

James Blackstone Memorial Library STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

2022 - 2027



Engaging Community Expanding Minds Enriching Lives

"...the modern idea of education includes everything that goes to make life worth living."

- James Blackstone Memorial Library Opening Exercises, June 17, 1896

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Vision, Mission, Values	2
Guiding Lens	3
Strategic Framework Components	4
Eight Strategic Initiatives	7
Blackstone Library Infrastructure	16
Branford Community: What We Learned	23
Acknowledgements	28

Introduction

Libraries must continually evolve to serve their communities in new ways, allowing them to play a central role in community life. The James Blackstone Memorial Library has served Branford since 1896 and we are committed to ensuring our programs and services continue to deliver the greatest value to Branford. To support these efforts, the Blackstone Board of Trustees authorized an innovative strategic planning endeavor starting in January 2021.

This planning process involved (i) prioritizing community engagement to ensure our understanding of our community's needs, expectations, and motivations, (ii) reviewing operational plans annually to keep the library's offerings aligned with trends and community needs, and (iii) empowering library staff with tools for staying attuned to changing dynamics by engaging patrons and partners.

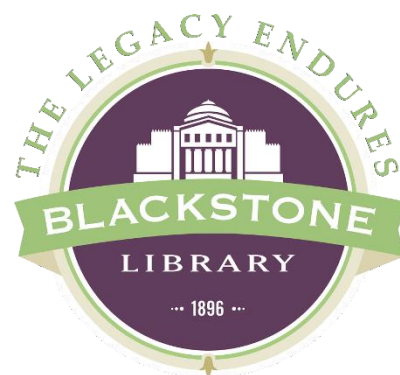
This **Blackstone Strategic Framework** is informed by the insights and discoveries gained from a community "deep needs" assessment plus staff and stakeholder conversations. What we learned from our community is captured in our vision, mission, values, and in eight strategic initiatives that define the library's core focus:

- ❖ Inspire A Love of Learning, Innovative Thinking & Creativity
- ❖ Cultivate Knowledge Through Access to Expert Minds
- ❖ Promote Personal Empowerment
- ❖ Support Economic Wellbeing
- ❖ Facilitate Community Connections Around Shared Interests
- ❖ Be A Community Information Hub
- ❖ Advance Volunteerism
- ❖ Celebrate Diversity & Understand One Another

— *Strategic Planning Committee & Team*

"The James Blackstone Memorial Library... is more than a library – it is a building of rejoicing and of joy in the social life, in all the opportunities in which it may most notably exhibit itself in the village life."

- Excerpts from Opening Exercises, June 17, 1896



VISION

Building on the forward-looking founding of the **James Blackstone Memorial Library**, we continue to expand our legacy of engaging community, expanding minds, and enriching lives with a commitment to addressing community needs and supporting each individual's journey towards lifelong learning, continued well-being, and personal growth.



MISSION

The **James Blackstone Memorial Library** inspires and enriches curious minds, welcomes and connects community to community, and helps our community learn, succeed, and thrive by providing essential access to information, resources, and unique shared experiences.

VALUES

Equity and Respect

We provide fair and equitable access to a welcoming environment for learning, enrichment, and growth for all.

Cultivation of Knowledge and Literacy

We advocate for the acquisition of knowledge and the advancement of literacy to democratize the power of information.

Excellence

We are dedicated to excellence in customer service, resources, technology, and programming.

Stewardship

We act as stewards of community support, keeping the needs of Branford central to our decision-making.

Guiding Lens — Strategic Framework



Strategic Framework Components

OUR GOAL – Serving Branford’s Needs

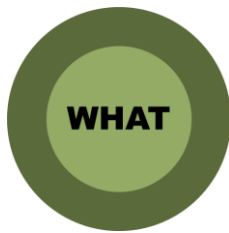
The goal of this Strategic Framework process was to ensure the Blackstone remains attuned to the changing dynamics of our community so we continue to align our offerings with Branford’s needs. Through facilitated conversations and a community-wide survey, we worked to align the Framework components:

- **“WHY”** – our Vision and Values
- **“WHAT”** – eight Strategic Initiatives that are informed by what we learned
- **“WHO”** – the different segments of the Branford community we serve
- **“HOW”** – our “Infrastructure” resources



OUR VISION AND VALUES

From its inception, Blackstone was conceived as playing a role central to "village life." This visionary concept 125 years ago was incredibly farsighted, as 21st century libraries are evolving to play an expanded role in their communities. The founding vision for the library focused on enriching the whole person. Blackstone would not only be a place for books, but would also offer warmth by the fire on cold winter nights, as well as provide a place to experience art and culture. Today, Blackstone remains committed to helping everyone in our community learn, succeed, and thrive in life. In this role, Blackstone serves everyone in our community, with a commitment to equity and excellence.



OUR STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

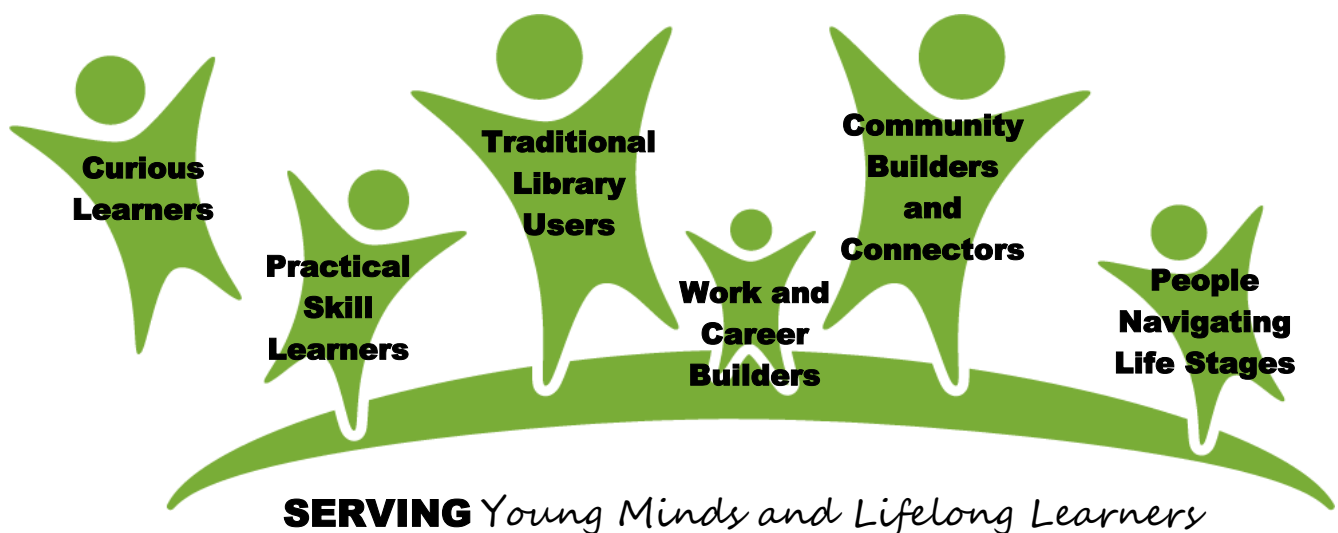
The crowning dome of our building is a masterpiece that embodies symbols of light, intelligence, illumination, aspiration, and achievement. These ideals were affirmed in conversations with patrons, partners, staff, and trustees. Eight strategic initiatives emerged from this community outreach that will guide the library in developing new programs and services that address the changing needs of our community in truly meaningful ways.

