



*Peer-Reviewed Article*

## Exploring Sustainability Perceptions of New Mexico's Library Directors: A Survey and Four Interviews

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### ABSTRACT

Since the American Library Association's declaration of sustainability as a core value of librarianship in 2019, it is unclear to what extent librarians have embraced and integrated sustainability into their understanding of the profession. This article attempts to explore how library leaders, specifically a small set of participant library deans and directors in New Mexico, define and apply sustainability in their libraries. The responding library deans and directors in New Mexico are in different places on their journeys to understand how sustainability and libraries connect but share some essential core values defining sustainability.

### KEYWORDS

sustainability, leadership, library directors, New Mexico, community, attitudes

### SUGGESTED CITATION

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## Introduction

In 2019, the American Library Association (ALA) identified the three-legged stool definition of sustainability as a core value of librarianship. According to the press release “this tripod consists of practices that are environmentally sound, economically feasible and socially equitable” (American Library Association, 2019). A recent systematic review of the literature shows that sustainability in libraries is focused on buildings, information, collections, education, and culture, with other areas making up a smaller percentage (Kamińska, A. M., Opaliński, Ł., & Wyciślik, Ł., 2022). Libraries and librarians work in ecosystems that rely on concepts of sustainability to function appropriately for the long term. Munro notes how libraries are connected to these larger issues:

Apart from the fact that libraries are a small part of the larger whole that’s affected by power outages, floods, and tornadoes, they’re also part of several other big, complex systems. These systems—publishing, academe, intellectual property law, technology, the economy—are undergoing major changes that affect libraries in complex, sometimes unforeseen ways. (2011)

In addition, sustainability has the potential for us to explain our value on a level of long-term viability that is understandable to our user groups on many different levels. Understanding the field of librarianship through sustainability is powerful in that it is a concept that can be applied to all aspects of librarians’ work in some way. Infusing concepts of sustainability into librarians’ daily work and the theory of our profession enables us to connect so many of the intersectional values and issues librarians work with daily. Exploring how library leaders define and apply their definitions of sustainability in practice can help to establish the importance of sustainability in the profession, as it gives us an idea of where directors currently are in understanding these concepts. Library directors’ leadership affects what and how philosophies and policies trickle down into the libraries they lead. If library directors lead the way on sustainability, we can achieve more sustainable resilient library systems overall. This research surveyed and interviewed a small population of library deans and directors in New Mexico, in order to discover how they were defining and applying sustainability in their libraries now, and how they imagined doing so in the future. As such, my research questions were focused on what directors’ understanding and engagement was in general, and how, once given a definition, they might apply this definition to work currently going on in their libraries, and work that could be done in the future.

## Background Literature

Because of the multitude of ways of defining sustainability, this study utilized the definition embraced by ALA, which stems from the priorities identified by the World Commission on Environment and Development’s *Our Common Future* report emerged as a core document in the development of sustainability approaches. Edwards describes the report’s importance in the development of sustainability, saying “conceptually, the report contained the

first articulation of the key to contemporary sustainability—the importance of evaluating any proposed initiative with reference to the interaction of three fundamental criteria: ecology/environment, economy/employment and equity/equality” (Edwards, 2009, p. 17). Utilized since the report’s release in 1987, these three Es are the most familiar definition of sustainability. Stemming from the *Our Common Future* report, sustainability is set up as consisting of three Es: environment, economy, and equity; a three-legged stool (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987).

Additionally, sustainability initiatives are frequently approached in a checkbox sort of way, with an end goal that can be stamped “achieved” and moved on from, unless someone is diligent about maintenance and revisiting goals. An example of this is the incredibly popular LEED certification for green buildings, which utilizes checklists and a points system to tackle mostly environmental concerns, and also public health (U.S. Green Building Council, 2023). However, according to Tanner et. al., sustainability should not be a checkbox concept, but infused into the fabric and strategies of libraries as a key part of how we understand our institutions and daily work (Tanner, Ho, Antonelli, and Aldrich, 2022). We can see this three-legged stool coming into play in libraries in a variety of ways: budget issues (economy), censorship of books (equity), building and collection upkeep (environment and economy), access (equity), instruction (equity), waste management programs (environment), and staffing (equity and economy), to mention a few broad examples. Librarians’ work can be approached through a sustainability lens, which allows us to see the connections between different departments, our users, and our larger communities.

