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Navigating Institutional Landscapes: Grassroots Sustainability in Library Contexts

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Abstract

Like many institutions and organizations, libraries face complications stemming from the different values of formal administration and the individuals doing the work. Sustainability and climate crisis work is one area where these conflicting priorities can come into play. Administrative leaders often have their own agenda, goals and actions; they shift to a new institution and with that, values, actions and services shift in tandem, directly affecting individuals' work and organizational culture. This article provides a brief history of sustainability work in libraries, explores the complications of conventional management, and offers alternative examples of grassroots leadership for climate action work in libraries.

Brief history of sustainability and climate action in libraries

The integration of sustainability and climate action within libraries has evolved significantly, mirroring growing environmental awareness. Libraries began addressing these themes as early as the 1970s, with groups like the Special Library Association (SLA) forming natural resources and environmental information divisions (Stoss, 2009). In 1989, grassroots efforts by a group of librarians in the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association (ALA) led to the creation of the Task Force

on the Environment (TFOE). In 1990, Terry Link and members of the Task Force on the Environment (1990) published "Sources for a Small Planet." This bibliography categorized emerging environmental resources to help libraries and educators find and access environmental information. The 1990s saw a focus on "greening" physical buildings through energy efficiency and waste reduction, with "green libraries" becoming synonymous with sustainable building practices and the adoption of certifications like Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) (Antonelli, 2008; Anwar & Wei, 2022).

By 2008, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) had formally recognized libraries as important contributors to sustainability in the information society. This recognition helped lead to the establishment, in 2009, of the Environmental Sustainability and Libraries section (ENSULIB) (Lux, 2008). Through the late 2000s, libraries expanded to include environmental information and education, embracing social and economic dimensions aligned with the 'triple bottom line.' Interest in sustainability and green practices in libraries continued to grow with increasing numbers of activities and discussions around these topics. Maria Jankowska's retrospective article traced the growing engagement of librarians in environmental issues, highlighting key initiatives and developments that appeared between 1989 and 2011 (Jankowska, 2011). Afterward, the ALA's focus shifted from green initiatives to broader sustainability, leading to the creation of the ALA Sustainability Round Table (SustainRT) in 2013. Additionally, the New York Library Association's (NYLA) Sustainability Libraries Initiative (SLI) in 2014, along with ALA naming sustainability a core value in 2019 (ALA, 2023; Filar Williams et al., 2015; Sustainable Libraries Initiative, 2022). SLI further supported this direction by introducing certification programs to align library practices with global environmental goals and position libraries as community sustainability exemplars.

In today's changing climate, libraries are vital community hubs, offering essential resources and support during climate-related events. Academic libraries, as exemplified by Embree and Gilman's (2020) Sustainability Hub, foster community engagement, while public libraries are increasingly recognized as Resilience Hubs (Laurian et al., 2025). This shift emphasizes climate literacy and community engagement, as seen with ALA's Resilient Communities grant initiative (ALA, 2020b). Libraries are expanding services to include tool and seed libraries and serving as safe places during extreme weather. Organizations like the California State Library continue these efforts with guides such as their Climate and Sustainability Action Guide (Alliance for Library Impact, 2024). However, clearer understanding, dedicated leadership, and suitable assessment tools are crucial for enhancing sustainable practices (Tribelhorn, 2023). The history of sustainability in libraries reflects a growing recognition of interconnected environmental, social, and economic factors, transforming them from "green" buildings to active participants in building sustainable, resilient communities.

Leadership, Libraries, and Sustainability

Library professionals, with their commitment to democracy and information stewardship, are uniquely positioned to champion sustainability beyond conventional environmentalism, embracing community activism, economic justice, and social equity

(Filar Williams et al., 2015). Librarians' vital role includes empowering individuals, helping conversation, and providing resources for a more resilient future. Despite this alignment, sustainability and climate work remain only partially integrated into the profession. Library workers face immense emotional strain from budget cuts, job creep, systemic inequalities, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and opioid crisis. Frontline staff often meet patrons experiencing homelessness and mental health crises, often without adequate training or support, risking harm (Lawrence, 2024). A study of urban public library workers revealed frequent stress, harassment, and burnout, worsened by insufficient administrative follow-up after incidents (Urban Librarians Unite, 2022). Political pressures intensify these internal stresses, as librarians face pressure to align programming with external agendas (Hanell et al., 2025). This constrained autonomy and top-down directives often lead to uncompensated extra responsibilities (Newman, 2024; Salyers et al., 2018). Intensified workloads, reduced autonomy, and detached leadership deepen cycles of burnout and turnover (Davis Kendrick, 2020; Koseff, 2025; Schultheis, 2025; Stauffer, 2025).