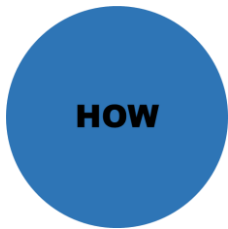


COMMUNITY SEGMENT NEEDS AND MOTIVATIONS

Serving all of Branford, young minds and lifelong learners, is at the heart of all that we do. To ensure our Framework considered needs from different segments of the Branford population, we included a range of ages and life-stages, but also looked at different motivational segments (those with similar circumstances, needs, perspectives, motivations) to better understand what brings people to the library, what are they looking for from the library, and how well the library addresses both their functional and emotional needs.

We conducted community conversations with people who fell into these groups: Curious Learners, Practical Skills Learners, Work and Career Builders, Community Builders, and People Navigating Life Stages. We captured Traditional Library Users through a community-wide survey. We gained insights from thousands of participant responses. This deeper understanding of the expectations and needs of our community is the basis for aligning what Blackstone does with what Branford needs as we move into the future.





OUR INFRASTRUCTURE

HOW

The Blackstone Library is fortunate to have significant resources to support our goals and objectives. However, infrastructure improvements may be required to deliver on the full promise of this strategic framework. Moving forward, the Blackstone Library Board of Trustees and staff will work to identify investments needed to enhance the library's ability to carry out the strategic initiatives.

STAFF – The Branford community feel Blackstone's staff are effective, open, and caring. The library and Board of Trustees is committed to supporting its staff so they can continue to deliver excellence in service and develop 21st century professional skills.

SPACE – The Blackstone building is an architectural wonder that sits on an extraordinary park-like property. Improving the flexibility of our indoor space for a wider variety of uses and taking better advantage of our library grounds are important needs identified by the community.

PROGRAMS, SERVICES, AND COLLECTIONS – Blackstone Library is keenly focused on ensuring its programs, services, and collections provide the inspiration, enrichment, education, and connections that Branford residents are seeking.

PARTNERSHIPS – To provide the greatest diversity of innovative, educational, and enriching programming, Blackstone will continue to build effective community partnerships.

COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH – Blackstone Library recognizes the importance of engaging in communications, outreach, building awareness and promotion to drive engagement and demonstrate the deep impact the library has in the community.

FUNDING – The library will strengthen its relationships with the Town of Branford and Friends of Blackstone, and continue its efforts to generate support through private donations, fundraising events, and local, state, and federal grants.

POLICIES – Blackstone Library is committed to continually reviewing its policies so they meet evolving community needs, remove barriers to access, and ensure the library remains a safe and welcoming space.

Eight Strategic Initiatives

EXPANDING MINDS

- Inspire A Love of Learning, Innovative Thinking & Creativity
- Provide Access to Expert Minds

ENRICHING LIVES

- Promote Personal Empowerment
- Support Economic Wellbeing

ENGAGING COMMUNITY

- Facilitate Community Connections Around Shared Interests
- Be A Community Information Hub
- Advance Volunteerism
- Celebrate Diversity & Understand One Another

The Eight Strategic Initiatives outlined above will serve as a road map for the Blackstone as we move forward in developing programs, services, and projects that will continue to align with Branford's evolving needs. The following section features an overview of each initiative and what it is striving to achieve, followed by programs, projects, and services that have been identified as possible ways to support the initiative. The actual programs, projects, and services that will be enacted will be determined by staff in collaboration with the Board of Trustees.

Inspire A Love of Learning

Our community is seeking opportunities to learn for fun. Self-directed learning has grown in popularity, as have opportunities to experience hands-on creating, making, and learning. Crafting and DIY is more popular than ever with young people and families. Parents are interested in crafting as a way of bonding with their children, as well as a way of practicing creative development, reading, and hand-eye coordination.

The community has also expressed a strong interest in arts and culture events. Branford strongly supports the arts, as evidenced through the Branford Arts & Cultural Alliance and newly-opened Legacy Theater. Together with these and other community partners, we will help our patrons explore a variety of creative and STEAM pursuits, providing immersive learning experiences that fulfill the need for self-directed, creative expression and making connections with others.

Blackstone Library will expand its already rich set of creative learning experiences by targeting more interests, providing more learning-for-enrichment classes and workshops, and offering new all-family programs to continue inspiring a lifelong love of learning and foster a culture of creativity and innovative thinking for everyone in Branford:

- **Learning on Your Schedule:** The library will provide access to hands-on opportunities for families and individuals of all ages to experience reading and learning on their own schedule through take-home kits, in-house learning tables, and inspirational, self-directed programs.
- **The Heather Nolin Creative-in-Residence Program:** The library will support a creative to make a work of art and lead related public programs to foster knowledge of and appreciation for Branford and the broader shoreline community.
- **A L.O.T. of “Borrow Don’t Buy” Objects:** The library will provide easy access to lendable objects from our Library of Things (L.O.T.) such as sewing machines, telescope, video production equipment, games, and more.
- **A L.O.T. of Space:** The library will create a space within the building to facilitate experimentation, drop-in instruction, and classes utilizing items from our Library of Things (L.O.T.)
- **Local Partnerships & More Programs:** The library will expand our list of community partners to offer a greater variety of enriching experiences and opportunities to connect with others over shared interests in culture, arts, and sciences.