The global conversation regarding sustainability continues to evolve and gain momentum as environmental, economic, and equity crises persist. In 2012, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development was held in Rio de Janeiro, where they created an update called *The Future We Want*, in which the General Assembly reaffirmed its past commitments and envisioned what further evolutions need to happen to advance sustainability around the globe. As their third point, the document states that: “we therefore acknowledge the need to further mainstream sustainable development at all levels, integrating economic, social and environmental aspects and recognizing their interlinkages, so as to achieve sustainable development in all its dimensions” (United Nations, 2012). With our focus on community, information, access, etc., if libraries embrace sustainability in their institutions and the larger field, the goals of the U.N. can be brought into local spaces that may not have considered them relevant previously. This could contribute to the overall advancement of the U.N.’s sustainability goals and future resilience of our communities. Walker, Salt, and Reid describe the importance of understanding the cycles in an ecosystem in order to create resilience within systems and enact change, noting that it “is also important for policy and for managing natural resources because it suggests there are times in the cycle when there is greater leverage to change things, and other times when effecting change is really difficult” (Walker, Salt & Reid, 2006, p. 76). As

leaders of change in libraries, library directors are poised to recognize these moments within their institutions, allowing them to introduce change when it may be most effective. However, Kamińska et al. did not note significant percentages of sustainability articles relating to leadership and administration in libraries to merit its mention in their systematic literature review (2021). There is little investigation of how library directors understand and engage with sustainability in their libraries. This study is attempting to explore, in a small population, these things and perhaps provide some perspective for continued, future research. In Henk's book on sustainability in libraries, she notes that "unless we have a vision for what a library should be and what the information system should look like, we will not be able to build the library and information system we want. We will not be able to serve our communities in the way our shared values call on us to serve" (2014, p. 113). As library directors are often the leaders of our shared visions and strategic planning, this gap in the literature makes it difficult to understand how libraries may move forward implementing ALA's core value in a broader, institution and community focused way. Methods

This mixed methods research case study was focused on understanding how library leaders in New Mexico defined, implemented, and saw future planning, both in their own terms, and as connected to the sustainability concepts of environment, equity, and economy. The author developed a series of demographic questions, dichotomous questions, open-ended survey questions and open-ended interview questions to gather the data.

### **Design**

A mixed methods survey of 26 open-ended, short answer questions was developed as the first part of this study. The first eight questions were designed to gather demographic data and informational data regarding the leaders' paths into leadership. The next four questions asked leaders to define sustainability in their own terms. The next ten questions were completed after participants were given a definition from which to base their answers. The final questions asked participants to consider opting into a further interview. The optional interview was 45 minutes long or more depending on the conversation that ensued and consisted of seven open-ended questions. Questions for both the initial survey and follow-up interviews can be found in the Appendix.

### **Procedure**

Participants for the survey were self-selected through recruitment letters sent out through regional and state library associations, and through direct emails. Study data were collected and managed using REDCap electronic data capture tools hosted at New Mexico State University that allow for electronic survey creation and secure data storage (Harris, Taylor, Thielke, Payne, Gonzalez, and Conde, 2009; Harris, Taylor, Minor, Elliot, Fernandez, O'Neal, McLeod et al., 2019). The interviews took place via a recorded Zoom session, in order to obtain a transcript more easily. The transcripts, and handwritten interview notes, in addition to notes

taken while rewatching the recorded interview video, were coded by the researcher, by hand, for themes, as was the survey data previously collected, using in vivo (code derive[d] from the actual language of the participant) and descriptive (code that “assigns labels to data to summarize [...] the most basic topic of a passage of qualitative data”) coding (Saldaña, 2021, p. 95 and p. 362). Descriptive coding used the 3 Es definition of sustainability and my research questions as guides for a first round of coding, after which point the data was coded again using in vivo coding to capture language used by participants as well. This coding was used to develop the specific wording used in some tables below. The responses here have been edited to correct grammar and punctuation. Some responses may be paraphrased or summarized or cut to preserve the most important information. To secure their anonymity, interviewees have been given name aliases: Jackson, Kristin, Evelyn, Anna.

## **Participants**

In New Mexico, there are over 100 positions that may be identified as library deans or directors, permanent or interim, and were therefore eligible for this study. Twelve library directors or deans responded to the call to participate in the survey. Of those, four opted for an additional interview. Despite sending the survey out on state and regional email lists, the library leaders who participated in this study came from academic, state, and public libraries. No archives directors or school libraries responded to this survey.