An institutionalized expectation that management alone sets direction can undermine staff motivation for initiatives like climate action. Power dynamics and structures often create tension, treating employees as passive resources (Edwards & Hodder, 2022). This structural alienation leads to top-down solutions that disregard frontline experience, local nuances, and staff ability (Grace & Sen, 2013). Without mutual understanding between decision-makers and those executing decisions, imposed solutions become inconvenient additions, breeding resentment, especially when management boasts of "doing more with less," eroding morale and contributing to feelings of being undervalued and overextended.

The concept of "vocational awe"—the belief that library work is inherently good and above criticism—highlights unrealistic expectations that, coupled with chronic under compensation, contribute to burnout (Ettarh, 2018; Moran & Nadir, 2021). These perceived qualities stem from librarianship values like community service and the public good (Ettarh, 2018; Gibson et al., 2017; Jaeger et al., 2016; Martin, 2019; Morales et al., 2014; Rubin et al., 2020). These values are often deeply ingrained in library workers who see their work as a calling they were drawn to, in part due to the orientation towards community service (Ettarh, 2018). In the past couple of decades, these values have evolved and expanded to include sustainability, social justice and responsibility (Gibson et al., 2017; Jaeger et al., 2016; Martin, 2019; Morales et al., 2014).

These values often conflict with management's priorities: higher education administrators often prioritize growth and financial success, while public sector leaders focus on short-term savings over long-term investment (Cox, 2018; Miller, 2015). Business-oriented management practices and structures can create organizational friction, hindering sustainability efforts and climate action (Evans, 2021; Paschalidou et al., 2022; Tansey, 2015). Entrenched management often perceives new ideas, especially from enthusiastic frontline staff, as threats. Dismissive remarks like "you're not jaded yet" convey cynicism, eroding staff confidence and passion for sustainability initiatives. Frequent administrative shifts and frontline burnout worsen these dynamics (Newman, 2024). Left unchecked, this culture of resistance fosters low morale and risks losing enthusiastic individuals crucial for community sustainability and library innovation.

Frequent management changes can frustrate climate librarianship initiatives. While supportive leadership that understands institutional interrelations with the environment can greatly aid climate action, the inverse is also true (Miller, 2015). Gaps, misunderstandings, silos, and a lack of support from leadership hinder the embedding of environmental sustainability in library policy and strategic plans, negatively changing budget and personnel allocation (Frederiks, 2020). Conflicts between sustainability goals and management norms are symptomatic of inherited rationales, knowledge systems, and power structures standard in libraries. These call for scrutiny during transformative climate action. Business-style leadership, despite touting "big picture thinking," often uses on times minuscule compared to climate change; as Elizabeth Merrit notes, "long-term planning often was only looking three or five years into the future" (Bothwell, 2018).

Finally, the notion that certain individuals—or a class of individuals—own universal leadership and ability, justifying the operation of "public institutions and society as corporations" (Klikauer, 2015), conflicts with librarianship's democratic values and often does not reflect reality. One example includes a study of Scandinavian cultural organizations which found that managers, while expressing a need for societal "relevance," lacked ideas on how to achieve it (Kann-Rasmussen, 2016).

Relationship with community

Knowledge hierarchies create epistemic and relational distance between experts (academics, scientists) and community members (Hajer, 2012). The intellectual insularity of expert communities has fueled populist mistrust of elitism, affecting public belief towards such knowledge. This gap was exploited by fossil fuel interests to create the illusion of climate change uncertainty (Bugden, 2022; Oreskes & Conway, 2022). This manipulation now extends to intermediary knowledge professions like journalism and teaching, discrediting them politically in myriad settings around North America (Nesbitt, 2024). Nor are librarians exempt, as recent events in the U.S. and Canada clearly show (Bendery, 2024; Gee, 2024; Kingkade, 2023; Levesque, 2024). This separation from knowledge creation and distribution is a critical obstacle to climate action. Libraries are uniquely positioned to reconnect communities to these processes; however, deconstructing these barriers and re-establishing community connection to cultural knowledge work requires intentional and rapid development within library practice.