A family plays lawn games with an adult volunteer at the library's 125th anniversary celebration.

Provide Access to Expert Minds

Branford residents are looking for personal enrichment for themselves and their families, and turn to the library for access and connection to experts for experiences across a wide variety of disciplines. They want to broaden their horizons through interesting lectures, engaging discussions, and unique events. There is also a wealth of local expertise in our area, and people want to develop and share their own knowledge and experiences, becoming mentors and offering guidance to others in our community.

People are looking for accessible, interactive, and online learning experiences and lifelong learning is becoming the new normal. By offering access to dynamic experts, both online and in-person, from near and far, Blackstone Library will be able to connect those in our community with each other over shared interests and offer them meaningful experiences that expand their knowledge and help them feel fulfilled and engaged, including helping them become mentors in their own right.



Learning about Edgar Allan Poe and enjoying dramatic readings of his works by performer/historian Campbell Harmon.

Blackstone Library will continue to expand opportunities to connect to experts and share knowledge for curious minds looking for inspiration, learning, and mentorship:

- Further develop its programs with experts exploring arts, culture, history, science, music, wellness, world issues, and more, with in-person and online offerings, in both small and large group settings.
- Provide opportunities to connect and learn with others in the community in a relaxed, social setting.
- Develop a mentorship program, giving members of the community who wish to share their own expert knowledge the opportunity to do so, either on a one-on-one or group basis.
- Continue to offer and evaluate new resources to maintain a rich and robust system of online learning, which are available any time, day or night, anywhere you have internet access.



Experts from Mystic Aquarium discuss sea creatures during a touch tank experience. program, sponsored by the Branford Community Foundation.

Promote Personal Empowerment

Our world is changing rapidly. With constantly evolving technology, increasing societal pressure to do more, and unprecedented global upheaval that is directly impacting us all, people are facing continuous pressure to learn new things and acquire new skills. People feel they must adapt, or they'll fall behind. Our goal is to be the go-to place for opportunities to learn the life skills necessary to survive and thrive in the 21st century. Whether entering a new stage of life or adapting to Branford as a newcomer from another town, or even another country, Blackstone can help provide guidance and support.

Blackstone Library will provide resources and programming to promote life skills, learning and literacy, helping to navigate challenging life transitions and keep up with ever-changing technology:

- Recruit community members to teach a broader range of essential life skills for various life stages.
- Create opportunities for people experiencing similar life challenges to come together and build a support network.
- Hold events welcoming newcomers, introducing them to the library and community.
- Help immigrants adjust to a new community while maintaining connections to their home cultures through support groups, English language learning groups, and an international Branford festival.
- Create a series of classes for adulthood such as car maintenance, cooking, sewing, personal finance, taxes, etc.
- Provide seniors with a space to share stories, challenges, experiences, and laughs with each other.
- Offer more advanced technology classes and provide access to up-to-date devices.
- Provide technology support via a virtual chat service, providing help in real time.
- Go out in the community to teach technology skills to those needing in person training but unable to come to the library.
- Be a warm, inclusive space, with staff members eager to help and include people in all life stages.



Blackstone Library provides an avenue for community members to learn essential practical and life skills so they can thrive, feel supported, and welcomed living in Branford.

Support Economic Wellbeing

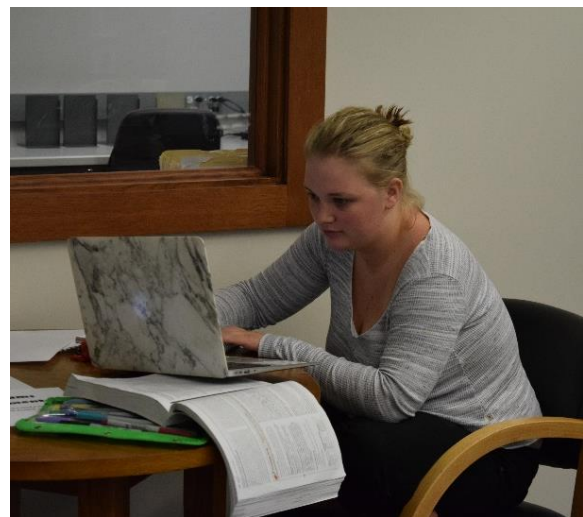
Finding the right job, learning new career skills, or gaining the knowledge to start a business is important to our community, but enhancing one's career is often more than just learning new skills or updating a resume. People are eager to connect with the larger community to enhance both their career prospects and their family life. Finding others with common interests is important.

The modern career landscape offers many paths to success. Job seekers, career builders, and entrepreneurs all have unique needs and the library will work to ensure we offer services and resources aimed at supporting each individual's career goals. Workers at every level and stage of their career can benefit from making connections. Blackstone will leverage its central position within the community to help working people make career connections--whether they are looking for guidance from an experienced business owner, need to practice their networking skills, or just want to meet someone new.

Despite their focus on careers and businesses, community members are also eager to attain better work/life balance. To that end, they are eager to connect with and become better integrated into their community both for themselves and their families. Managing a career and a family is never easy. The last few years have been exceptionally challenging for many people, and they are seeking more financial security and stronger family and community relationships.

Blackstone Library will be a resource to help Branford residents successfully navigate the modern workscape:

- Leverage existing partnerships with local business groups, and cultivate new partnerships to provide library users with easy access to local experts and resources.
- Introduce two new support groups: for job seekers and for entrepreneurs. Members will be able to learn from experts, make connections, and support and learn from each other.
- Continue to offer classes on business resources offered by the library to help users make the most of these valuable resources.
- Get creative in the ways we utilize work spaces in the library to provide a quiet, not-home place to get work done.



Blackstone Library offers a quiet, alternative, out of home workplace.

- Coordinate concurrent adult/child programs and explore other family centered solutions to help alleviate childcare challenges that can get in the way of taking advantage of library programs.

Facilitate Community Connections

Community members of all ages are interested in opportunities that allow them to connect and socialize while learning new things with others who have similar interests, passions, and curiosities. In today's world where technology is being used more and more for social interaction, young and older adults are having difficulty finding organic ways of meeting and making friends, teens are looking for places outside school and home to engage with others face-to-face, and families want to meet other families and find convenient ways for children to socialize and learn while having fun. The library addresses the needs and wants of Branford residents for social activities that are attached to learning opportunities by providing a supportive gathering place for like-minded individuals to meet over common interests, helping people feel connected to, and welcomed in, our community.



