

IMLS Library Convening 250: Telling America's Story

Evaluation Findings Report

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Prepared for:
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1. Executive Summary

In celebration of America's 250th birthday, IMLS launched a national initiative, "IMLS Library Convening 250: Telling America's Story," with an overarching goal of inspiring and empowering library workers at small and rural libraries to share their national and local American stories. This initiative was a set of six nationally distributed convenings running from April to October 2026 in Phoenix, Atlanta, Washington, DC, Cincinnati, Reno and St. Louis. The convenings reached a total of 712 attendees, including representatives from 644 public libraries, 52 State library agency staff, 10 representatives from territories and Freely Associated States, and 6 representatives from national and regional library organizations. Through presentations, panel discussions, hands-on learning labs, pre-convening training sessions, on-site interviews sharing 250th celebrations, and historical tours, participants gained fresh ideas, practical skills, and renewed energy to create programs and preserve stories that honor the nation's history in 2026 and beyond. Beyond the educational sessions, the convenings provided opportunities for library professionals to exchange ideas, build relationships, and explore ways to bring America's 250th birthday to life in their communities.

Small and rural libraries play an essential role in preserving community histories, providing access to educational resources, and ensuring that local voices are represented in the broader American narrative. This library demographic, however, is one that's particularly hard to reach from a federal level, where their staffing and funding constraints limit library workers' ability to participate in national initiatives. From the outset, IMLS staff understood that in order to meet the overarching goal of reaching the smallest and most rural libraries, it needed to invest energy, time and resources in crafting a customized approach to its event planning, agenda design, outreach and engagement strategy, and on-site support efforts. It also provided financial support to all attendees, including a stipend to use to cover expenses at the library due to the staff person's on-site attendance.

IMLS met its goal of reaching this subset of libraries. Of the 644 public libraries that attended the six convenings, about two in three (68%) serve 10,000 people or fewer, and 86% have ten or fewer full-time equivalent staff. Nearly two in three (64%) have five or fewer staff, and nearly three in ten (29%) have two or fewer. [1] Further, the post-event evaluation results confirm the convenings reached the libraries they were designed to support, and those libraries expressed high value for having the opportunity to attend.

The attendance profile also suggests that the initiative successfully reached library professionals who may not typically participate in national conferences because of staffing, geographic, or financial constraints. Attendees' responses in the post-event survey, stipend applications, and

[1] Planning staff used the FY22 IMLS Public Library Survey, the latest available at that time, data set to identify the target library type for the invitation and participant list. All references throughout the report to public library demographics are based on Fiscal Year 2022 publicly reported metrics.

participant feedback consistently described barriers that often limit access to professional development opportunities. These comments affirm the success of IMLS implementing a strategy to make national-level learning and networking accessible to a group that is often underrepresented at large professional events.

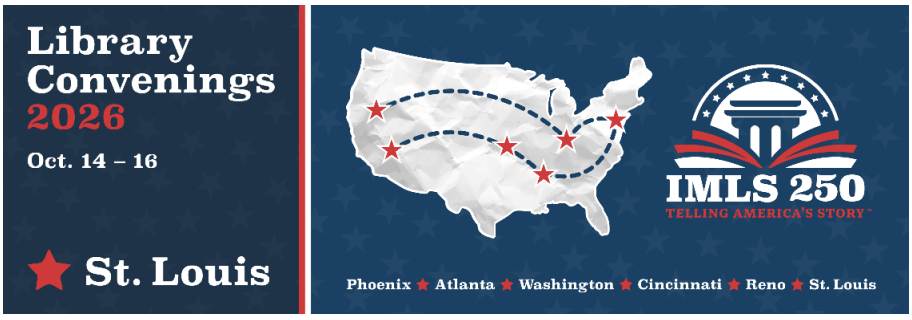
> *"It was honestly the best convening I've been involved with in my 36 years as a librarian." — Attendee, Phoenix*
>
> *"The ability to learn and network with other small and rural libraries was an invaluable life experience that I will forever carry with me in my personal and professional life." — Attendee, Washington, DC*

2. Key Learnings

712	68%	98%	98%	3 in 4
Total attendees at the six convenings	of their public libraries serve 10,000 people or fewer	said they gained new skills	plan to use what they learned in their own programs to celebrate America's 250th birthday	respondents named connecting with peers as the most valuable part

Participants were eager to share their enthusiasm and support for these convenings. IMLS received formal feedback from the post-event evaluation and informal feedback from email and in-person engagements about the success of the initiative and considerations for improving future, targeted efforts. As a case in point, the high response rates signify a value on the part of the respondents wanting to share their opinions. More than three in four of the 712 attendees (79%) completed the post-event survey, a strong response rate for an event evaluation. Comments from the evaluation reinforced how meaningful this focus was. Nearly every respondent rated the experience positively, and many described it as one of the best professional events of their careers.