Further disaffection arises from framing the library-community separation as "staff vs. patrons" (Almeida & Hoyer, 2020)—or worse, "customers." Trust is invaluable in library disaster response (Patin, 2020b, 2020a; Stricker, 2019) and community resilience (Baja, 2021; Ciriaco & Wong, 2022; Mardis et al., 2021). This trust is crucial for safe access to recovery resources yet may be undermined by organizational hierarchies. A key concern for adaptive climate librarianship is supporting or increasing this trust during institutional climate transformation to avoid politicization and prevent beliefs of libraries "ghoulishly profiting" from climate impacts (Burgess, 2017).

On a related note, a limited view of the library, as an institution separate from its environment, informs inward-looking climate action and sustainability initiatives that prioritize changing internal practices over interfacing with and contributing to broader

societal infrastructure (Oliver, 2023). This limited vision is also clear in library disaster planning, which typically focuses on incidents within library facilities rather than preparing for community-wide disruptions (Patin, 2021).

Assessment

Beyond assumptions of hierarchy, other management values like optimization and efficiency may conflict with sustainability as well, leading to tensions with climate action. These approaches often prioritize reducing ecological impacts through energy efficiency, relying on quantitative, "objective" data for "rational" optimization (Klikauer, 2015). This justifies surveillance in organizations and the environment (Bryant & Wilson, 1998; Gray & Bebbington, 2000; Luke, 1999), while de-legitimizing unquantifiable knowledge. This organizational bias towards quantifiable data creates a feedback loop, perpetually demanding more tools and "qualified" individuals to interpret it, favoring easily measured information over meaningful information that is harder for these tools and individuals to assess and interpret—"what gets measured, gets managed." Furthermore, the sole pursuit of efficiency can increase labor, material, and energy use (Wolfe, 2012). And, as the climate changes, infrastructure will need de-optimizing to perform across broader climatic conditions (Chachra, 2023).

Optimization and assessment tools also pose complications. Systems, like LEED, are seen as box-ticking exercises rather than drivers of meaningful change. Web articles describe "cheating" LEED for financial gain through tax incentives and greenwashing, rather than ecological benefit (Frank et al., 2013; Seville, 2011). The debate between financial and environmental benefits persists; doing the actual work prioritizes larger benefits but "sells" their work to management through financial returns. Libraries sometimes use the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for benchmarking, yet Doro (2024) argues the SDGs are inadequate for assessing academic library environmental sustainability due to capitalist underpinnings, lack of Indigenous inclusion, and political complexities. Applying only SDGs leads to mapping existing activities without fostering meaningful climate action. Doro proposes alternative frameworks prioritizing degrowth, like Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS), true cost accounting (TCA), and incorporating Indigenous Knowledges, for more nuanced and impactful measurement.

Meanwhile, valuable information and experiences are ignored by this lens. Indigenous knowledge systems and keepers have provided fundamental and unrecognized leadership in environmental stewardship of their lands since time immemorial, and it is precisely this kind of leadership that is more important than ever as western governance structures stall out and backtrack on their responsibilities. Bridging Indigenous and Western ways of knowing is complex and careful work due to philosophical differences and power imbalances favoring settler traditions, yet Indigenous perspectives are critical for sustainability. Different Indigenous librarians have emphasized metaphysical, holistic, relational, and intergenerational approaches (Bitz, 2023), relying on diverse intelligences (interpersonal, emotional, kinesthetic, spiritual) and knowledge systems to repair ecological and social relationships (Littletree et al., 2020). Land teachings also connect people to traditional values or ways of knowing, by asking "how am I fulfilling my role in this relationship?" (Stinson, 2018).

Grassroots leadership

Grassroots efforts often drive library sustainability initiatives, with staff and community members championing green practices and environmental awareness. These efforts integrate sustainability into existing programs, leverage interests, and foster community engagement (Udell, 2025). Administrative responses, and the sustainability of the work itself, vary based on individual library contexts, resources, and management priorities. Libraries actively support grassroots efforts, while others hesitate, creating a nuanced relationship between management and worker activism. Bureaucratic constraints and resistance to revamping long-standing practices pose barriers. For instance, shifting from print to digital summer reading materials can face opposition from decision-makers committed to traditional methods who argue that print is crucial for digitally underserved communities. Yet, this may brush aside experiments that could foster sustainability without sacrificing accessibility.

Small, manageable experiments and informal leadership have played a significant, underrecognized, and typically under-resourced role in advancing library sustainability. Below, we share examples from our personal involvement or close familiarity, detailing how these projects interacted with formal management practices.