Blackstone's in-person and hybrid events include engaging, interactive, collaborative experiences for adults, teens and children.

Blackstone Library will provide programming and space for collaborative learning opportunities that bring together community members around shared interests for personal enrichment, enabling individuals to learn, forge friendships and develop deeper community ties:

- Offer more hands-on learning opportunities that encourage socializing such as cooking classes, guided arts and crafts, trivia night, etc.
- Develop a Social Enrichment club, in which, like the salons of old, attendees will gather over food and drink to discuss current topics and engage in lively debate.
- Adapt our indoor and outdoor spaces to accommodate both large and small groups, offering both intimate and open experiences.
- Provide programming at times that better accommodate community members' hectic schedules.
- Expand the scope of existing programming through social venue and event partnerships with Branford organizations for "Meet Ups" (at local coffee shops, breweries and restaurants), and access to instruction and demonstrations for a wider range of interests such as music, dance, yoga, art, theater, etc.

Be A Community Information Hub

Our community members are looking for a one-stop information-center that offers easy access to information about town events, local attractions, and community resources so they can find opportunities to connect with their town, with organizations within the town, and with each other. The central role that Blackstone plays in our community ideally positions the library to serve as this hub of information, connecting individuals to each other and to the resources they want most.



Emerging Adults from a library social group connect while exploring local attractions.

Branford residents have expressed a desire for a calendar where they can find library programs as well as town-wide events for themselves and their families. As a trusted source of information, the library will curate local information, helping community members get the most out of all Branford has to offer in terms of engagement, enrichment, and opportunities to expand one's mind and horizons.

Just as the hub on a wheel connects multiple spokes, Blackstone Library will create a resource and social information hub for Branford living:

- Become a clearinghouse of local information: provide easy access to a curated list of local resources, events, organizations, and businesses, so both newcomers and established community members can learn and adapt to life in town, and seek out the connections they want most.
- Local Events Calendar: we will expand our events calendar to include not only library events but also events run by other town departments and outside community partners, providing a more complete picture of Branford social happenings and what it means to be living in Branford.
- Civic & Community Resources: we will curate, update, and maintain a list of local services and civic information; we will provide easy access to those resources, including those designed to fight hunger, stop homelessness, provide healthcare, and respond to other imminent needs in the Branford community.
- Local Information: We will curate, update, and maintain a list of local attractions, parks, and hiking trails, and provide easy access to those resources, as well as access to the town's chamber of commerce for a list of local businesses.
- We will provide social opportunities for the community to connect and access these resources with Uncover Branford, a group facilitated by the Blackstone that meets to explore Branford living, local businesses, and area attractions, getting to know each other while we get to know the town we love.

Advance Volunteerism

The Branford Community is growing at the lower and higher income brackets, with the middle class shrinking. Branford has a strong culture of service, and a history and reputation for reaching out to those in need through community partners. Volunteers are always needed, and our community wants to volunteer, help others, and give back. People see the library as a hub that can match their skills to organizations in need and help them to discover opportunities to serve. People who are curious about their community and want to make local connections - especially those who are new to town – are interested in participating in volunteer group activities to accomplish common goals.

The library has an affiliated volunteer-led group: The Friends of Blackstone Library. The Friends raises funds for the library through book sales and other year-round activities. In addition, there are other opportunities to volunteer within the library. Volunteering strengthens communities by promoting strong ties with others, enabling people to practice new skills as they gain confidence, make friends, and learn about different aspects of Branford living.

Blackstone Library will empower community members to volunteer and make a difference by facilitating connections between individuals and organizations:

- Provide experiences for those who are new to town, or just new to volunteering, to explore local volunteer opportunities in a facilitated, collegial environment.
- Connect volunteers to community organizations through regular volunteer match events.
- Increase volunteer engagement and recognition by developing policies that celebrate the contributions of library volunteers.
- Continue to strengthen our partnership with the Friends, an all-volunteer organization whose efforts help support the library.



The Friends of Blackstone Library is an all-volunteer organization that raises funds for library programs.



Blackstone library connects community members with local volunteering opportunities.



Community volunteers gather to plan outings for the library's Uncover Branford program.



- Take a leading role in connecting volunteers with local organizations through an online matching tool.

Celebrate Diversity & Understand One Another

Celebrating diversity empowers people by respecting and appreciating what makes them different in terms of race, age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, education, and national origin. Navigating the conversation on the complex issues of diversity and inclusion is challenging. Branford community members are interested in engaging in this dialogue in the hope of better understanding one another and bringing about positive change locally, as well as more broadly in our society.

Blackstone is committed to bringing Branford residents together through constructive conversations that celebrate diversity and each individual's contribution within our community at large. Current programs on diversity, equity, and inclusion have the goal of moving us forward towards a less divisive world by enabling everyone to gain greater insight and empathy for underrepresented community members.



Blackstone Library will help our community create meaningful connections with one another by providing opportunities to celebrate diversity within the community in a safe and inclusive place that fosters mutual understanding, appreciation, compassion, and respect for all:

- Continue our social justice discussion group, “Awakening to Change” with monthly current event topics designed to help unify our community by developing a shared understanding of the history, policy, and experiences shaping contemporary discussions of race.
- Develop a series of lectures covering topics that help educated the public on issues of racism, homophobia, ableism, xenophobia, ageism, etc.
- Conduct a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion audit to assess our collections using demographics and the culture of Branford to identify the specific factors that will help us create a diverse and inclusive anthology of materials that aligns with the needs of our community.
- Foster community partnerships with organizations that service underrepresented groups.
- Review and update our platforms to accommodate our disabled and ESL patrons to afford them access to previously unattainable information.
- Continue professional development for staff in sensitivity training.

Blackstone Library Infrastructure

- **Staff**
- **Space**
- **Programs, Services and Collections**
- **Partnerships**
- **Communications and Outreach**
- **Funding**
- **Policies**

As the Blackstone moves forward in developing new programs, projects, and services to meet the full promise of this strategic framework, the library will work to ensure it makes the best use of its current infrastructure, as well as identify areas needing additional investment.