Figure 1. St. Louis Convening Highlights Video (Vimeo)



Communities Celebrating America's 250th Birthday and Telling America's Story

Across convenings, participants enjoyed sharing and hearing from peers about their programming ideas to celebrate America's 250th birthday. In addition to networking and peer sharing, nearly one in three attendees accepted the on-site invitation to conduct an interview, sharing what they were doing in their hometowns for the Semiquincentennial. Attendees reported that their libraries hosted America's 250th birthday parties, sing-alongs, re-enactments, and parades. They held watch parties, duck races, book clubs, and citizen ceremonies. Participants shared hundreds of ideas on ways to celebrate and instill a sense of civic pride for all generations – all of this without having large budgets or staff.

- **225 attendees representing 47 States and two U.S. Territories recorded their library's story, and each could take home a professionally edited video.** At every convening, IMLS provided dedicated time and a recording space where attendees could sit down with a professional videographer and describe what their library was doing, or planning, for America's 250th. The recordings were designed to serve attendees as much as IMLS. They give the agency a firsthand record of how small and rural libraries celebrated America's story this year. At the same time, every participant could take home a professionally edited video of their interview to use for their own needs back home, from promoting programs to sharing their library's work with local officials, boards and community members. For libraries with few staff and limited marketing budgets, a professionally produced video is a resource they would rarely be able to create on their own.

- **Libraries told the national story through local, and often less-told, history.** Local history was the most common thread in the interviews. More than one in three interviewees (35%) tied America's 250th to the history of their own town, county or state, and one in five (20%) explicitly connected that local story to the national one: Revolutionary War soldiers from their county, Underground Railroad stops in their region, presidential whistle-stop visits, and what their part of the country looked like in 1776. Nearly one in four (24%) intentionally included perspectives that are less often told, such as Native American, Black, immigrant, Hispanic and women's history. Several libraries serving tribal and Native Hawaiian communities described commemorating the anniversary on their communities' own terms. Attendees found that this personal, place-based approach drew people in.

> *"People are really hungry for local history." — Interview participant*

- **Libraries are capturing their communities' stories before they are lost.** Nearly one in four interviewees (24%) described history or storytelling projects, recording oral histories with longtime residents and veterans, digitizing photographs, films and old newspapers, inviting residents to bring family artifacts and share the stories behind them, and assembling time capsules to be opened in 2076. Several spoke with urgency, noting that

the residents who remember their town's history are passing away. About one in eight (12%) described work designed to last well beyond 2026, such as permanent local history archives, annual programs, or materials preserved for future generations.

- **Working with small budgets, libraries reached their whole communities through partnerships and programs already in place.** Nearly two in three interviewees (63%) described working with partners to make their celebrations possible, including city and county governments, chambers of commerce, schools, churches, fire departments, Daughters of the American Revolution chapters, historical societies, museums and state humanities councils. About one in three (32%) worked with historical or archival partners specifically. About one in four (26%) built the anniversary into programs their communities already rely on, especially summer reading and story time. Activities ranged widely: parades and birthday parties, public readings of the Declaration of Independence, a civics challenge in which residents practiced for the U.S. citizenship test, and community discussions of the Ken Burns documentary The American Revolution. Attendance was often striking for small towns. In one Iowa community of about 1,200 people, 791 turned out for a midweek Freedom Truck visit, and in one New Jersey town, 30 local organizations held 22 charity drives modeled on a Revolutionary War–era minister's supply drives for the troops. Some librarians described discussion programs that brought neighbors together in a divided time.

- **Libraries left ready to tell their communities' stories for America's 250th.** The session on commemorating the 250th was among the best-received learning sessions and almost all attendees plan to use what they learned to develop and strengthen America's 250 programming in their communities. Their ideas range from recording residents' stories to using the Library of Congress and National Archives. Small and rural libraries are uniquely positioned to document the people, places, and experiences that shape their communities. This includes stories that may receive less attention in broader historical narratives.