### ***Demographics of Participants***

The range of ages of participants was split fairly evenly, with a lower number of 9.1% (1) of participants in the 24-30 age range, compared to 36.4% (4) in the 41-45 age range, 27.3% (3) in the 46-50 age range, and 27.3% (3) in the 51+ age range. 8.3% (1) chose not to provide their age at all. Gender was provided as a fill-in-the blank question, allowing for participants to choose not to answer or to provide their preferred representative vocabulary. 41.7% (5) of participants preferred not to answer this question, while 58.3% (7) provided an answer. Those answers ranged from: male (2) to female (5). Similarly, to the question on gender, participants were given a short answer blank for the question of race and ethnicity as well. Of the participants, 25% (3) preferred not to describe their race and ethnicity, whereas 75% (9) provided an answer. Those answers were: white/non-Hispanic (1), white (6), white/Hispanic (1), and Caucasian (1). Participants were also asked if they were a person with disabilities. Of the twelve, 18.2% (2) identified themselves as a person with disabilities, while 54.5% (6) answered that they are not a person with disabilities, and 8.3% (4) preferred not to answer.

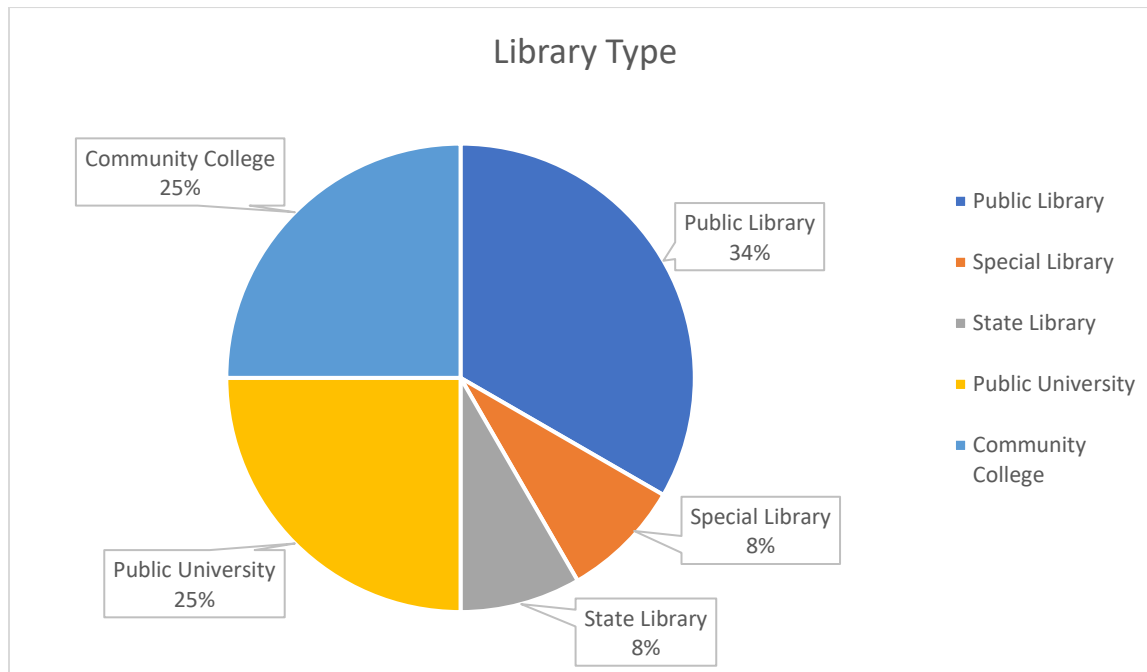
### ***Library Type***

Because this survey was sent to all library deans and directors in New Mexico, several different library types were represented. Half of the participants in the study were from academic libraries of some type, either public universities or community colleges. The other half

were made up of public libraries, special libraries, and state libraries. Of the respondents to the survey, 33.3% (4) of participants were from public libraries, 25% (3) from public universities, 25% (3) from community colleges, 8.3% (1) from special libraries, and 8.3% (1) from state libraries, as is reflected in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1**

*Library Type*



Note. N= 12.

***Leadership Position Length***

All of the participants have been in their current leadership position for 0-5 years. Of the participants, 66.7% (8) were in a similar leadership position prior to their current one, while 33.3% (4) were not. Participants were asked to share their path to library leadership. The majority of the participants described their educational history as including a Master's degree of some sort in Library and Information Science. Some mentioned a doctoral degree, or that their job did not require a master's in library and information Science. Most came to their current position through years working in the library field, and one participant came to the work through work in marketing and nonprofits. Most participants had recently come from another top-level position, or from one assisting a top-level position (for example: an associate dean to dean position), and one leader from a membership and marketing position.

## Results

The following results section has been split into two parts. The first part details the results from the survey, while the second part details the results from the interviews.

### Survey

The first priority in this study was to see how library leaders were defining sustainability on their own terms, without a definition provided for them, as this is the example that we see in their daily work life. Participants were asked to: “Brainstorm some keywords or phrases that come to mind when you think about sustainability.” The following word cloud (Figure 2) shows the keywords generated by participants. There are several noticeable trends, including a focus on environment, social issues, community, and long-term vision. Next, participants were asked to write out a definition based on the keywords they had identified previously. Table 1 presents the definitions that were provided by study participants.

