2008) provides a comprehensive overview of green-library developments. Her 2012 co-edited book *Greening Libraries* covers recent examples from all types of libraries taking initiatives ranging from green building to resources as well as the coauthors' own reflections and insights (Antonelli & McCullough, 2012).

Educating for environmental stewardship and engaging with communities on green initiatives are additional strategies used by libraries to contribute toward a more sustainable future. Libraries offer a neutral venue and bring together programming on sustainable topics through film nights, local speakers, book clubs, events, and art exhibits. For example, Laura Barnes (2012) identifies public libraries that connect themselves with the developing ideals of the communities they serve and use their green-building technologies and practices as tools to teach patrons how to be more sustainable at home, at work, and in the community.

Within academic libraries, sustainability engagement has played out in many of the same ways as in other libraries. As part of a larger institution, however, each academic library must serve its distinct communities of learners and researchers by aligning itself with its institution's mission and vision. The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), founded in 2005 as a professional organization to help coordinate, advance, and strengthen campus sustainability efforts, boasts over 750 institutional members (AASHE, 2015). As of July 2015, AASHE's database of academic programs reports nearly 1500 sustainability-focused programs at 476 campuses in 66 American states and Canadian provinces (AASHE, 2015). Another indicator of higher education's engagement with sustainability is the increase in the number of signatories of the American College and University President's Climate Commitment (ACUPCC). The original 2007 charter, signed by 152 presidents, had an additional 533 signatories as of July 2015. Signing the Climate Commitment signals resolve

by colleges and universities to "demonstrating with their actions that addressing climate and sustainability issues are central to the education, research and service mission of higher education to help create a thriving and civil society" (Second Nature, 2015). Given the urgent need for cutting-edge research on effectively managing climate change, it is not surprising to see the emergence of a serious and focused dialogue within the academic library community on the library's role in advancing and supporting sustainability teaching, research, and service.

Several pivotal publications have recently focused on this new interest on the part of academic libraries and their growing role in educating for sustainability, including contributing to scholarly activities and curricular initiatives. *Focus on Educating for Sustainability: Toolkit for Academic Libraries* captures a range of best practices, case studies, and activities ready for implementation in the academic library (Jankowska, 2014). The book emphasizes the role of librarians as teachers and collaborators engaging with administrators, instructors, and researchers to provide credible resources and instruction, bringing sustainability more fully into the curriculum and reinforcing collection development. Two studies (Charney, 2014; Jankowska et al. 2014) also provide a baseline on the sustainability efforts of academic libraries, including library guides, instruction, research, institutional repositories, collaboration with other units on campus, and the role of Library Information Studies (LIS) schools.

### The Role of Library Associations

Library associations are the backbones that connect the library community worldwide, through networking, professional development, sharing, and collaborating. ALA, the "largest and oldest library association in the world," was founded in 1876 during the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia (ALA, 2015a). With over 50,000 members, ALA's highly complex structure offers myriad options for participation. Members may join divisions, sections, committees, discussion groups, task forces, and/or round tables. The overall goal of establishing a roundtable is to promote a field of librarianship that does not fall under any single division. While roundtables may recommend policy and action to other units, ALA is not committed to any declaration of policy.

Placing a high value on learning, collaborating, and sharing is inherent to the library profession. Joining an established association, whether local or global, large or small, is one means of transforming values into action. Finding colleagues with whom to collaborate and share ideas strengthens the profession and thus the communities it serves. Library associations are also venues for creating strong partnerships to advocate for issues facing the profession and communities. As John Berry (2010)





says in a *Library Journal* column, “Every issue is a library issue.” He goes on to cite a resolution submitted in 1978 to move the ALA Headquarters to an Equal Rights Amendment state or district. The ALA Council defeated the resolution, but it demonstrates an infrastructure for advocacy within library associations.

### Task Force on the Environment (TFOE)

Well before “green“ and “sustainable“ became household words, libraries were drawing attention to these issues, as reflected in the establishment of the Task Force on the Environment (TFOE) in 1989 (Stoss, 2009). Spurred by the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in 1989 and created under the ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT), TFOE quickly contributed to the profession by publishing several articles and hosting the first ALA environmental program at its 1991 annual conference. A turning point occurred in scholarly publishing with the creation of *The Green Library Journal: Environmental Topics in Information World* (GLJ) in 1994, now the well-respected *Electronic Green Journal* (UCLA Library, 2015). Following their creation, TFOE and GLJ supported each other and were instrumental in emphasizing environmental concerns within the library community.