Strengthening Small Libraries

The convenings also strengthened the everyday work of small libraries. Nearly two in three (64%) in the participating public libraries have five or fewer staff, so skills that save time and stretch limited budgets have a significant positive impact. Attendees learned how to identify funding opportunities and develop competitive grant proposals, make the most of limited space, build lasting community partnerships, and support children's reading and adults' information skills. Many said the experience renewed their sense of purpose. For many, the fact that IMLS covered all travel costs was the only reason they were able to attend.

- **Attendees left with practical skills and specific plans they could apply when returning home.** Sessions on grant writing, maximizing small spaces, building partnerships, and supporting reading and information literacy were rated highly at every site. Attendees

described gaining ideas they could adapt to their own communities, and some emailed event planning staff afterward to share that they had already begun putting what they learned into practice. This immediate application suggests that the convenings provided not only inspiration but also practical tools that participants could use in their everyday work.

- **The significance of the convenings extended well beyond skills training.** For some librarians, particularly those serving communities with limited staffing and budgets, attending represented a rare opportunity to travel professionally, participate in a national initiative, and connect with colleagues who understood the challenges of working in small libraries. Some participants described experiencing their first flight or attending their first national event. Beyond the knowledge gained, they reported that they were going to return home with new professional relationships, renewed confidence, and a stronger sense that small and rural libraries have an important place in the national conversation. Their experiences illustrate how access to professional development can provide both practical benefits and a meaningful sense of recognition and belonging.

> *"Librarians are some of the most passionate, devoted people I know… I'm the only one of me in my community. There's not another person I can go to …. and network and build those relationships…..so, this is how we build [those relationships] with events like this." — Attendee, St. Louis*

- **Learning from one another was among the most valuable parts of the convenings.** Nearly three in ten (29%) attending public libraries have two or fewer staff, meaning many participants work in small teams or independently and have limited opportunities to connect with colleagues outside their communities. Attendees frequently identified conversations with peers facing similar challenges as the most valuable part of the experience. The convenings created space for participants to exchange ideas, discuss shared difficulties, build professional relationships, and learn from approaches being used in libraries across the country. For librarians who rarely have opportunities to attend conferences, these connections were especially meaningful and offered a professional network they could continue drawing upon after returning home.



Convening attendees engage in small-group discussion.

- **State library engagement strengthened the convening participation and added value to their on-site experience.** IMLS asked State library staff to share the invitation with small and rural libraries in their states and encouraged them to attend. They also invited one State library staff member from all 50 States, the District of Columbia, Territories, and Freely Associated States libraries to attend one of the six convenings. Anecdotally, and reinforced in the survey results, participants reported they were skeptical the invitation was genuine and might be a scam and would not have attended without their State library staff validating the invite as legitimate and encouraging them to attend. Additionally, the on-site engagement with a State library staff strengthened their relationships with this hard-to-reach library demographic. Several evaluation respondents explicitly named time with State library staff or colleagues from their own state as the most valuable part, and some met in-State peers for the first time. These observations highlight the potential for state library partnerships to strengthen outreach, build trust, and sustain connections beyond the convenings. Lastly, 23 interviewees (10%) described state library or state 250 commission resources which demonstrates that state agencies provide important content that fed into IMLS' storytelling objectives.

- **Financial assistance helped make participation possible, but staffing constraints remained an important consideration.** In addition to providing financial support to attend, IMLS offered a stipend to participants in need of funds to pay for staffing or programming needs. In their stipend applications, directors described the practical challenges of leaving to attend a conference as they are their library's only full-time employee, only having a few other colleagues to work additional shifts, or need to hire substitute staff simply to keep their libraries open while they attended. For these institutions, the cost of attending extended beyond transportation, lodging, and meals to the challenge of maintaining

essential community services in their absence. Financial support for staffing helped turn an invitation into an opportunity that some libraries could realistically accept. These accounts underscore the importance of addressing both direct travel expenses and the operational realities of small libraries when designing accessible professional development opportunities and programs.

> *"I know I'm not alone when I say my attendance would not have been possible without the stipend, reimbursement and underwriting of travel and registration expenses. I am very grateful." -Attendee, St. Louis*

Beyond the immediate learning experience, the convenings provided small and rural libraries with valuable resources, professional connections, and inspiration to bring America's 250th commemoration to their communities into the future. These opportunities helped strengthen their role in preserving local histories and ensuring that smaller communities have a voice in the national story.