### Figure 2

*Brainstorm some keywords or phrases that come to mind when you think about sustainability*



**Table 1**

*Definitions of sustainability provided by survey participants*

<b>Based on those [keywords], how would you define sustainability?</b>
Sustainability is the ability of a community to evolve positively into the future to meet new challenges, regenerate its vitality and viability, and actualize mutualism on the community level, and human capability on the individual level. It is most successful when approached with whole systems thinking, seeing human systems and natural systems as overlapping and intrinsically linked.
An organization is sustainable when it has a regular, secure funding source, a well-compensated and diverse staff and is able to provide relevant services to the user population.
A community decision to reduce the use of materials that are harmful to the environment.
It is the set of conditions necessary to provide for continuous existence.
Planning with an eye towards the future/longevity of the institution and the world.
Balance.
Sustainability is the ability to maintain current practices over a period of time without depleting the resources necessary for these or future practices.
Sustainability is the ability to keep going at a certain level, but specifically in balance - i.e., you don't use more resources than you have or can create.
Meeting today's needs while preserving the ecology for the long-term so that future generations can meet their needs.
A lifestyle or ecosystem with little wasted energy or product.
When possible, reusing material and/or providing options for material that can be reused.
The ability for something to be maintained for a long time.

Note. 12 responses.



The next question asked whether participants had been involved with sustainability efforts in their library and on a larger campus. The majority of the participants had been involved in some kind of sustainability effort, the majority strictly within the library, as can be seen in Table 2. Participants were then asked whether or not they cared about sustainability on a daily basis, with eight responding yes, two responding no, and two responding not sure, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

**Table 2**

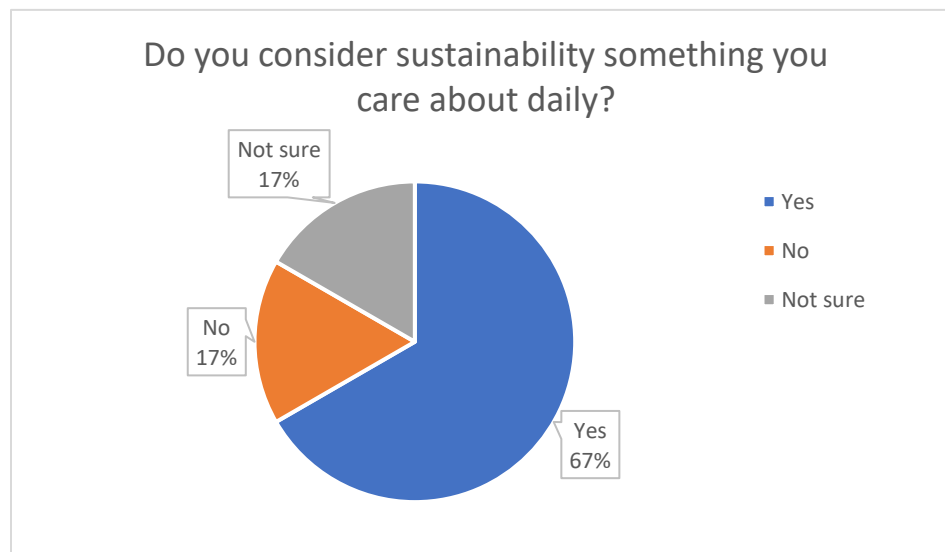
*Survey Participants' Involvement with Sustainability Efforts*

<b>Have you been involved with sustainability efforts in your library and on a larger campus?</b>	
Yes, in the library	7
Yes, on a larger campus	2
Yes, both	1
No	3

Note. 12 respondents.

**Figure 3**

*Survey participants' responses to daily care about sustainability*



Note.  $N=12$ .

In the second half of the survey, the library directors were given the 3-legged stool definition of sustainability to frame their answers to the remaining questions. All of the directors participating in the survey saw the 3-legged stool definition as useful or of continued relevance, with some comments on the pitfalls of checklist approaches, notes of how the pandemic has exacerbated some of these areas, resource availability for making sustainability a priority, etc. Directors were asked whether or not they saw sustainability as something that is important for libraries to be involved in, and why. All participants answered that they saw sustainability as something libraries could be involved in. A few answers came with caveats however, such as “if libraries could ever get out of a funding crisis” or “as a broad concept. A narrower concept might depend on the type of library, its mission, and its place in the community.”