Over the next few years, TFOE hosted a variety of green programs at ALA conferences, including “How green is your library: environmentalists at work” in 1990 and “Environmentally and socially responsible business: finding the information to make the decision to buy or invest” in 1996. TFOE also introduced resolutions to promote greater environmental stewardship within ALA and at its conferences while providing a forum and open dialogue for the greater library community.

In 2000, ALA’s president, Sarah Ann Long, supported sustainability in her landmark project *Libraries Build Sustainable Communities* (LBSC), a two-year grant-funded partnership between ALA and Global Learning, Inc. (SRRT, 2000). This groundbreaking ALA initiative, heavily supported by TFOE, educated the library community on sustainability concepts and provided the tools for libraries to “serve as strategic assets and resources for building sustainable communities while building positive development, environmental integrity, and equitable access” (Stoss, 2003). One significant element of the program was a train-the-trainer preconference, which equipped participants with a “workshop in the box” to hold their own LBSC workshops back home. Libraries responded

to the call for environmental stewardship and education with a strong green-library movement.

TFOE continued its powerful advocacy for sustainable library efforts by meeting and offering at least one program during each ALA annual conference. At the same time, global events and social stressors led to library-budget cuts amid a rapidly changing environment, with increasingly digital formats. Accordingly, libraries were compelled to focus on managing change and providing new and key services to stay afloat. These cross-cutting institutional pressures caused a natural veering away from the siloed environmental focus, embracing a more complex, interconnected, full-spectrum sustainability concept. Despite continued efforts, membership, participation, and activism within TFOE plateaued and then significantly decreased, with very few attendees for the 2010 meeting at the ALA annual conference. The reasons for this decline are multifaceted, but it became clear that TFOE was no longer meeting the needs of library professionals even while they were clearly formulating and engaging in all three E’s of sustainability—environmental, economic, and social-equity—as a direct response to their increasingly informed and challenged communities. The question then emerged as to whether sustainability-engaged library professionals wanted and/or would support and contribute to a community of practitioners, an outlet for expressing their passion, a forum for communication and, equally important, a virtual “home.”

### Collaboration Leads to Webinar Series

In 2011, while co-writing a book chapter for *The Entrepreneurial Librarian*, the first author of this article and colleagues (2012a) drew from a survey designed to identify advocates, educators, and entrepreneurs involved in sustainable librarianship activities. Subsequently, she created the *Sustainable Librarians* LinkedIn space to connect respondents who participated in the survey. That same year, the second and third authors of this article met for the first time at the AASHE conference, where they both presented on sustainable libraries and co-facilitated a library-networking event. Informal communication regarding the need to strengthen and energize the library community regarding sustainability led to a virtual collaboration and a shared vision among these three library professionals. The goal of developing and implementing a series of free webinars emerged as a first step toward a national dialogue, and thus the four-part *Libraries for Sustainability* was born.

Figure 1 Libraries for Sustainability Webinar Series



GRAPH 1: INFORMATION ON WEBINARS

## LIBRARIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY WEBINAR SERIES

### WEBINAR PARTICIPATION BY THE NUMBERS

Data collected by 8/01/2015

#### WEBINAR 1: A Call to Action & Collaboration | February 28, 2012.



#### WEBINAR 2: Exploring Sustainability Practices in Libraries | April 24, 2012



#### WEBINAR 3: Engagement in Professional Library Organizations | June 12, 2012



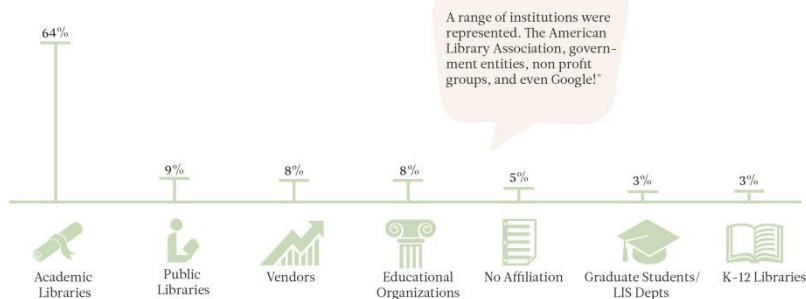
#### WEBINAR 4: Exploring More Sustainability Practices in Libraries | August 28, 2012.