Staff

We were gratified to learn that the Branford community, across all segments, has very positive perceptions and high ratings on library staff. They feel the staff are effective, open, and caring. Blackstone Library is committed to continuing to support its staff so they continue to deliver excellence in service to all library users. We will look for ways to increase efficiencies within the library, freeing up time for staff to spend interacting with our patrons, both in the library and at outreach events, and developing new and exciting programs, services, and partnerships with community organizations and clubs. We will also create more opportunities for cross-training and collaboration between different departments to foster a sense of teamwork and ensure staff is flexible and responsive at all times.



Library staff learn new skills at a library in-service training session.

Many community members expressed a deep desire to connect with others in a facilitated setting. We will continue to provide training for staff to develop facilitation and other professional skills that are needed to be 21st century library leaders such as training on cultural sensitivity and how to handle difficult social situations that can occur in an open, welcoming, safe and non-judgmental environment like the library.

Space

The Blackstone Library building is truly an architectural wonder. The awe-inspiring design features of the library, together with its surrounding “wonderland-of-trees,” makes Blackstone a jewel in the Branford community that, when built, was the center of “village life.” Across all life stages, people in the Branford community are looking for spaces to gather and



socialize while learning, and we will strive to improve the use of our inside and outside spaces to provide the experiences our community is looking for.

Supporting the evolving needs of a modern library while preserving the historic nature of our building is not without its challenges. Our space must be flexible and accommodating for a wide variety of uses, and it must feel warm and welcoming while supporting evolving technology needs.

There is also clear need for us to offer quiet spaces for work and study, as well as areas where varying noise levels are accepted to allow for lively and engaging activities. The library's existing meeting rooms are in high demand, and creating more spaces for small groups to work is a clear need expressed by the community. We will continue to evaluate our furnishings to provide optimal comfort, flexibility, and access, balancing the historic beauty of the building with growing needs for shelving and displays, technology and workspaces to create and make, and places to gather and connect.

Our community has also asked for more outdoor events and better use of the outdoor space. The new terrace is well-used and the 125th Community Celebration drew hundreds of people to the library's park-like lawn, underscoring the desire for outdoor gathering spaces. We will continue to explore ways to enhance the use of our outside spaces, investigating options for work and play.



The Blackstone Library dome features murals that embody symbols of light, intelligence, illumination, aspiration and achievement, including the evolution of the printed word.



Families enjoying Storytime on the Blackstone lawn and playing Giant Jenga from our Library of Things.

Programs, Services and Collections

Programs

Blackstone Library remains keenly focused on ensuring that the library's programs deliver high value by addressing the needs of our diverse Branford population, providing the inspiration, enrichment, education, and connections that our community is seeking. We currently offer a broad range of programs, and this strategic framework provides a roadmap to how we can build upon what we do now and provide even greater impact.

The Blackstone Library's events and classes play a critical role in the lives of so many in our community. The Blackstone's programs are for all ages and walks of life; they include (i) talks and events that educate and encourage curiosity, (ii) classes and discussion groups that enrich the lives of community members, and (iii) arts and cultural events that inspire them to new heights. We will develop and refine our ability to measure the impact and effectiveness of programs, allowing us to continually improve and offer the most meaningful programs possible, incorporating feedback from our patrons.

Services

In addition to programming, the library offers a wide variety of services to the Branford community. From traditional library offerings such as books and databases, to more unique offerings such as our Library of Things and our Homebound Delivery service, there is something for everyone at Blackstone. Today we offer CreativeBug for online arts and crafts classes, Pronunciator for language learning, JobNow for job and resume help, Gale Legal Forms to assist with everyday legal questions. These databases provide the Branford community with 24/7 access to more expertise than the library can offer in-house, and more materials than a physical library can hold. In order to continue offering our highly demanded services, the library will seek to offer a wider variety of databases and other online resources available to patrons. An expanded Library of Things will offer more opportunities for creativity and hands on learning for our patrons, and enhancing our outreach operations will ensure that our community is more aware of the services we offer.



Using sewing machines that are available from our Library of Things.

Collections

The library maintains an ever-evolving collection of books, films, magazines, and other resources to meet our community needs. We also offer a Library of Things, technology that patrons can borrow, and online resources for eBooks, audiobooks, movies, and music collections that are available 24/7.

Moving forward, the library will build our physical and digital collections to add more items that our community has asked for and that align with our eight strategic framework initiatives. To increase opportunities for hands-on learning, the Blackstone will expand our Library of Things. To better support anytime learning, the library will enhance and refine our online database resources to address a wide array of interests and needs, including job seeking, technology skills, practical skills, higher learning, and certification opportunities. The library will ensure the collections continue to evolve to better serve the community by dedicating staff time to researching trends and community interest in future purchases for all our collections, and will conduct a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion audit on the collection to determine what areas need to be better developed.



Choosing an audiobook from our physical collection.

Partnerships

Blackstone Library is ideally positioned to connect our library patrons with many community partners. Working with local schools, town departments, community nonprofits, and local businesses will also help connect the library to programming resources, expert minds, and sources for unique experiences only available in Branford. Business connections will allow us to expand our list of resources for job seekers, while nonprofit connections will help us expand both our list of community services and our list of local volunteer opportunities. Connecting more firmly with town departments will ensure that we are providing our patrons with the most up-to-date information on what is happening locally.

Moving forward, Blackstone will seek to create new partnerships and reinforce existing relationships to better support our community, allowing us to be more dynamic and responsive to a broad set of needs. Strong, mutually beneficial and impactful partnerships will help us extend further into the community to deliver programs and services in new ways and create new connections within the community.

Communications and Outreach

The importance of engaging in communications, outreach, and promotion emerged as a top-tier need in our community conversations. Blackstone Library will build upon its basic communications infrastructure that currently includes email, Facebook, and Meetup platforms by investing in other social media activities to improve our online presence and outreach. The library's Social Media Committee will focus on developing a more robust plan for content creation and information sharing to help Blackstone expand the network of community members who opt in to receive information about the library.

One of our major strengths in outreach is our weekly community newsletter. We currently share information about local non-profit initiatives, vaccine clinic schedules, and other highly localized information aimed at improving the lives of our community members. Going forward, Blackstone will better define the kind of information shared in that newsletter and continue to improve the way we utilize it as a tool for community outreach and information sharing.

The Blackstone will also take a more proactive approach to outreach, so we can better serve the Branford community as a whole, interacting with people who may not be aware of all the library has to offer. By putting ourselves in front of the community whenever possible – at local schools, retirement communities, community events on the green, and area nonprofits – we will be better able to understand the needs of our community and tailor our offerings to meet those needs.