The remainder of this report provides a detailed account of who participated, what the convening series offered, what attendees reported gaining from their experiences, and recommendations for future IMLS convenings.

3. Event Summary

IMLS held six convenings from April to October 2026 (Table 1). Five were regional events in Phoenix, Atlanta, Washington, DC, Cincinnati and Reno, each serving a group of nearby states and territories. Because of the series' success, a sixth convening in St. Louis was added and opened to all 50 states. Each event lasted three days: an optional pre-convening day to attend two skills training workshops or guided historical tours, followed by two days of speakers, hands-on learning and professional development sessions and structured networking time for peer-to-peer engagement.

The evaluation findings in this report draws on 560 written survey responses from attendees across all six convenings, reflections from the convening planning team, 71 unsolicited thank-you messages from participants, 225 on-site interviews, and records maintained by IMLS and the planning team. The analysis was conducted by Lindenstar Consulting, an independent third-party evaluator, which used Claude AI to assist with coding of the data. The resulting analysis and findings were manually reviewed by Lindenstar Consulting to assess accuracy and ensure the integrity of the report. Survey responses were collected anonymously, and quotations are presented without names to help protect participants' privacy.

Event invitations went to one staff member per library to nearly 6,000 small, rural, remote and outlying public libraries identified through the Public Libraries Survey, with a focus on those serving fewer than 10,000 people. State library staff, IMLS grantees, and libraries located in or near the

host city were also invited. IMLS covered travel, lodging and meals for attendees, presenters and staff, and offered stipends to libraries that needed additional support.

Table 1. Where and When the Convenings Took Place*

Host city	Dates (2026)	Region served	Attendees	Survey responses
Phoenix, AZ	April 14–16	Southwest and Southern Plains (8 states**)	134	112
Atlanta, GA	May 11–13	Southeast (10 states)	124	85
Washington, DC	June 10–12	Northeast and Mid-Atlantic, plus Hawai'i (12 states), DC, and 6 territories and Freely Associated States	132	97
Cincinnati, OH	June 22–24	Midwest and Appalachia (10 states), Marshall Islands	127	98
Reno, NV	September 1–3	West and Northern Plains (11 states**)	125	110
St. Louis, MO	October 14–16	All 50 states	70	58
		TOTAL	712	560