### REGISTRANT PROFILES

- Collection Management Librarians
- Volunteer Outreach Coordinators
- Government Documents Librarians
- Administrators
- Catalogers
- Public Service Desk Librarians
- Reference Librarians
- Subject Liaisons
- Facilities Managers
- Graduate Students
- e-Resources Librarians
- Directors
- Circulation Staff
- Acquisitions Staff
- Law Librarians

### REGISTRANT AFFILIATIONS



A range of institutions were represented. The American Library Association, government entities, non profit groups, and even Google!

### A GLOBAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE!



The majority of registrants are from the USA and Canada. But we also had people registered from around the globe!

A seasoned distance-learning librarian, the first author was already adept at techniques for hosting online

sessions and had access to existing tools. The idea of a webinar series to initiate a national conversation seemed



within reach, with the stated intention “to facilitate dialog with the hope that leaders will emerge and begin to work on a new framework for collaboration.” A robust marketing effort was launched, which encouraged attendance by members of the *Sustainability Librarians* LinkedIn group, SRRT, and TFOE—including key leaders identified from the history and literature reviews. To broaden and maximize participation and input, presenters from a variety of library environments and roles were selected. All sessions were recorded for future viewing by those unable to participate (Filar Williams, 2012). Using a Google form for registration, participants were asked for their name, email address, library role, institution, hopes for the session, ideas for future webinars, and interest in presenting in webinars or becoming otherwise involved (Smith et al. 2012a). Gathering this information was important to better understand the needs and range of individuals interested in sustainability in libraries.

The first webinar, *Libraries for Sustainability: Call for Action and Collaboration*, took place in February 2012. The session featured invited guest Maria Jankowska as the most recent Chair of TFOE, to discuss the organization’s background, challenges, and successes, as well as her recommendations for next steps to revitalize TFOE and support the sustainable library movement in the United States and Canada. Participants shared their ideas regarding possible courses of action within ALA. A follow-up email was sent to all registrants with links to the recording and slides, a chat transcript, a bibliography of items mentioned, along with a few questions to further investigate options and ideas. Key questions included: Should this group be revitalized and/or is a change in direction indicated? What are some options for remaining engaged at the local and national levels? Where are opportunities for collaboration and action around broader sustainability issues? The organizers hoped that this conversation would spur leaders to organize a new ALA group or revitalize TFOE.

The second webinar, *Exploring Sustainability Practices in Libraries*, held in April 2012, featured speakers representing the following array of library initiatives:

- Kathryn Miller: Public Libraries, *Sustainability through library operations*
- Marianne Buehler: Academic Libraries, *Sustainability across the curriculum and research*
- Laura Barnes: School Libraries, *School libraries—lead by example*
- Mandy Henk: Community, *Confronting power*

The webinar also included an open discussion.

The registration form posed the question, “What do you hope to get out of the session?” (Smith et al. 2012b).

Responses indicated the need for new ideas, tips, and information. Other important themes included “understanding what libraries are doing to become more sustainable and what trends they are seeing,” “identifying applicable strategies and best practices,” and “developing a plan for sustainable practices.” Both the general and more specific responses confirmed the desire for a community to share practices and learn from each other. The topics presented, which represented a broad array of library initiatives, generated an engaged exchange of information and a lively discussion. By the conclusion of this second webinar interest seemed to be rising.

The third webinar, *Engagement in Professional Library Organizations*, held in June 2012, was scheduled just before the ALA annual conference to generate ideas and momentum. The discussion was designed to glean specific recommendations for successful sustainability activities within professional library organizations, including library associations, national and regional organizations, and other groups, such as discussion groups, task forces, committees, and social activities. Participants also shared their experiences using tools such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and listservs. The registration form asked for input regarding desire to be part of, or assist in forming, a group focused on sustainability within existing library associations (Filar Williams et al. 2012b). Participants were provided options including individual sections within ALA, AASHE, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions—Environmental Sustainability in Libraries Special Interest Group (IFLA ENSULIB), state and regional associations, and write-in suggestions. The majority of respondents selected ALA, but others suggested a range of cultural and local organizations, recommending outreach and partnerships with these sustainability leaders once an established ALA group was formed.