In order to get an idea of how participants saw this definition translating into action in their buildings, participants were asked: “In which departments of the library are you already integrating sustainability?” Similarly, in a further question, participants were asked: “In which departments of the library do you think sustainability can be implemented?” These open-ended questions were asking participants to identify specific departments in their library. Their answers were grouped into department categories based on their answers. There were some differences in department name, for which I made a decision based on the majority use and grouped accordingly, for clarity. The frequency of answers is displayed in Table 3 below.

**Table 3**

*Departments in which Sustainability can be Implemented*

<b>Department</b>	<b>Currently Implemented Frequency</b>	<b>Future Implemented Frequency</b>
Collections	7	4
Administration	3	3
Public Services	3	2
Facilities	3	3
Reference & Instruction	2	3
Programming	1	1
Technical Services	1	1
All	4	9
None/Haven't considered	1	1

Note. 12 respondents.

The last questions had participants answering questions about actual sustainability initiatives their libraries had done or would possibly undertake. “Give several examples of how your library has championed sustainability concepts” and “Give several examples of how your library could champion sustainability concepts in the future.” Answers to these open-ended questions ranged throughout areas in the library and were coded through what area of action the change is or would be seen as, as seen in Table 4 below. Some edited (for length) portions of answers from this section are displayed in Table 5 below.

**Table 4**

*Perception of Areas of Current and Future Implementation of Sustainability in Survey Participants’ Libraries*

<b>Area of Action</b>	<b>Current Implementation</b>	<b>Future Implementation</b>
Programming	3	5
Processes	4	2
Changes to facilities and equipment	4	4
Public Services	4	5
Collection Development	4	2
Dissemination of information	2	1
Hiring	3	1
Policies	3	3
Community Involvement in the library	2	1
None/Haven’t considered	3	3

Note. 12 respondents.

**Table 5**

*Sampling of Answers to How Survey Participants' Libraries Have Implemented Sustainability Concepts*

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**Give several examples of how your library has championed sustainability concepts**

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We've worked with libraries on equity issues, such as broadband connectivity. Solar power, EV Charging Stations. We've implemented paperless grant contract systems so we're not shipping big stacks of paper back and forth throughout the state. We purchased a more energy efficient bookmobile.

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For equity, we have created a diversity and inclusion group to come up with policies and procedures to help expand our reach into the community and hire a diverse pool of candidates, representative of the population they serve.

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Creating a support system to help faculty move to OER textbooks. Providing access to reserve textbooks.

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We have an employee union. We actively pursue a culture of care and justice. We share our feelings and practices socially at work. We encourage multiple languages spoken and written. We seek higher pay for workers. We check out seeds. We give gardening, water, and land use resources. We partner and collaborate with indigenous knowledge collectives. We invite decision making from neighborhood residents.

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Educating patrons to maintain older electronics. Promoting recycling of non-traditional things such as books. Planting edible landscaping.

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**Give several examples of how your library could champion sustainability concepts in the future**

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Dissemination to libraries statewide of sustainability training. Disseminate knowledge about unintended externalities of things like receipt printer tape, databases, etc.

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Creating space for families to study (larger study rooms).

---

Deepening those connections and opening wider to distributed decision making on library and community matters.

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Note. 12 respondents.

The final targeted question asked library leaders: “How does your library signal to its users that sustainability is important to you?” Most library leaders answered this question in terms of physical environmental signals such as recycling bins, EV charging stations, solar panels, and programming. Many expressed that they do not actively communicate this information to their community, and that it typically takes place within the building amongst the employees. Some mentioned upgrades to collections and technology communicated out to the public as a way to signal an interest in sustainability.

The last question in the survey asked library leaders if they had any additional comments. One made the connection between the library’s position as a community-focused institution that holds significant sway, saying that: “People accept ideas readily from libraries, because they know we are all about community service.” While another director commented that: “Sustainability: to survive and persist seems like a low bar to set for a community-based institution. I prefer thinking with and toward regeneration,” hitting upon one of the problems that can come in conjunction with sustainability, which is the tendency to see it merely as a series of checkboxes to tick off, rather than a continuous, evolving process.

### *Interviews*

In coding for the specific 3-legged stool elements (environment, economy, equity) that guided this particular survey, all three were found throughout each participants’ interview. Each participant did tend to favor one of the three over the others though, which may be attributed to their own personal interest in that area, or in current struggles and focuses on their own libraries. Overall, coding turned up the following topics and common threads in addition to the initial coding for the 3-legged stool sustainability principles (see Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Coded Themes from Interviews and their Frequency*

<b>Coded Term</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Community	65
Equity	40
Environment	33
Long-term	32
Economy	30
Systems	24
Government	23
Politics	21

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Evolution	15
Connections	13
Career	12
Change	12
Social justice	12
Traditions	12
Disregarding	11
Physical spaces	11
Resilience	11
Culture	10
Disaster	10
Place	10
Relevance	10
Checklist	9
Accessibility	8
Education	8
Programs	7
Care	6
Initiatives	6
Technology	6

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Note. Four library directors interviewed.