**A full list of invited states by region and invitation counts are in Appendix C.*

***California was divided into two regions – Southern and Northern – due to its size – and is counted twice.*

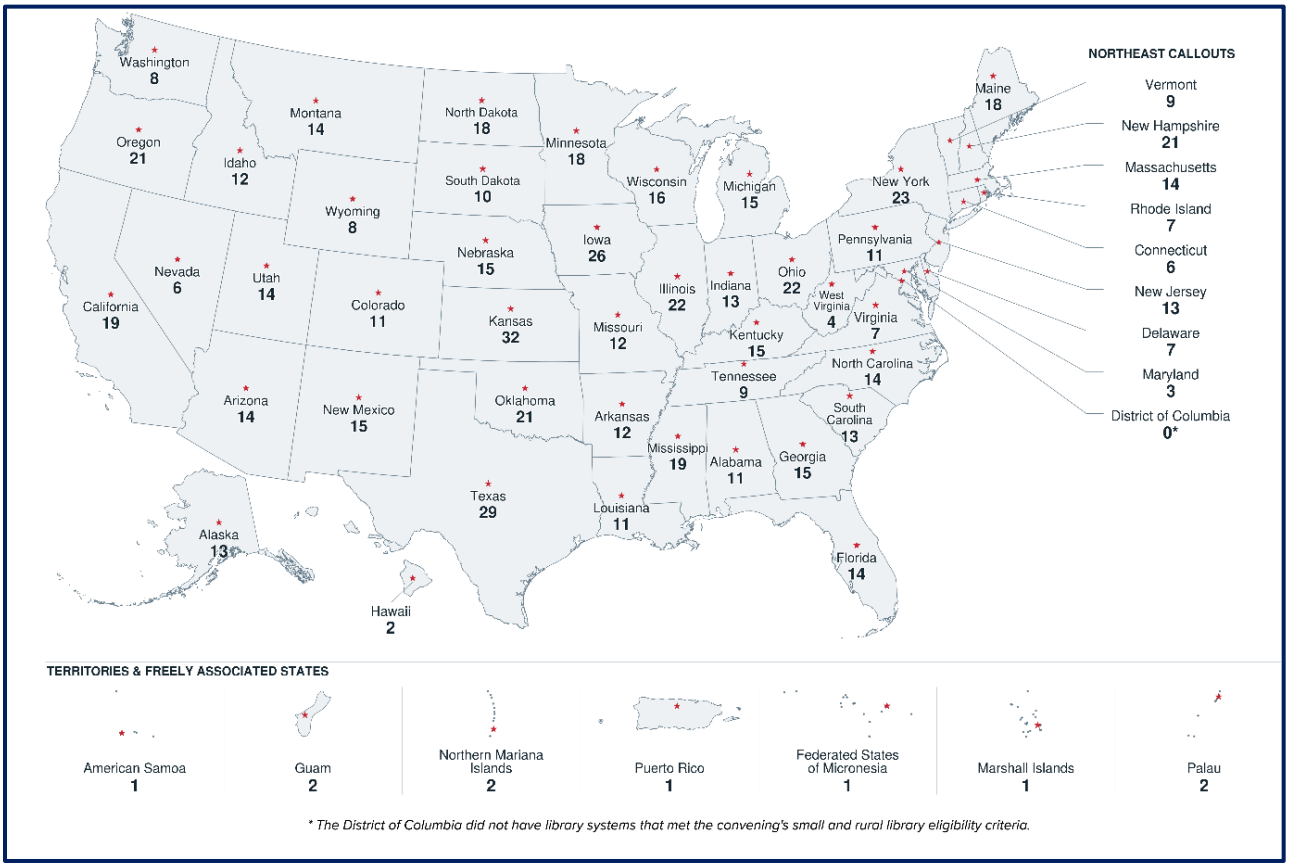
Who Attended

The six convenings drew 712 attendees from across the country (Figure 2): staff from 644 public libraries, 52 State library agency staff, 10 representatives of U.S. territories and Freely Associated States, and 6 representatives of national and regional library organizations.

Of those public libraries:

- more than one in four (28%) serve 2,500 people or fewer, and half (50%) serve 5,000 or fewer;
- about two in three (68%) serve 10,000 or fewer;
- nearly three in ten (29%) have two or fewer staff (full-time equivalent), and nearly two in three (64%) have five or fewer;
- 86% have ten or fewer staff.
- St. Louis, the final convening and the only one open to all 50 states, drew the smallest libraries of the series: 62 of its 64 public libraries (97%) serve 5,000 people or fewer.

Figure 2. Library Attendees from Across the Nation Joined the Convenings (N=712)



These participation figures, relative to the invitation list, reflect the self-reported barriers staff experienced when wanting to attend. Several representatives wanted to attend but could not arrange coverage for a single-staff or short-staffed library. Others needed approval from municipal officials, were managing summer reading programs or school-related commitments, or facing family scheduling concerns. These qualitative observations indicate that inability to attend did not necessarily signal lack of interest. Tables 2 and 3 show the full breakdown of participation by population served and paid full-time equivalent staff.

Table 2. Libraries Represented by Population Served (Legal Service Area)

Population served	PHX	ATL	DC	CIN	RNO	STL	Total	% of public libraries
500 or fewer	1	0	2	0	4	1	8	1.2%
501–1,000	9	1	5	2	10	0	27	4.2%
1,001–2,500	20	3	34	31	26	30	144	22.4%
2,501–5,000	30	6	25	28	21	31	141	21.9%
5,001–10,000	28	11	28	32	18	0	117	18.2%
10,001–20,000	19	30	5	13	22	1	90	14.0%
20,001–50,000	9	28	3	6	10	1	57	8.9%
50,001–100,000	3	19	7	1	3	0	33	5.1%
100,001–999,999	5	15	1	2	1	0	24	3.7%
Over 1 million	2	0	1	0	0	0	3	0.5%
Public libraries, subtotal	126	113	111	115	115	64	644	100.0%
State library agency staff	8	10	11	9	9	5	52	—
Territories and Freely Associated States	0	0	9	1	0	0	10	—
National and regional library organizations	0	1	1	2	1	1	6	—
Total attendees	134	124	132	127	125	70	712	—

Table 3. Libraries Represented by Number of Staff (FTE)