The webinar began with a recap of efforts to date and the introduction of five embedded facilitators—engaged and energetic librarians recruited to assist with the session. Participants broke into two virtual rooms, one for an ALA-focused discussion—in particular, the future of Task Force on the Environment (TFOE)—and the other to discuss alternative options for collaborating on sustainability in libraries. Participants self-selected a virtual room, then both groups rejoined for sharing. Plans were announced for a meet-up during the upcoming ALA conference, at the TFOE official meeting time, with the hopes that discussions on whether to revitalize TFOE or create a new group would become conclusive at that point.

The fourth and final webinar, *Exploring More Sustainability Practices in Libraries*, held in August 2012, focused on creating an action plan and facilitating an open discussion. Although this webinar had the



lowest registration numbers, many more people viewed the recording after the webinar as demonstrated in Figure 1. The registration form asked whether participants had presented, or had plans to present, on a sustainability topic and requested future webinar suggestions (Charney et al. 2012). The session began with a TFOE update report from Ashley Jones, a librarian from Miami University, who had assisted with the previous webinar and co-facilitated a meet-up at the ALA annual conference in June 2012. Similar themes and ideas coalesced from previous webinar discussions: revitalize TFOE or create a new group to be more inclusive and visible to all ALA members; create resources for people such as a toolkit with information, data, best practices, and so forth; work with ALA to make conferences greener; and seek collaborations for future conference sessions. Participants discussed at length whether to use the term “sustainability” in the group name to reflect broader engagement than is reflected in the term “environment,” and whether to create a new entity altogether. Some felt it would be wiser to remain within a well-established entity such as SRRT rather than starting from scratch, while others believed that sustainability was a large enough arena to warrant its own roundtable.

As Figure 1 demonstrates, a range of libraries and other entities were represented in the webinar series, including some from outside the profession and several from across the globe. The types of positions held within library and related organizations also varied. Registration was widely marketed as a way for interested parties to access the recording even if they were not able to participate in real time. Of the 4,138 total views, 97% (4,024) were offline, with only 3% (114) viewed live. These recordings are still viewable and the offline views will only grow over time. These figures reflect significant desire for remote engagement and SustainRT is strongly committed to connect with those not able to attend a conferences, including professionals in other countries.

### SustainRT is Formed

The deliberations and discussions during the webinar series led to the decision to create a new ALA Round Table. By December 2012, with Jones taking the lead, a plan was formulated to navigate the logistics of creating this organizational form. Working with ALA, Jones and her collaborators implemented and promoted an e-petition, which requires 100 signatures from ALA members; gathered input from others in the library community; drafted a mission statement; created a logo; secured an online space on ALA’s “Connect” portal; and scheduled a networking meet-up for the ALA Midwinter Meeting in January 2013. More signatures than necessary were gathered to form the Round Table. A

small team from this emerging practitioner community presented the e-petition to ALA Council at Midwinter 2013, which granted its immediate approval. SustainRT members then collectively decided on *Libraries Fostering Resilient Communities* as a byline for the group.

An assortment of professionals from academic, school, and public libraries, among other settings, came together, virtually at first and later in person, at ALA meetings. The webinar series described above jumpstarted a sustainability conversation, which led to a fairly organic process for creating SustainRT. Unwittingly, this process turned out to be based on the three fundamental elements of a CoP: a *domain* of knowledge, a *community* of people, and the shared *practice* within this domain (Wenger et al. 2002). Member benefits of a CoP, as Wegner et al. (2002) state, are assistance with challenges, access to expertise, team contributions, confidence building, enjoyment, meaningful participation, and a sense of belonging. In a practical sense, a CoP allows its members to manage knowledge efficiently and then share and steward that knowledge effectively. However, the group’s knowledge is also “an integral part of their activities and interactions, and they [the CoP] serve as living repository for that knowledge” (Wegner et al. 2002). While a full exploration of CoPs does not fit the scope of this article, it is useful to note that this model now guides SustainRT’s work.

Vital to the group’s success is a consistent message for members to share in the responsibility (and attendant satisfaction) of improving the group’s evolution over time. SustainRT’s foundation rests not merely on its members’ professional achievements, but equally on their ethical and personal stake in the well-being, empowerment, and blossoming of the communities they serve. Continued success will depend on marketing the community value of this group, so that membership increases as existing members invest their energy and legitimize its voice (Wenger et al. 2002).