## Discussion

The New Mexican library leaders who participated in the study all mentioned specific actions taken in their libraries in regard to sustainability. When asked to use the definition stemming from the *Our Common Future* document, that relates sustainability to the three areas of environment, economy, and equity, all noted engagement in their libraries in line with this definition, though not everyone had previously considered all three areas as sustainability before. All saw sustainability fit into their libraries along the lines of environment, with most mentioning recycling and outreach programs undertaken in their library buildings, and even

sustainable and green choices for building improvements. These libraries seem to be considering environmental sustainability when possible.

Other responses showed various levels of engagement with the sustainability concepts of equity and economy, often couched not in those particular terms, but in the specific issues the library leaders were facing, suggesting that though these concepts are part of sustainability, they were not necessarily being framed in that way. Several library directors showed evidence of considering sustainability beyond the expected, typical definition, and moving into a regeneration framework.

That said, there were two respondents who expressed little to no interest in how sustainability might connect to their library, or even saw it as not at all related to their work. It is perhaps an indication of the long road sustainability has towards a real implementation across libraries. Interview participant Anna expressed a concern with the way libraries are currently approaching sustainability by merely simplifying it, rather than tackling connections. She mused that “when we reduce something too quickly, we [make] the same bad choices.” Continuing a conversation on the relevance and implementation of sustainability as a guiding framework is an important effort for libraries to engage in continuously if we want to evolve our institutions’ relationships with sustainability, rather than keep its implementation status quo.

The four library directors who agreed to an interview were all passionate in some way about sustainability and resilience in libraries and how we can move along that continuum to grow that mindset in libraries within New Mexico and in the United States. Interview participants were from public, community college, and state libraries. Interview participant Evelyn sees it as inseparable from a library’s work: “You know, to me, sustainability is very real, very not theoretical at all. It’s like the lifeblood of this place.”

The most frequently coded term in the interviews (Table 6 in Results) was “community”, demonstrating that respondents consider sustainability a community-engaged endeavor. Interview participant Jackson explained a previous experience with a group talking about sustainability in libraries that drove his definition, saying: “I have a definition of sustainability that’s extremely systems oriented and community oriented. I don’t think libraries exist outside of their community system and I don’t think you can talk about sustainability without talking about community systems.” He also noted the differences in communities in New Mexico as opposed to other states, saying: “Sustainability for a librarian and a small town in New Mexico is much more whole community based, because everything they do is community based. [...] You know they might put up solar panels on their library, you know cool, but what their real interest is like building up resilience in their community, making the entire community sustainable.” Interview participant Evelyn insisted that “Libraries are a partner in a community when you talk about sustainability, whether it’s economic sustainability, or whatever. Libraries can be so many different things.” Her last statement is a testament to the broader role libraries

can play in their communities, and one of the reasons that sustainability is a flexible, interdisciplinary option for approaching library missions and interactions. As sustainability is focused on a whole view rather than merely a narrow view, it allows those who use it a lens through which to see the entire system.

Equity, environment, and economy ranked highly and in this particular order as shown in Table 6 in the results section, which is no surprise since interviewees were specifically asked to utilize a definition using the three Eterms when answering this second half of the survey. The order is a little surprising, as most of the actions in their libraries were environment-focused examples. Kristin described issues with recycling withdrawn books:

Being able to recycle is really hard here, and while the waste management companies in [the city] were willing to try to work with me, at times they couldn't afford to ship our recycling to the place that it needed to go. The shipping costs would not make economic sense to them so they would tell me that I had to throw stuff away instead of recycle. ... Because they could be recycled it's the recycler that says that the glue in books makes it different from paper, and so it has to go through a special process—at least it did at the time.

However, participants talked about sustainability mostly related to equity issues in their libraries and communities. Kristin talked about the power of changing things you walk by every day for sustainability (equity and environment) reasons and shared a story about moving a rarely used Spanish-language collection into a prominent spot in the library and the hopes she had for increased usage. Ultimately, she imagined the connections that could be made through this collection now that it had moved, whether it was from seeing an interesting book in passing and picking it up, or users meeting someone new while browsing and expanding their circle of people. The library directors interviewed saw equity as the formation of connections as well as a force for social justice.