Academic Libraries - Internal sustainability work

The power of grassroots initiatives in libraries, often beginning with individual staff actions, fosters a culture of sustainability beyond large projects. For example, one library's staff-led composting effort, initially an individual endeavor, was later integrated with building services through initiative-taking collaboration, proving how bottom-up engagement can use existing infrastructure for sustainability. Other examples showing this grassroots engagement include creating a reusable "party pack" to reduce single-use items at internal events and buying reusable breakroom items.

Beyond reusable items, one librarian—despite the potential issues with the UN SDGs—used the momentum from an SDG exhibit on campus to enroll the library in the Sustainable Libraries Initiative Certification Program (Sustainable Libraries Initiative, 2018). To meet SLI goals, the library formed a Sustainability Committee to guide the process and developed a formal Library Sustainability Policy to ensure accountability.

Another librarian interested in campus sustainability realized work was needed closer to home. Collaborating with a facility colleague, the librarian formed a committee that conducted an energy audit, brought in recycling stations, created a resource guide, hosted sustainability lunch-in-learns, and launched a monthly internal newsletter. Yet this example also illustrates a fundamental challenge facing bottom-up sustainable library work. Despite positive momentum, this work proved unsustainable; the "committee" was essentially one individual. When that person left, the work ceased due to lack of management support for continuation.

Academic Libraries - Community engaged sustainability work

Academic libraries can start community-engaged sustainability through internal work, fostering broader campus collaboration. For instance, the library that began staff composting used this experience to partner with a student club, expanding composting campus-wide. Their student-managed public composting pilot exemplifies libraries as living laboratories for campus sustainability, highlighting the benefits of grassroots approaches integrated into existing systems. Similarly, the library that enrolled in the SLI certification gained visibility from their internal efforts, leading to formal recognition by the university for the library's contribution to the campus Climate Action Plan. In turn, this momentum supports the library in strategically cultivating further partnerships for climate justice, especially for marginalized county groups.

With visibility and momentum, individuals can engage directly in campus projects. Librarians have used their success to secure committee seats, take part in campus events, share experiences, support faculty/student work, and collaborate with neighboring institutions. Expanded and innovative programming and lending options are also highly visible ways to promote community sustainability by distributing the material and energy costs associated with individual items through prolonged or wider use. Some academic libraries lend solar chargers, energy meters, mending kits, and citizen science kits, among other things, while holding workshops and events on their use. One library even offers refillable whiteboard markers and t-shirt rags as erasers, combining sustainable items with standard lending.

While internal actions can offer a good start, they are not the only way, nor are they exempt from managerial obstacles. A recurring point of discussion among academic librarians is that they often run into resistance from administrators when trying to implement community-engaged work beyond the traditional scholarly related projects such as workshops on how to cite or what peer-review is. A telling example: of 78 libraries applying for an ALA climate action grant, only 14 were academic (ALA, 2020a). One example includes two librarians who, when unable to access formal university sustainability leadership, created a physical and virtual library space to fill campus gaps. This space offers resources, hosts events, helps discussions, collaborates with students and faculty, and displays sustainability art/science projects. As this work gained traction, navigating university and library hierarchies presented challenges. While early efforts were distinguished by an initiative-taking outreach to both the broader community and the wider campus—extending the library's engagement beyond traditional resources, the approach to measuring success has often differed from institutional expectations. While enthusiasm and anecdotal feedback were primary impact indicators, formal leadership increasingly demanded quantitative assessment. This push, coupled with evolving regulations on space, food, and project approvals, risks stifling the spontaneity and morale of student-focused initiatives, hindering the grassroots energy that drove their success. Such disconnects between institutional structures and initiative-taking student efforts hinder grassroots initiatives and exemplify one reason sustainability work can stagnate.

Public Libraries

Public libraries have immense potential to serve as community hubs for resilience, education, and sustainability. Across the United States, public libraries increasingly function as vibrant sites for participatory science projects (Au, 2023) embedding sustainability and environmental awareness into permanent programming that can endure beyond shifting political climates or budget constraints. Notably, the Los Angeles Public Library's Neighborhood Science (NeiSci) Initiative effectively engages diverse communities, including youth and historically underrepresented groups, in environmental data collection on air quality, urban heat islands, biodiversity, and other locally relevant concerns (Los Angeles Public Library, n.d.). Similarly, other libraries collaborate with organizations like NOAA, NASA and SciStarter, which supports libraries in launching participatory science programs (SciStarter, 2025). For example, Maricopa County Library District and Phoenix Public Library partnered with SciStarter for participatory science kits and community engagement events, promoting scientific literacy and civic engagement (Maricopa County Library District, n.d.; Peet, 2017). Such initiatives show libraries' potential in democratizing science, enhancing environmental awareness, and fostering resilient communities.