### SustainRT’s Place within the Profession

The *Libraries for Sustainability* webinar series, which involved a host of presenters, facilitators, participants, and organizers, jumpstarted the formation of SustainRT as a CoP. Casting the net broadly to capture as many sustainability library practices and practitioners as possible was key, and indeed was prominent at the very foundation of SustainRT, in opening an inclusive dialogue. The most dedicated individuals formed an interim steering committee to navigate the complex structure of ALA, an organization with over 50,000 members. A backbone began to form, connecting geographically and topically scattered pieces. With each subsequent resource, meeting, and conference came a





growing sense of community and shared enthusiasm, with the knowledge that together we could accomplish even more. Some of the intangible values of a CoP listed by Wenger et al. (2002) are an increased ability to innovate, relationship building, a sense of belonging, a spirit of inquiry, and “the professional confidence and identity [CoPs] confer on their members.” Special acknowledgment goes to Ashley Jones, who stepped forward as the first SustainRT Coordinator, the group’s lead officer. Her pioneering spirit led the Round Table into the next phase of development and growth. While electing officers is a requirement within the structure of ALA, SustainRT established a decentralized and distributed leadership structure, a growing “ecology of leadership.”

ALA Council’s approval of SustainRT in 2013 affirmed the value that such a group brings. The professional association provided strong support to SustainRT from the start, including a capable staff liaison for guidance through administrative procedures and a seasoned council liaison who shared ideas on outreach and procedures when working within ALA. According to Wenger et al. (2002), these “external roles” are important, “especially as communities mature, because communities depend on external sponsors for access to influence and resources and for building credibility with teams and business units.” Looking ahead, there are limitless ways SustainRT can grow within ALA to bolster sustainability engagement within the profession. SustainRT provides a unique means for all types of libraries to interact, allowing the interpenetration of the three E’s, and creating a holistic, more synthesized approach to sustainability in libraries.

SustainRT became an official ALA body with the election of its officers in June 2014 and has moved rapidly from an engaged to an active stage. The CoP culture of SustainRT operates from a decentralized leadership structure, intentionally encouraging members to step into leadership roles. Members create, expand, and exchange knowledge, as well as develop individual capabilities, such as posting resources on the website, adding content to SustainRT’s social media channels, learning to organize webinars, participating in conference-submission reviews, helping draft resolutions, implementing and contributing to the blog, and learning how to run a membership drive. Many of our members are stretching in these new roles. The aspiration is to continue increasing the passion, commitment, and identification within the group and expand its expertise (Wenger et al. 2002).

A “Think-Pair-Share” exercise was conducted at the first SustainRT board meeting in June 2014 (SustainRT, 2014). The group was asked to collectively respond to the statement, “When we are successful, we will have....” Sheets of paper on the wall were soon filled with specific visions, including “Convey that

sustainability is not an ‘add-on’”; “Develop a situational awareness of what is already being done in the area of sustainability in ALA and in libraries modeling best practices, at conference (both in our activities and by influencing how the conference is run) and through resolutions at council”; “Boil down our message to a tag line”; “Develop resources and an online toolkit to share best practices and help others avoid reinventing the wheel”; and “Adopt and practice a decentralized leadership culture within SustainRT.” All of these statements have come to fruition. Other ideas from the exercise are infusing conversations and taking shape through the project teams, for example, “Embedding sustainability in the profession”; “Providing a clear understanding of the sustainable, resilient, and regenerative nature of libraries and how libraries can adaptively manage the future”; “Shifting the culture of the profession and the perception of libraries in our communities so that we all have a renewed sense of the role of libraries within the context of the social-ecological system”; and “Talking to library schools and students.”

From the exercise, project teams were formed for governance, environmental scan, online education, and outreach (with a program-project team added later). Each team chose a chair and was offered a board liaison. The governance team quickly collaborated with ALA’s Conference Planning Committee to set up plastic badge reuse stations at the January 2015 midwinter meeting, a first step in helping to “green” ALA conferences. The establishment of a searchable public database to provide a cohesive and growing picture of sustainability advancement in libraries is now well underway, a project pioneered by the Environmental Scan Team, which is collecting publications, policies, and procedures, facility projects, best practices, curriculum support, programming, and community-outreach documents from the broad library community. The Online Education Team launched a free webinar series, beginning with a showcase of lightning talks from the ALA annual conference; a presentation about ALA’s Center for the Future of Libraries focusing on the trends of resilience and sharing economy; an IT lesson in saving energy costs with the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency’s EnergyStar Program; and a “Book to Action” program featuring Chelsea Green Publishing and the Hayward Public Library. The Programs Team organized lightning round presentations at two annual conferences. With a goal of 300 members by the end of 2016, the Outreach Project Team initiated “Each One, Reach One,” a membership drive including a gift-certificate incentive to a green-products company. An active and skilled webmaster keeps activities updated and a blog adds another layer of dynamism to the group’s public face, as well as providing opportunities for contributions from members.