Now, more than ever, websites are often the first impression new users have of an organization and the gateway for building and maintaining connections and engagement. First impressions matter, as do ease of use and accessibility. Moving forward, we will redesign the Blackstone website with a new information architecture that makes it easier to navigate, access resources, share information, and engage in interactive chat and help. Additionally, the new website will be optimized for mobile devices – a critical improvement in an age where many people's primary access to the web is through a mobile device.

Funding

Since its founding, Blackstone Library has been an association library and not a municipal department. The library was fully funded through its endowment until 1960, when the Town of Branford agreed to help support the library, eventually becoming its largest annual funder. Today, the library is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit entity, with the Town of Branford contributing the majority of our operating budget each year. The library must fundraise the remaining amount.

Moving forward, the library will continue to strengthen its relationship with the Town of Branford, reinforcing and establishing relationships with Town officials and representatives to create ongoing dialogue. The library will strengthen its advocacy and communications to demonstrate the deep impact the library has in the community. The library will continue to support the efforts of the Friends to ensure their hard work throughout the year is recognized by the community. And library staff and trustees will continue efforts to generate philanthropic support through various fundraising activities.



A player at the 2022 Mini Golf fundraiser, which drew hundreds of people and raised thousands of dollars for the library.

Policies

Blackstone Library is committed to creating policies that help our efforts to better meet our community's needs, ensuring that the library remains a safe and welcoming space for both the public and for library staff. The library will regularly review and update its policies to ensure they align and support the needs of the entire community, and will strive to address existing gaps, including policies on volunteering, customer service, meeting space usage, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Branford Community: What We Learned

Community-Driven Needs Assessment

The Blackstone Library conducted 16 conversation sessions with a total of 71 members of the community, plus internal interviews with staff, board members, and other key stakeholders in the community. A community-wide survey received over 340 responses. Every response was logged and coded, generating over 50,000 data points, which were analyzed and sorted into different categories, leading to the eight strategic initiatives that will guide the library in the future.

Over and over in the responses, we found recurring themes of a strong desire to connect over shared interests, to volunteer and give back in meaningful ways, to learn for fun and get hands-on experiences, to enjoy more social experiences, and to gain access to experts. The Blackstone will strive to incorporate those ideals into all that we do.

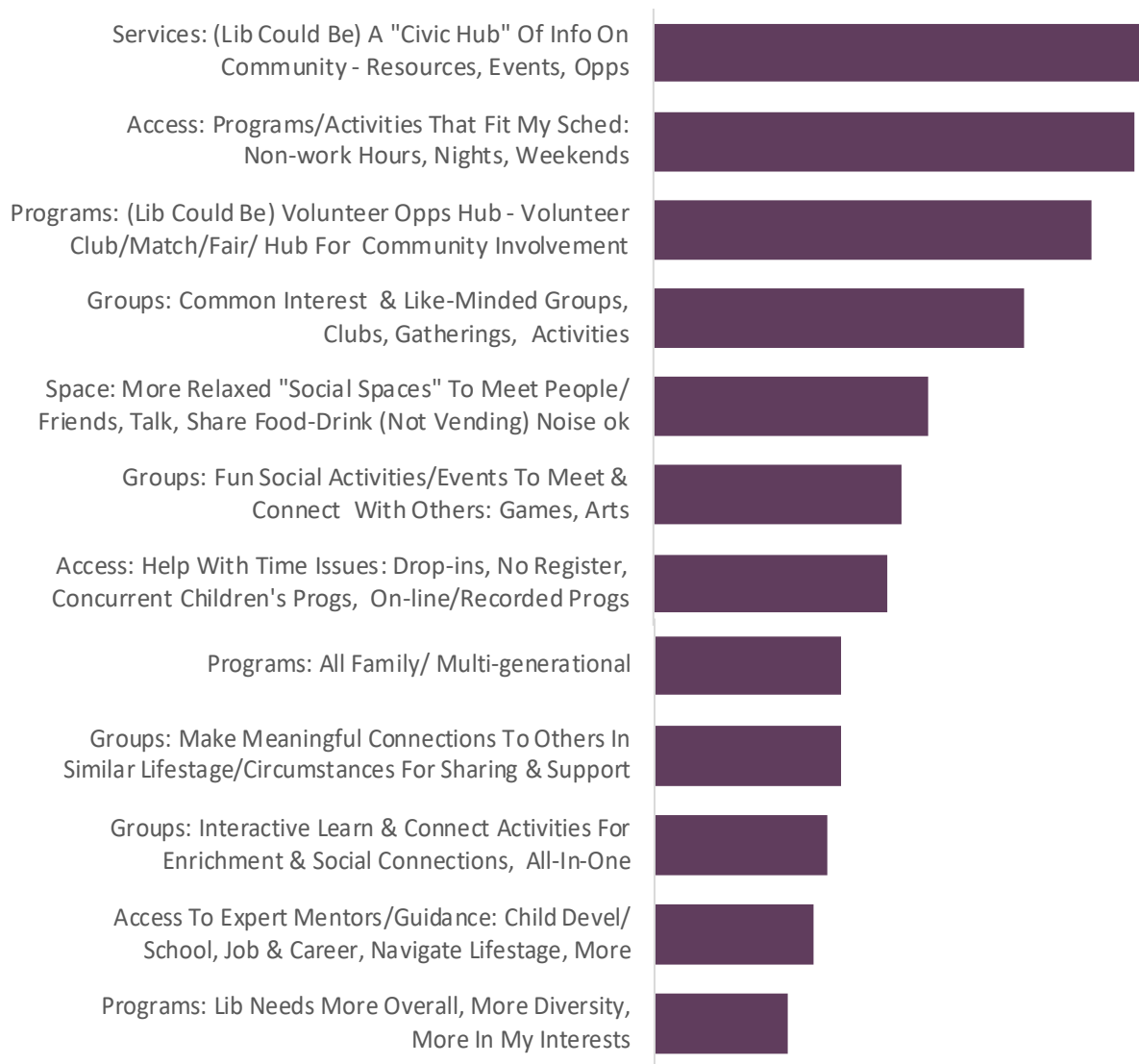


What Our Community Is Looking For:

Across All Life Areas

We asked participants about 5 different life areas: Learning Practical Skills; Work & Career; Personal & Family Wellbeing; Community Connections; Personal & Social Enrichment. Across all life areas, Branford residents want to know what is happening in their community, and they want better access to those activities. They are looking for volunteer opportunities and to enjoy more social opportunities with people who share their interests.