However, these ambitions face practical challenges. Driven by passion, these community-centered projects often depend heavily on librarians who actively take initiative beyond their official responsibilities. However, internal institutional challenges, such as staffing shortages, departmental silos, power dynamics, or complex procedural requirements, can limit support, prompting librarians to seek resources and collaborations externally. At times, administrators' emphasis on procedural compliance, although well-intentioned, inadvertently discourages enthusiastic librarians by imposing complicated approval processes. Such hurdles not only delay meaningful initiatives but can also demoralize enthusiastic librarians eager to introduce enriching programming. Additionally, this organizational climate may lead librarians to avoid openly sharing their programming experiences or insights, as doing so could attract scrutiny or complicate their relationships within the institution, particularly when initiative-taking approaches are viewed critically or negatively.

Sustainability initiatives relying on buy-in from leadership are vulnerable to political shifts; new leaders may prioritize visible, short-term projects over long-term sustainability. Consequently, meaningful efforts often devolve into superficial activities for media exposure. To take one example, a public library in Canada introduced an enormously popular seed library pilot only to quietly shutter it after the first round of media coverage due to the effort, personnel, and resources needed to support the popular collection appropriately. Both staff and community members expressed interest in supporting the initiative, but no opportunity was offered for feedback or continuity. Grassroots initiatives—like community gardens, repair cafés, upcycling events, clothing swaps, e-bike lending programs, or tool-lending libraries—often meet administrative resistance citing liability or compliance, especially when deviating from political agendas. These programs are often the first cut during budget reductions.

Despite the challenges, librarians persist by creatively navigating around institutional barriers. They forge external relationships, collaborate directly with local community groups or patrons with needed ability, nonprofits, and federal partners, and secure essential resources independently. Their dedication highlights a tension between

frontline librarians' commitment to serving their communities and administrators' bureaucratic priorities, emphasizing the need for institutional leadership that actively supports, rather than hinders, initiative-taking efforts to address local needs.

Returning to the example of seed libraries, these emergent initiatives reflect community resilience, sustainability, biodiversity, and food sovereignty (Peekhaus, 2018; Ramsey, 2018). However, they are complex undertakings that must be adequately supported. Libraries must carefully manage seed collections to avoid distributing mislabeled or chemically coated seeds, or spreading invasive species, which can harm ecosystems and erode community trust (Cook, 2019). Libraries should proactively collaborate with local botanists, gardening experts, and environmental specialists for guidance on seed management, correct labeling, and ecological considerations. Crucially, libraries must familiarize themselves with state-specific seed laws and regulations for compliance and ecosystem protection (Ramsey, 2018). Libraries distribute seeds only from trusted vendors, not accepting community returns, ensuring safety though limiting the "library" aspect. Libraries accepting broader donations or returns should offer workshops on seed harvesting and request seed sourcing transparency to safeguard biodiversity and foster long-term community engagement and trust.

While the library sharing model is inherently sustainable, effective leadership can better promote these aspects. Nashville Public Library's documentary, "It's All Connected: The Art of Sustainability," explores how their daily operations and collections, including their Seed Exchange, Library of Things, Repair Fairs, and community garden, educate the community on sustainable practices, showcasing local partners from local non-profits, municipal departments, community gardens, and even the local zoo.

Professional work

Grassroots sustainability work is crucial for the growth of professional associations. The SLI and IFLA's ENSULIB are prominent examples, alongside related groups within other library associations, from sections for environmental studies to dedicated working groups. ALA's SustainRT appeared from a grassroots Community of Practice (CoP) formed of individuals enthusiastic about sustainability in libraries. Recognizing a lack of unified venues for sharing best practices, they used their success, including the "Libraries for Sustainability" online seminar series (Filar Williams, 2012), to advocate for a more official organization. Connecting with "green library" pioneers (Antonelli, 2008; Stoss, 2009) and gathering over 500 petition signatures, they successfully proposed an ALA Round Table. Though initially successful, becoming ALA's fastest-growing roundtable, SustainRT faces ongoing barriers common to large, bureaucratic organizations with required membership (Filar Williams et al., 2015). Burnout, turnover, and organizational continuity impede momentum. Despite open access resources, attracting committed volunteers remains a struggle, compounded by inadequate resources, ineffective communication, unclear committee roles, and competing priorities within the profession.