The summer of 2015 was a fertile time for sustainability and community-related advancements within ALA itself. Sari Feldman, ALA’s President for 2015–16, launched the Libraries Transform (LT) campaign, which highlights how libraries support individual opportunity and community progress. One of its goals is to “Energize and engage all library workers as well as build external advocates to influence local, state, and national decision makers” (Feldman, 2015). The LT campaign includes the Center for the Future of Libraries, which, according to ALA Executive Director Keith Michael Fiels, helps libraries “identify emerging trends, provoke discussion on how to respond to and shape the future, and build connections with experts and innovative thinkers in other fields who can help libraries understand and meet the challenges of the future” (ALA, 2013a). One trend identified by the Center is resilience, which is particularly aligned with SustainRT’s core

value of equity and access; the term “resilience” is actually embedded in SustainRT’s byline. The statement, “Truly resilient communities would embrace distributed renewable energy, support diversified local agriculture, and foster social equity and inclusion,” demonstrates that ALA already upholds the three E’s of sustainability. Also related is the LT campaign’s Libraries Transforming Communities program, which trains library staff to better understand communities, change processes and thinking to make conversations more community-focused, be proactive to community issues, and put community aspirations first (ALA, 2015b).

A particularly powerful example of SustainRT’s work so far, and ALA’s support, is the passing of an ALA resolution, *The Importance of Sustainable Libraries* (ALA Council, 2015). Within ALA, a resolution is “a clear and formal expression of the

**Table 1** SustainRT Communities of Practice Model

CoP Lifecycle Phase	CoP Lifecycle Phase Explanation	SustainRT Steps Taken
<b>Inquire</b>	Explore, in order to identify audience, purpose, goals, vision	Webinar series with embedded questions regarding: the resurrection of TFOE, hoped for outcomes of a webinar session, how to initiate contact with library groups, how to address diverse needs of all library types, interest in presenting at sustainability conferences.
<b>Design</b>	Define activities, technologies, group processes, roles to support the group	Used virtual technology for webinars, including chat function to stimulate discussion, ideas, and connections; invited guest speakers to webinars.
<b>Prototype</b>	Pilot the community with a select group of key stakeholders, to gain commitment, test assumptions, refine the strategy, and establish a success story	Formed an interim steering committee across library types; navigated the channels of ALA for becoming an official round table; collaborated on writing bylaws; selected neutral title of “Coordinator” for lead officer.
<b>Launch</b>	Roll out the community to a broader audience, in ways that engage newcomers, and deliver immediate benefits.	Launched social media, listserv and website with resources, news, events, and opportunities; circulated e-petition and asked everyone to share it with colleagues and other library groups; used open LinkedIn group for communicating; celebrated approval of the round table at an in-person social event.
<b>Grow</b>	Engage members in collaborative learning and knowledge sharing activities, group projects and networking events, that meet individual, group and organizational goals while creating an increasing cycle of participation and contribution.	‘Think Pair Share’ exercise at initial in-person meeting to elicit ideas from everyone; established ‘Project Teams,’ intentionally named to stimulate collaborative and tangible results; Lightning Rounds for sharing success stories at conferences; collaborative environmental scan of sustainability library projects; widely communicated goal of 300 members by end of 2015.
<b>Sustain</b>	Cultivate and assess the knowledge and “products” created by the community, to inform new strategies, goals, activities, roles, and technologies.	Continue to populate Project Teams, encouraging members to serve as chairs, with officers moving to liaison roles; open virtual meetings prior to in-person meeting to gather ideas from everyone; free and open professional development webinar series.