Economy was touched on at least once by all the interview participants and most of the survey participants. Evelyn, who spoke about it the most of the four, observed that:

People have either realized how relevant we are to their communities and have rallied around us, or the opposite is happening. Everyone's gone like: *why do we care about libraries?* which is where [my last city] went. And [my current city] was more like: *Oh my God, we love our library!* which I'm really relieved about. And that's the other problem—public perception can kind of dictate funding sometimes.

Communicating the importance of libraries to communities, government/administration, and other key stakeholders has always been a critical component of ensuring adequate funding and the longevity of our institutions. Approaching funding and other economic issues from a sustainability lens could be a powerful way to connect the daily reality with the resilience of not only the library itself, but also the community and its priorities and needs. Participants in the survey and interviews spoke about programming and initiatives at their libraries that provided striking benefits for their community, and couching these programs within a larger framework of sustainability allows for these benefits that are so tangible to the community to be directly



connected to these issues of economy, equity, and environment and a larger, strategic plan for library resilience that is not separate from its community.

One of the interview participants, Anna, considered questions of sustainability in libraries and communities as questions of the kinds of lives community members wanted to live. And interview participant Evelyn noted the power of libraries to create more equity and better lives in communities, particularly, she thought, in New Mexico:

If you look at the library and just think it's a fun place to get books and go to story time, then you're missing the point. There is so much going on in southern New Mexico, in the Southwest, in terms of the digital divide, poverty levels, and, you know, libraries are such an equalizer. And so, I think when you're talking about sustainability, if you're able to reach the ears of the people who are looking at these issues and you're able to say, "Hey we're over here!" And we can do workforce development, we can do adult basic education, we can help with all of these things that help people, you know, eat, and even the playing field, I think it makes us more relevant in this region.

Evelyn noted that the definition or perception of sustainability overall can be difficult to work with because of how people understand it, saying: "I had to kind of rename [sustainability], almost redefine it. I had to call it something else because here in [this city], sustainability is defined as an environmental thing." Anna also touched on, and expanded this issue well, connecting it instead to a shared understanding of what constitutes quality of life, saying: "We have to have something [a definition or a perspective on what makes a life worth living] that a person can then turn around and do something with. And I worry that—I don't think as a profession we are capable of producing such a thing right now." Anna's worry is not unjustified; other interviewees held similar levels of skepticism.

In the end, most interview participants questioned how ready the library profession really is to embrace sustainability on a meaningful level outside of a best practices or checklist approach. Earlier in his interview, Jackson mused: "I think that the way we approach sustainability in librarianship both tells us a lot about where librarianship is and its current shortcomings." While Anna ruminated on the idea of a shared definition of sustainability saying she "think[s] sustainability can't be the goal of this shared definition because it's a buzzword—probably we should all decide on what it means but even if we took a dictionary definition to sustain what we have—is that even what we seek to do?" Evelyn spoke of how quickly her day shifts from larger concerns that a library director may have in the broader community, to dealing with users complaining about a fine, reflecting upon how these shifts make it more difficult to concentrate on larger theoretical discussions on a daily basis. This voiced skepticism about sustainability in relation to libraries and the library profession can be seen in conversations with others in the profession. It may be that unless a librarian is actively interested in it, it just will not even come up at all in their daily work, which is why administrators may need to be the ones to create space for these conversations in their libraries. At one point, Anna challenged libraries to consider what their communities are saying and

allowing that input to help guide the conversation: “Folks in sustainability [are] not listening to people, and [are] saying “listening to people is not sustainability” –and I think it’s the only way we get there.” And Jackson also touched on the importance of knowing the community, listening, and encouraging participation in the process of moving into a more fruitful iteration of sustainability, noting that in his opinion: “The most effective librarians you’ll ever meet, they’re really good at getting to know community members and what those community members are good at, and then getting them to contribute those talents and contribute the information and knowledge they have, and that’s the way they move beyond their measly budgets.” Interview participants seemed to largely agree that dialogue with their communities was the route to a more useful, tangible, and meaningful implementation of sustainability in relation to the library and the area it serves.

One of the limitations of this study is the small number of participants. Out of over a hundred estimated potential participants, only 12 responded. Additionally, the representation of library types was skewed much more towards academic library representation than other library types. A potential limitation is the homogeneity of the gender identity, and race and ethnicity diversity of the participants, however this tracks with recent statistics of the composition of the American library field overall. The American Library Association’s 2017 demographics report, which surveyed ALA members (and therefore represents only a portion of the profession), shows that 81% of respondents identified as Female, and 86.7% identified as white (Rosa & Henke, 2017). None of the library deans or directors who were not as interested in sustainability agreed to a further interview, and so their perspective, though captured in the survey, is missing in the interviews. Therefore, the data collected is not a wholly accurate representation of the state as a whole, but rather a snapshot of the responding population. Though these limitations exist, this study is a good jumping off point for future research on sustainability in New Mexico’s libraries. There is a large potential here for educating library leaders in New Mexico about how taking a sustainability approach for their libraries could be beneficial and allow them to tackle problems with a more holistic view. Future research could see more targeted efforts based on library type or even expanding the region covered to include the entire Southwestern United States.