Another example of these on-the-ground social interactions driving climate action can be seen in the British Columbia Library Association (BCLA) Climate Action Committee (CAC). Peers and colleagues working at different institutions formed a foundational CoP after they noticed they were often meeting each other informally at climate activism

events in their community and began to build on that momentum. This group eventually led to the establishment of the province-wide CAC, supported by receptive leadership at the BCLA. Driven by a shared commitment to the climate emergency, the CAC provides a dedicated regional forum for library professionals to learn, strategize, and take initiative-taking measures. Recognizing climate change's impacts on libraries, communities, and ecosystems, the CAC has been developing targeted resources, nation-wide events like Climate Action Week, and circulating varied successful strategies from their own institutions. Outcomes have included developing a Climate Action Statement for the provincial sector (BCLA, 2023), raising awareness of library vulnerabilities to climate change, benchmarking the sector's climate-related work (BCLA, 2024), and meeting collective discussions for the profession. The social connections forged through this work are both highly valued and integral to its long-term viability, though engaging, onboarding, and keeping new volunteers is an ongoing challenge.

Grassroots sustainability work in the library profession has also occurred in publishing, as this journal exemplifies. Started in the early 1990s by librarian Maria Anna Jankowska, the *Electronic Green Journal* (e-ISSN: 1076-7975) aimed to “advance the role of academic libraries in sustainability initiatives through publication of international research on the topic” (Khalid et al., 2024), providing a consistent outlet for promoting sustainability in libraries discourse through digital curation and a digital repository platform, using a Diamond Open Access model to support accessibility and preserve authors' rights.

Individuals going beyond their libraries and campuses

Individuals often integrate sustainability/climate issues into their library work due to personal interest, extending their passion beyond the library. Below we highlight just a couple.

Kate Elliot, Director of Wayfinding for Restorative Methods and member of Low-Carbon Research Methods, coordinates virtual monthly gatherings for scholars, artists, and activists to share carbon-lowering suggestions and skills (Elliott, 2024). She fosters open connections, transcending silos and daily routines, with conversations spanning solar servers, university flying policies, low-carbon electronics, and data centers. Elliot actively shifts focus to digital structures and technologies, highlighting material consequences of cloud interactions and environmental injustices from unsustainable digital infrastructures while exploring climate-informed research intersections with university labor practices (Niche Administrators, 2022).

Eric Tans, a Michigan State University (MSU) librarian, took part in MSU's Great Lakes Leadership Academy, bringing diverse leaders together for public challenges. Joining a cohort of leaders at MSU with a year-long common good curriculum endeavor, which combined introspection and personal growth, alongside field experiences, to align with the program themes of agricultural, community development, and natural resources, Tans worked outside the library and beyond the campus community with a culminating visit to South Africa. He has a history of impactful storytelling and visually narrates this experience through a GIS story map (Tans, 2025).

An example of a grassroots educational series organized by librarians through funding from Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) was the 2024-2025 Climate Resiliency Series. This series offered six thematic expert-led sessions every other month, spanning a variety of relevant climate issues, but also offered follow up community-led Climate Circle discussions to reflect on issues raised by sessions along with an open-source toolkit.

These examples are just a few met within our own small Sustainability Community of Practice (CoP). CoPs connect individuals with shared interests (Fagerheim et al., 2023). Finding others interested in sustainability and climate work provides a structured venue for knowledge exchange, innovation, and strengthening group capabilities. It also builds community, helping ability through peer consultation, confidence building, leadership opportunities, a sense of belonging, and a venue to share one's passion (Smith & Filar Williams, 2017). These conversations lead to new directions, reduce feelings of isolation, foster mutual support through local work challenges, and enable project or scholarship collaboration.

Future Research

The authors' collective experience suggests conventional management practices limit sustainability efforts in libraries. This common but rarely documented tension motivates anonymous sharing, aiming to connect with others facing similar challenges. How can the authors foster open conversation, illuminating persisting issues with corporate leadership in libraries and reducing isolation within and between library workers? How do convince management that supportive, flexible, people-focused methods are practical and support them in getting their own leaders on board—university presidents, boards, or governors? How can librarians reorganize precarious times and uncertain futures? To those who consider organizational change too complex, we ask: Is this not precisely what global climate action demands on a globally? If we cannot change our own institutional governance, how can we expect national and international bodies to change?