Paid staff (FTE)	PHX	ATL	DC	CIN	RNO	STL	Total	% of public libraries
Less than 1 FTE	0	0	3	0	5	0	8	1.2%
1–2 FTE	39	10	32	34	31	35	181	28.1%
2.01–5 FTE	45	27	41	40	43	28	224	34.8%
5.01–10 FTE	27	34	24	28	25	1	139	21.6%
10.01–15 FTE	4	18	2	8	3	0	35	5.4%
15.01–20 FTE	4	7	0	2	4	0	17	2.6%
More than 20 FTE	7	17	9	3	4	0	40	6.2%
Public libraries, subtotal	126	113	111	115	115	64	644	100.0%
State library agency staff	8	10	11	9	9	5	52	—
Territories and Freely Associated States	0	0	9	1	0	0	10	—
National and regional library organizations	0	1	1	2	1	1	6	—
Total attendees	134	124	132	127	125	70	712	—

Source: final attendee master list. Each row is one attendee; each public library appears once, and some state library agencies sent more than one person. Counts are final attendance for all six convenings, and the percentage column is based on the 644 public libraries. FTE = full-time equivalent staff.

In addition to its learning objectives, IMLS established attendance goals of 150 participants for each of the first five convenings and 75 for the final gathering in St. Louis. Although final attendance fell below the original numerical targets of 150 per site, registration demonstrated strong interest in the opportunity, with several convenings meeting or exceeding their targets at the RSVP stage.

A total of 158 cancellations were recorded, representing 18.1% of RSVPs. Of these, 120 participants canceled without a replacement, while 38 arranged for another representative to attend in their place. The cancellations reflect some of the practical challenges associated with engaging small and rural libraries, where unexpected staffing needs, limited personnel, and competing responsibilities can make travel particularly difficult. Despite these challenges, attendance rates remained relatively consistent across the six locations, ranging from 77.6% to 83.8% (Table 4).

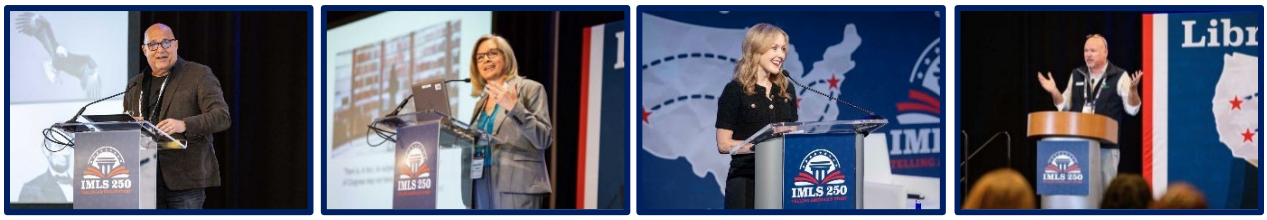
Table 4. RSVPs and Attendance by Convening

Location	RSVP'd	Attended	Attendance Rate
Phoenix, AZ	160	134	83.8%
Atlanta, GA	149	124	83.2%
Washington, DC	170	132	77.6%
Cincinnati, OH	153	127	83.0%
Reno, NV	154	125	81.2%
St. Louis, MO	85	70	82.4%
Total	**871**	**712**	**81.7%**

4. What Happened at Each Convening

Each convening included four types of activities. The program was largely the same at every site, with local tours and some speakers changing by city. This consistent structure ensured that participants across the country had access to similar learning opportunities, regardless of where they attended.

Keynotes and Featured Speakers



Keynote speakers from left to right: Lee Habeeb, host of Our American Stories; Lee Ann Potter, Library of Congress; Tamara Martin, Presidential Libraries; and Rob Cullin, ReThinking Libraries.

Every convening opened with a keynote on storytelling by Lee Habeeb, Host of Premiere Networks' "Our American Stories." National history institutions then described resources small libraries can utilize: Lee Ann Potter of the Library of Congress (Atlanta and Washington, DC) and Tamara Martin, Acting Executive for Presidential Libraries (Phoenix, Washington, DC, Reno, and St. Louis). State library presenters from Mississippi (Atlanta) and Oklahoma (Phoenix) described their states' America's 250th birthday celebration planning, and Rob Cullin of ReThinking Libraries led a main-stage session on partnerships in Cincinnati, Reno, and St. Louis. The Library of Congress presentation was the most highly rated, with nearly every attendee who heard it saying they learned something useful. For many small and rural library staff, these presentations also provided a valuable opportunity to learn directly from national institutions and discover resources they could bring back to their communities.