opinion or will of the assembly which supports ALA’s strategic plan, its mission and/or its core values” (ALA, 2013b). The ALA initiatives outlined above provided a logical, relevant, and welcoming bridge to passing this resolution in June 2015. This synergistic awakening within ALA as an organization invites its members to

commit to more specific, unified sustainability practices, presumably with support and insights from SustainRT. From greening library conferences, to offering professional development, to funding more sustainability projects, success will be partially measured by “the energy, commitment to, and visibility of the



community,” until SustainRT becomes “institutionalized as a core value-added capability” by ALA (Cambridge et al. 2005). Rebecca Miller’s *Library Journal* editorial sounds the alarm on *The Importance of Sustainable Libraries* resolution as a call to action. Recognizing that the sustainability work of libraries will be daunting in the face of “a broad shift in entrenched practice,” Miller notes how SustainRT set up structures to plan dynamically for this shift through alliances with library, civic, grassroots, business, and other groups. She appreciates the terms “resilient” and “regenerative” in the resolution, stating that they “add a supercharge that hints at challenges inherent in the sea change, literal and figurative, ahead.” She refers to the library community as “one vast, smart, ethical network that is poised to facilitate this work and make an impact, within the profession and well beyond” (Miller, 2015).

### Model for Fostering Dialogue and Collaboration

Due to the interest and passion staked around the subject of sustainability, individual and group efforts combined to move SustainRT forward relatively rapidly. Working from a more formal model, however, such as a CoP, would have provided an even more solid foundation from which to become established and grow. One of the goals of this article is to provide a model for library (and other) groups to start on firm ground.

The trajectory of SustainRT is reflected in the life cycle offered in EDUCAUSE’s *Community of Practice Design Guide*, which was adapted from Robert McDermott (Cambridge et al. 2005). Based on the history, development, needs, and aspirations of SustainRT, the preliminary model exhibited in Table 1 is offered to other groups starting out or working to revitalize membership.

SustainRT’s own challenges include how to involve school librarians, since their schedules do not accommodate daytime meetings and they do not typically work during the summer. Possible solutions include targeted outreach through school librarians’ professional groups, listservs and publications; creating a dedicated “home” for them within SustainRT (e.g., a Project Team); and fostering connections with public and academic libraries to support school libraries in the face of budget cuts and a shrinking workforce. There is also the question of how members can add to conversations when they cannot immediately attend the session. One idea is to solicit comments, questions, and statements in advance, just as a radio host does, so that others may respond. Finally, when guest presenters lack experience in the webinar environment, extra training sessions are necessary. Over time, as more members (and society in general) become accustomed to webinars, this challenge will likely resolve.

Ideas for strengthening and growing SustainRT include creating avenues for LIS faculty and students to connect and share resources; offering opportunities to share members’ passion and expertise through storytelling; mentoring peers; creating a sustainability “buddy system”; offering outreach to LIS students; and providing internships. In addition, SustainRT can support ALA’s *Libraries Transforming Communities* endeavors by developing instructional programs to engage community conversations as well as leading citizens to reliable information and empowering them to be proactive in the face of challenges to come.

### Conclusion

The journey from scattered individuals and disconnected library groups working on sustainability efforts to a unified, forward-thinking official roundtable, within a newly realized CoP framework, sets the stage for measureable change in the near future. SustainRT’s member-driven design supports the concept that social responsibility requires individuals to commit to action, while collegial support through ALA maximizes the library profession’s ability to address climate disruption along with economic and social disparities.

Our impetus for engaging the library community and joining forces around sustainability was born out of a sense of urgency to openly, unabashedly, and relentlessly address climate change, environmental degradation, and social inequities. As the instigators in rallying passionate and engaged colleagues around the *Libraries for Sustainability* webinar series, the authors hope that SustainRT’s work will provoke radical conversations and lead to critically needed change at the local, regional, and national levels, in our libraries, library associations, communities, and beyond. In his groundbreaking book, *Don’t Even Think About It*, environmental communication expert George Marshall (2014) writes about the need for unbiased and direct discourse on climate change, which is too often stymied by internal cultures of academia, politics, the electoral process, and the media. He laments that, “Climate change finds no foothold in the conversations between workmates, neighbors, or even friends and family...Each silence appears to be built on the other silences, but they have a common basis in the need to avoid anxiety and defend ourselves.” He celebrates the prolonged struggles of social movements that broke through socially constructed silence around wicked problems. SustainRT also breaks a silence, allowing sustainability, including addressing the urgency of climate change, to resonate as a core mission of libraries as community organizations. SustainRT provides an open forum that empowers those engaged in sustainability. In turn, SustainRT members and non-member participants can gird their communities with



reliable information while maintaining safe spaces for citizens to converse, connect, and learn.

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