Moreover, how can we prepare the next generation of library leaders for success rather forcing them to fit into a troubled system? Can we transform library leadership pedagogy and current workplaces to welcome, support, and empower future leaders?

Despite decades of successful sustainability work, climate-focused projects often stay untethered from what is perceived to be the central mission of the profession.

Administrators still question what it means to be a library. How can we finally cement the library-sustainability connection and move beyond stale conversations?

Is it about measuring differently? Surveys, like the 2024 National Climate Action Strategy: Strategy Implementation Survey (NCAS, 2024), provide baselines. However ongoing benchmarking, like the BCLA's recent benchmarking survey (British Columbia Library Association, 2024), is crucial for moving forward from that baseline. How can we cultivate a culture of data sharing to build on existing work? Measurement should assess how institutions evolve towards meaningful sustainable practice, as seen with STARS or the BCLA survey, rather than merely a tool for slotting sustainability into existing librarianship.

Another crucial area of inquiry involves informal communities of practice and their expansive collaborative potential. The 2017 Libraries and Archives in the Anthropocene Colloquium, which brought together the broader community to explore collective responses to ecological crises, exemplifies this. Both the event itself, the next special issue of the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, and the accessibility of its online documentation have had a subtle, but far-reaching influence on emerging scholars (Hackborn, 2024; Zahn, 2025). A second colloquium is planned for 2027, aiming to build momentum on these and other unaddressed questions.

Monocultures are ecologically dangerous. Far from fostering innovation, a homogenizing management logic which claims that systems are more similar than different and optimizable regardless of context (Klikauer, 2015), hinders our progress towards new sustainable practices. Differences in context and values cause discrepancies between policy-level climate action and community-desired outcomes (Adger et al., 2013). How can we diversify organizational practices as literal evolutionary pressures increase? All these questions offer direction for future research.

Discussion, Reflection, and Roadmap

Library administrations often prioritize "business" over daily work, leading to the bulk of sustainability work arising from grassroots efforts. While these initiatives are crucial, their success and longevity demand supportive, community-focused administration. Such efforts involve considerable emotional and advocacy labor, risking fatigue. Administrators who recognize that sustainability is fundamental to the long-term viability and relevance of cultural institutions must break silos, reduce individual burdens through formal structures, and use organizational influence. When management prioritizes sustainability, it empowers staff to innovate and integrate sustainable solutions across all services and processes. Management's commitment and accountability are essential for lasting, fair change, shifting sustainability from voluntary effort to an integral part of library operations and strategy. Leadership should be transparent and open-minded, supporting bottom-up approaches and ensuring frontline staff shape initiatives. They can also prove formal sustainability committees, Communities of Practice, or policies, ensuring continuity despite leadership shifts. Managers generally have the influence to holistically embed sustainability in their units, from adjusting procurement where they can and encouraging staff training to budgeting for sustainable initiatives and fostering cross-sector partnerships. If internal library culture is unsupportive, working with student or community voices can provide an avenue for change, or perhaps through interns focusing on student-to-student education. Everyone can contribute and inspire through their own conscious sustainable choices; however small they might seem.

Libraries face bureaucratic hurdles: jurisdictional complexities, budget constraints, administrative slowdowns, misaligned protocols, conflicting funding, and resistance from employees or community members. These impede inter-system coordination, often reducing sustainability to mere compliance or photo opportunities, lacking genuine impact. Measures are often executed without adequate research or planning, leading to

slowdowns and failures. For sustainability beyond tokenism, library systems must institutionalize support for genuine innovation through clear and meaningful performance metrics tied to sustainability goals. They must also be willing to encourage experimental initiatives, and back staff-led ideas.

For those interested in sustainability related work, a good starting point is beginning something small and achievable in the workspace, then branching out. Where the work starts will vary depending on the individuals involved and the institution itself.

Regardless, starting small, building community through the work, and being flexible are often integral to growth, success, and sustainability. Once proof-of-concept has been made and growth or endurance becomes difficult, administrative support will likely be necessary (if not already obtained). It is important to remember that even if work does not grow beyond personal actions and words, leading by example is still impactful.