### **Conclusion**

This initial study shows that the library directors in New Mexico who responded to this study are already considering sustainability concepts in their libraries, though they may not be using a sustainability lens to frame these actions. It also shows that these library directors prioritize community as a main concept of sustainability. It also suggests that library leaders in New Mexico may be at different places in their journeys to understand how sustainability and libraries connect. Further research on the population would be needed to determine exactly where their perspective of sustainability comes from. Some may be more interested than others in learning about and making these connections and implementing them in their institutions.

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The survey for this study was developed and disseminated through the REDCap platform.

The word cloud in this article was made using the Word Art website.

## Appendix

### Survey Questions

1. How do you describe your gender identity?
  - a. Please specify (opens box to self-identify)
  - b. I prefer not to answer.
2. Age:
  - a. 24-30
  - b. 30-35
  - c. 36-40
  - d. 41-45
  - e. 46-50
  - f. 50+
3. How do you describe your race and ethnicity?
  - a. Please specify: (opens a box to self-identify)
  - b. I prefer not to answer.
4. Are you a person with disabilities?
  - a. Yes.
  - b. No.
  - c. I prefer not to answer.
5. Library or archives type?
  - a. Public Library
  - b. School Library
  - c. Archives/Special Collections
  - d. Special Library
  - e. State Library
  - f. Corporate Library/Archives
  - g. Public University
  - h. Private University

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- i. Community College
    - j. Other (opens a text box to answer)
  6. How long have you been in your current leadership position?
    - a. 0-5 years
    - b. 6-10 years
    - c. 11-15 years
    - d. 16-20 years
    - e. 20+ years
  7. Briefly describe your education and work history that has led you to this position:
  8. Were you in a similar leadership position prior to this? If yes, note what position and how long.
    - a. Yes (Opens a text box to provide the rest of the information.)
    - b. No
  9. Brainstorm some keywords or phrases that come to mind when you think about sustainability.
  10. Based on those, how would you define sustainability?
  11. Have you been involved with sustainability efforts in your library and on a larger campus (if applicable)?
    - a. Yes
    - b. No
    - c. Not applicable
  12. Do you consider sustainability something you care about daily?
    - a. Yes
    - b. No
    - c. Not sure

For the purposes of this study, I am defining sustainability using the 3 Es model set forth in the *Our Common Future* document (also called *The Brundtland Report*) created by the World Commission on Environment and Development. This defines sustainability as consisting of three main tenets which permeate and inform all sustainability work: Environment, Economy, and Equity. Please answer the rest of the questions considering this definition of sustainability.

1. Have you considered sustainability beyond environmental concerns before? In what ways?
2. The report was published in 1983 and was meant to be long-lasting. Do you think the definition stemming from *Our Common Future* is appropriate for our current world situation? Explain.
3. Do you see sustainability as important for libraries to be involved in? Why or why not?
4. Do you consider sustainability initiatives to be an important part of your job? Why or why not?
5. In which departments of the library are you already integrating sustainability?
6. In which departments of the library do you think sustainability can be implemented?
7. Give several examples of how your library has championed sustainability concepts.
8. Give several examples of how your library could champion sustainability concepts in the future.
9. How does your library signal to its users that sustainability is important to you?
10. Do you have any other comments about sustainability in libraries you'd like to make?
11. Would you be willing to do a reasonable 30–45-minute interview with the PI of this study?
12. If yes, please provide your email address here:
13. What are typically the best days and times (MST) for you? Morning (8am-11am), Midday (11pm-1pm), Afternoon (1pm-5pm), Evening (5pm-7pm)

### **Interview Questions**

Those who opted into the interviews were asked the following open-ended questions, as well as follow-up questions that arose organically from the interview process:

1. Your position obviously means you have a very busy schedule. Tell me a little bit about why you were willing to participate in an interview with me.
2. I'm interested in the keywords you provided in the survey portion, and your subsequent definition. Could you tell me a little bit about why you chose those?
3. Do you think the regional realities of living in the Southwest, or even New Mexico specifically, make applying concepts of sustainability to libraries more or less attractive? Why?



4. Do you think your library in particular is well positioned to be a leader in sustainability initiatives?
5. After you completed the initial survey, did you find yourself thinking about sustainability in a different way?
6. After you completed the initial survey, did you find yourself thinking about sustainability more often?
7. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about relating to sustainability and libraries?