Pre-convening Trainings and Tours

On the first day, attendees chose between a historical tour or skills-based training sessions. The two training sessions were **Winning Grants for Rural Libraries**, which walked through the full grant process and the responsible use of AI tools, and **Small Space, Big Possibilities**, on making the most of limited library space and displays. Nearly every participant was satisfied with both. The grant session used a real IMLS-funded local history project as a running example. It covered setting goals and measurable outcomes, building a realistic budget, finding funders at every level, and reading a proposal the way a reviewer does, and attendees left with a workbook and worksheets to start their own proposal. The space session gave attendees self-assessment tools to evaluate their buildings and services and plan improvements. Both training courses addressed challenges especially relevant to smaller libraries, where limited funding, staffing, and physical space can make it difficult to expand services.

The historical learning tours, made available as an alternative to the pre-convening training sessions, included visits to the Carter Presidential Library, the Heard Museum, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Taft Museum of Art, historic Virginia City, and, in St. Louis, the Museum at the Gateway Arch, the Old Courthouse and a riverfront history excursion. All locations were rated highly and provided guests with unique educational opportunities.

Learning Labs

Small-group learning labs gave practical, take-home guidance on four topics: building sustainable partnerships, children's reading literacy and the role of public libraries, information literacy, and commemorating America's 250th:

- **Building sustainable partnerships** showed how to find, evaluate, and maintain community partners, using tools such as partner mapping and simple written agreements. Presenters stressed that it is fine to start small and to say "no."
- **Children's reading and public libraries** drew on a recent IMLS research review to explain what keeps children engaged in reading and how libraries can strengthen their reading programs and outreach.
- **Information literacy** introduced IMLS's online resource, informationliteracy.gov, a collection of ready-to-use resources on digital, financial, health and AI literacy designed for small community organizations.
- **Commemorating America's 250th,** led by peer presenters, helped attendees develop ideas for local celebrations and to exchange program ideas.

At least 97% of post-event survey respondents in each lab said they felt confident using what they learned. Many attendees wished they could have attended every lab rather than choosing. The smaller group format also encouraged questions, discussion, and the exchange of ideas among librarians facing similar challenges in their communities.

Networking and Peer Learning

Structured and informal time to connect ran through every convening: state and regional meetups, peer sharing about America's 250th birthday celebration plans, a fireside chat, evening receptions at local museums and cultural sites, and shared meals. This time proved to be the heart of the experience (see Section 5). For librarians who often work alone or with only a few colleagues, these interactions were especially meaningful. Attendees had the opportunity to meet others who understood the challenges of running a small library, sharing ideas, and building relationships that could continue long after the convenings ended. For some, simply being included in a national gathering reinforced that their work and their communities' stories mattered.



Convening attendees participate in networking and peer learning.

Additional Learning Activities

IMLS offered additional non-targeted learning opportunities on-site. Its Freedom Truck grant program allowed the trucks to be on-site at two locations – Atlanta and Cincinnati. IMLS promoted participation in Second Lady Usha Vance's Summer Reading challenge at every convening. Participants were also encouraged to bring their own handouts to make available at a resource table for everyone to access.

Post-Event Continuing Education Opportunities

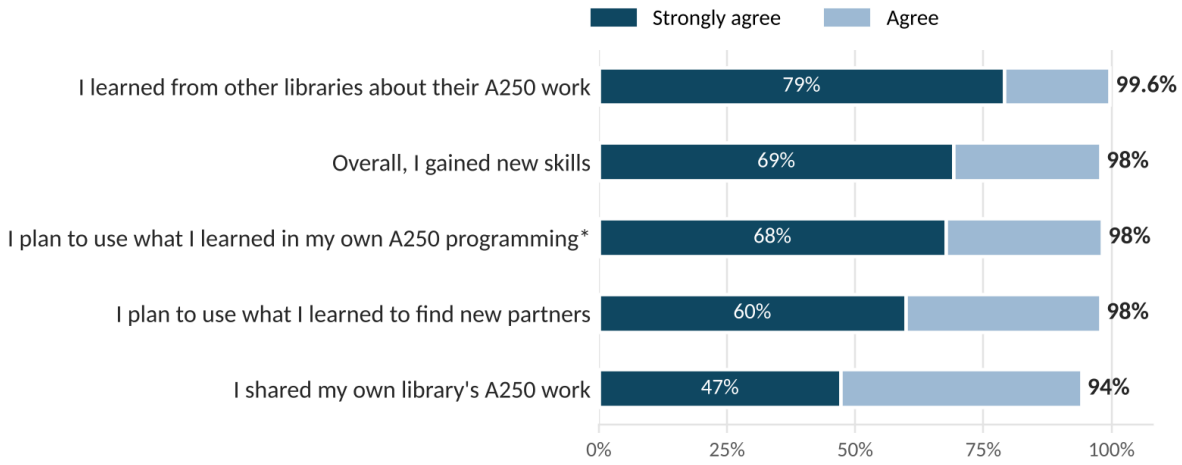
To extend the convenings beyond the people in the room, the trainings were turned into on-demand videos, and a public website brings together session recordings, highlight videos from each city, and downloadable tools. The tools include a grant-writing workbook and AI worksheet, a partnership planning guide, child reading research summaries, information literacy resources and facility self-assessments. The website will also host this report. These resources respond directly to attendees who asked for slides, recordings, and ways to stay connected. Making these materials