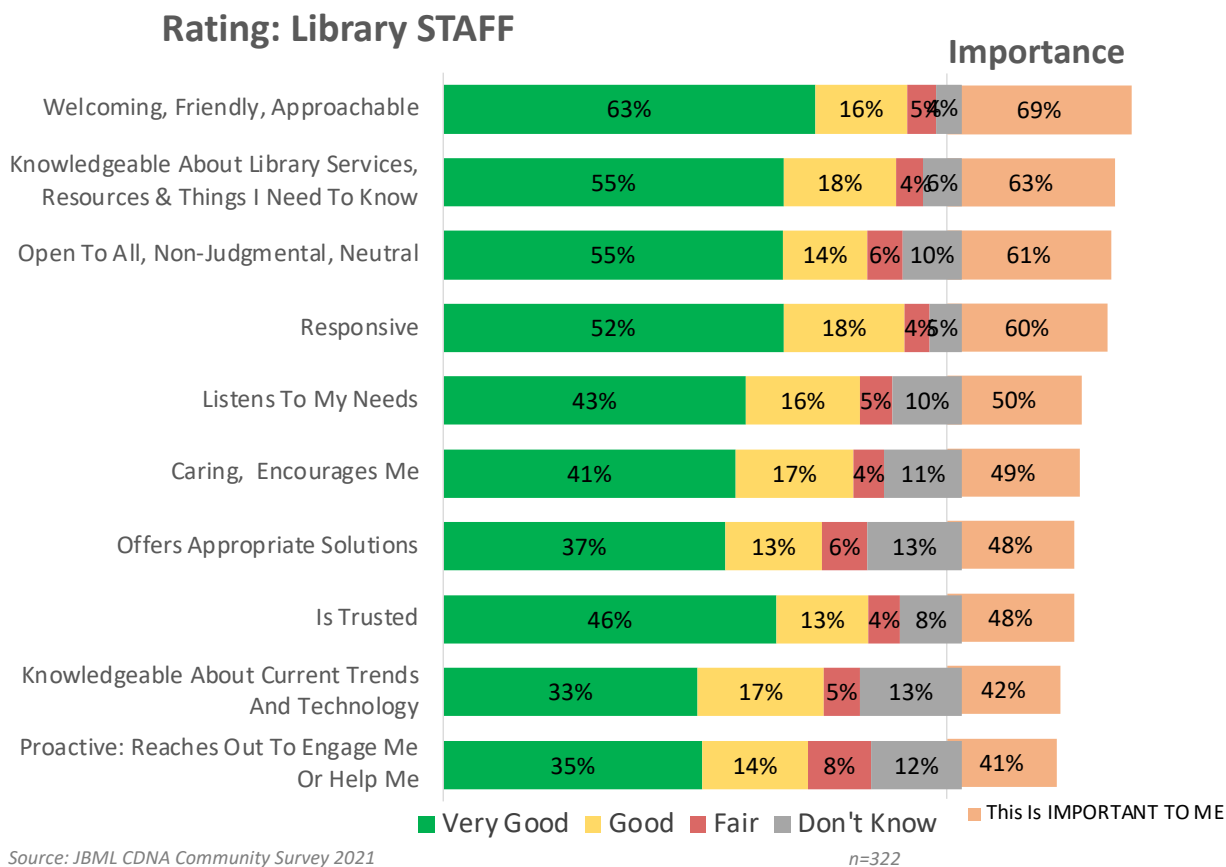
What I Really NEED & WANT In This Area...



Source: JBML EXCITE CDNA Deep Needs Conversations 2021

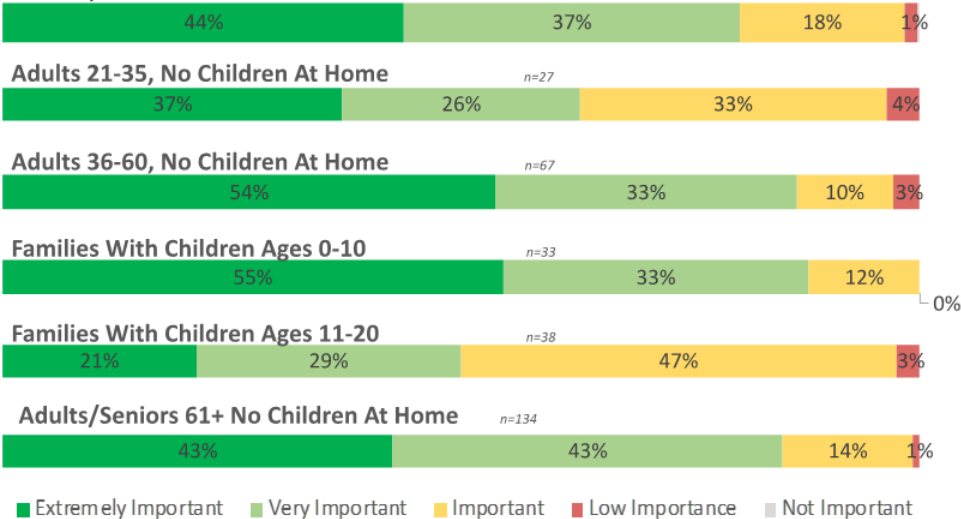
Perceptions of the Blackstone Library

Overall, our community has a strongly positive view of the Blackstone Library and its staff. People find the staff welcoming and approachable, knowledgeable and responsive. The library is important to most people, but there are opportunities for the library to find ways to better support the 21-35 age group as well as families with older children.



How Important Is The Blackstone To You?

All Respondents



Desired Programs and Services

The Branford community has a strong interest in attending a variety of programs as well as gathering in groups over shared interests. We currently offer many programs today that fall into these categories, but can refine our offerings to better align with these stated wants and needs. We also have an opportunity to create stronger group-oriented offerings with clubs and programs that meet regularly.