Key to "sustaining" sustainable library work is finding like-minded people—including those in administration—to brainstorm sustainable practices. Seek outside partners—community members, campus staff, students—for a louder, more organized voice to incite change or secure funding for pilot ideas. This may involve creative outreach. Sometimes, collaborators await an invitation. Often, one empowered person can start small cultural shifts. Conversely, it is entirely okay to abandon unproductive avenues rather than burn yourself out trying to make them work.

Roadmap for Grassroots Sustainability in Libraries

To move beyond the structural alienation of top-down management and the precarity of individual 'rogue' activism, the authors offer one potential roadmap, a strategic framework for embedding grassroots sustainability into the permanent operational fabric of the library. Table 1 highlights examples of barriers and support needed.

The primary goal of this roadmap is to bridge the "values gap" the authors have identified/observed during our work in the field, moving from sustainability as a "box-ticking" exercise to a core, staff-driven organizational culture.

Phase 0: Go rogue

- *Challenge:* No one has sustainability in their job descriptions and those with interest/passion have no outlet for sustainable work.
- *Action:* Go rogue.
- *Strategy:* Explore where small individual actions can fit within existing duties and initiatives without requiring significant other labor or administrative support. Depending on the job and library this can be incorporating more sustainable practices and/or themes into displays and events, promoting relevant resources, buying program materials.
- *Outcome:* Increase interest, visibility, and buy-in.

Phase 1: Formalizing the "Community of Practice" (CoP)

- *Challenge:* Grassroots work often dies when a single enthusiastic individual leaves.
- *Action:* Transition from "rogue" individual projects to formalized internal CoPs.

- *Strategy*: Ask administration for "protected time" (e.g., 2 hours/month) for a Sustainability Working Group. Framing this as risk management (disaster preparedness) or professional development often secures administrative buy-in more effectively than "environmentalism" alone.
- *Output*: A shared digital repository of project workflows and key contacts so institutional memory isn't lost during staff turnover.

Phase 2: Decoupling assessment from optimization

- *Challenge*: "What gets measured gets managed," often at the expense of meaningful impact.
- *Action*: Implement qualitative impact reporting.
- *Strategy*: Complement quantitative data (circulation stats, energy saved) with "Impact Stories," "Photovoice," or "Narrative Assessment." Use assessment frameworks that prioritize degrowth, such as the True Cost Accounting (TCA) model mentioned above, to show the social value of programs like seed libraries or repair cafés.
- *Next Step*: Create a "Sustainability Dashboard" that includes community testimonials alongside traditional Key Performance Indicators.

Phase 3: Building "Resilience Hub" Partnerships

- *Challenge*: Libraries often revert to 'crisis-response' mode when disaster strikes and are not seen as community pillars.
- *Action*: Initiative-taking external integration.
- *Strategy*: Move beyond library walls by embedding staff in municipal climate planning or campus-wide sustainability or carbon reduction committees.
- *Key Integration*: Foster relationships with community stakeholders and activists, including local Indigenous knowledge keepers in support of partnerships that move beyond Western "efficiency" models toward relational, intergenerational stewardship embedded within and accountable to the people and places we serve.

Phase 4: Overcoming "Vocational Awe" through Labor Advocacy

- *Challenge*: "Vocational awe" is often a driver of burnout.
- *Action*: Sustainable labor practices.
- *Strategy*: Sustainability work must be written into job descriptions rather than added as "volunteer" work on top of existing duties.
- *Degrowth*: For every new sustainability initiative (like a seed library), management and staff must agree together on one legacy task to "de-optimize", retire, or reassign to prevent job creep.

Table 1

Barriers identified with support needed.

Barrier found	Example grassroots solution	Administrative support needed
Epistemic distance	Participatory Science (NeiSci)	Funding for kits and outreach

Short-termism	Multi-year “living labs”	5+ year strategic alignment
Budget cuts	External grants/partnerships	Liability/Compliance “yes-buffering”
Silos	Monthly “climate circles”	Inter-departmental time clearing
My boss says “It’s not my job”	Review your position description with the mindset that “all jobs are climate jobs” to find avenues for sustainable shifts.	Approval of ideas or changes. Sustainability education for new management.

Ultimately, this article's examples highlight the critical role of both individual agency and collaborative spirit in embedding sustainability within libraries. Meaningful change often begins not with top-down mandates but with the collective action and innovative spirit of engaged individuals. Creating new pathways, like a river carving a new channel, often stems from shared work. This internal capacity for grassroots action positions libraries as crucial sites for fostering different relationships with our environments, offering new options for communicating complex environmental issues and overcoming resistance to change within our communities.

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