Community Needs and Wants:

PROGRAMS

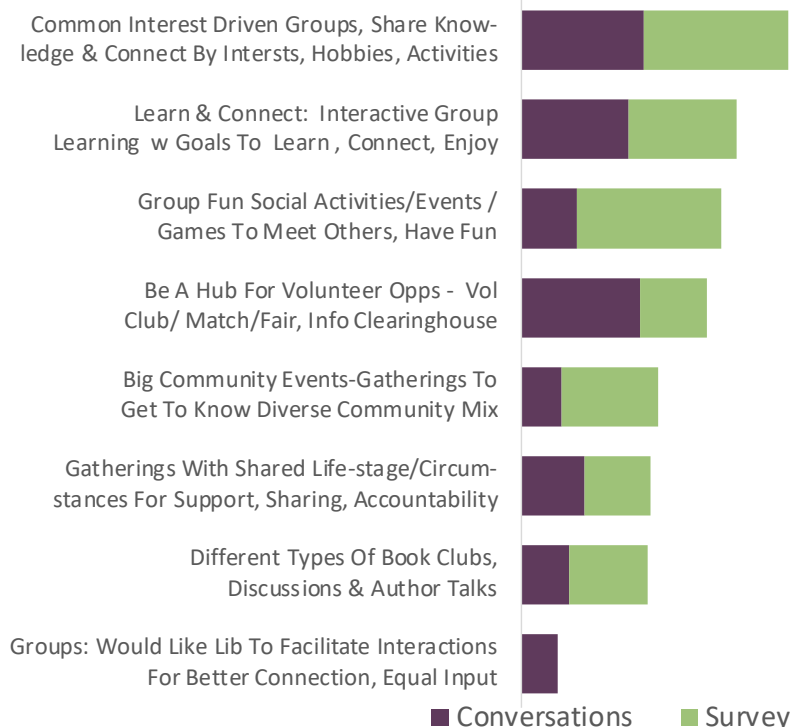
n=413



Community Needs and Wants:

GROUPS & GATHERINGS

n=285

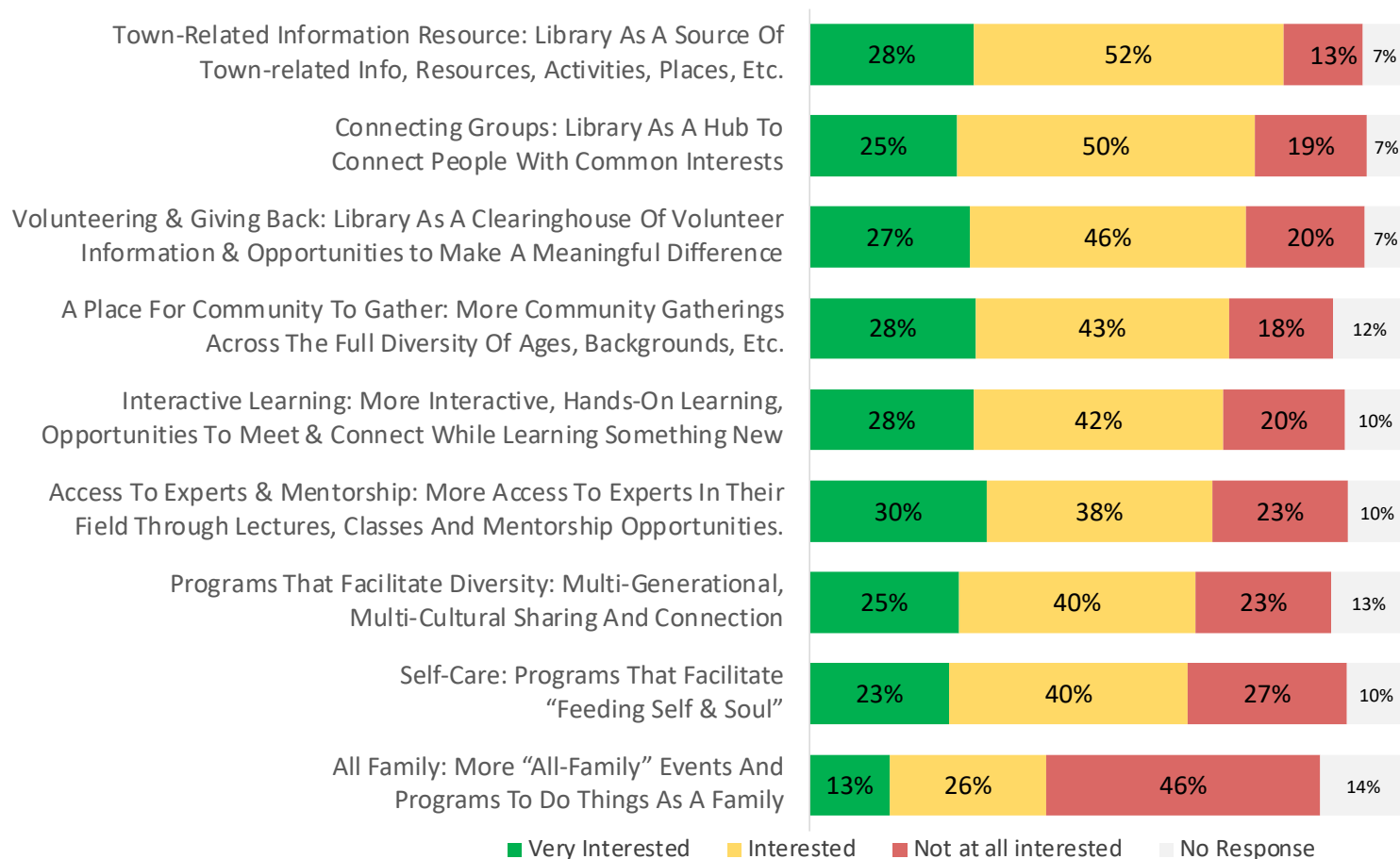


■ Conversations ■ Survey

Combined Summary CDNA Conversations & Survey 2021

Interest In Possible Future Library Offerings

We asked survey respondents to indicate their interest in specific program suggestions that came out of the community conversations. The indicated interest will help guide future programs and services offered by the Blackstone Library.



Acknowledgements

Thank you to all of the Blackstone Library staff, Board of Trustees (current and former), Friends of the Blackstone Library members, Town of Branford staff and elected officials, representatives from partner organizations who participated in interviews, and everyone who contributed to the strategic planning process.

Thank you to all of the community members who participated in the community conversations and who submitted survey responses. You have helped shape the future of the Blackstone Library.

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Maryann Amore

Cheryl Kaiden

Mary-Rita Killelea

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