publicly available also extends the initiative's reach to library professionals who were unable to attend, helping reduce geographic, financial, and staffing barriers to accessing the same learning opportunities. To view these resources, photos and videos from the event, and more, visit the project's website at https://imls250.cmpinc.net.

5. What Participants Told Us

Attendees answered a two-page survey at the conclusion of each convening. Ratings were consistently high across all six sites. Nearly every attendee agreed that they learned from their peers, gained new skills and plan to use what they learned (Figure 3). The one area where enthusiasm was more modest was if they shared their own library's Semiquincentennial work with peers: most agreed they did, but fewer than half agreed strongly. Several attendees noted that they were still in the early stages of planning their events, particularly those who completed the survey before July 4, and therefore had little progress to report.

Figure 3. What Attendees Said they Gained



Share of survey respondents who agreed or strongly agreed.

**Four sites; Reno and St. Louis used slightly different wording (98% agreed). Detailed results by site are in Appendix E.*

Connecting with Peers Was the Most Valued Part

When asked what was most valuable, three out of four respondents named networking and learning from peers. Nearly three in ten attending public libraries have two or fewer staff, so many attendees work alone or with one or two colleagues and seldom have anyone to compare notes with. Being in a room where others understood their unique circumstances and shared similar challenges was especially meaningful. Nearly one in four specifically said that meeting libraries of similar size was the highlight.

In response to the evaluation question prompting the most valuable experience at the convenings, participants said:

> *"Being in a group of all small & rural libraries - knowing that any table I sat at, I would find 'my people'" — Attendee, Reno*

Practical Skills They Could Use Right Away

Attendees valued how practical the sessions were. The grant-writing and small-space training courses were among the highest-rated sessions in the series, and attendees often mentioned them by name. Others highlighted resources they had not known about, such as the Library of Congress's online collections, National Archives' Presidential Libraries resources and IMLS's information literacy website.

> *"Small spaces and other workshops felt so geared to my library and provided practical advice I can implement immediately." — Attendee, Cincinnati*
>
> *"The grant writing course was especially informative.... We plan to apply many of the ideas and directives we learned to future grant applications, as well as explore new funding opportunities and grant-making organizations." — Attendee, Cincinnati*

A Well-Run Event That Made Attendance Possible

The registration and travel support provided by Capital Meeting Planning, the IMLS-contracted event planner, in addition to having direct access to IMLS staff, received the highest ratings of the experience, with 99% of respondents satisfied. Attendees repeatedly said they could not have come if IMLS had not covered the costs. For many small and rural libraries, professional development opportunities are limited not by a lack of interest, but by the financial and logistical challenges of attending. Covering travel and related expenses helped remove barriers that might otherwise have prevented these librarians from participating. This support made it possible for library professionals from communities with limited resources to access the same training, national speakers and networking opportunities as their peers.

> *"If IMLS had not covered the cost our library would not have had the means to attend." — Attendee, Phoenix*
>
> *"Having this professional development opportunity be all-expenses-paid allowed me to truly immerse myself in learning and networking without being burdened or troubled with financial stressors. I simply would not have been able to attend this Convening without this generous financial assistance. For this, I can't thank you enough!" — Attendee, Washington, DC*
>
> *"Without someone to cover my shifts we would have to close the library for the three days that I am attending the conference. The stipend helps defray costs of another person covering my vacancy." — Attendee, Atlanta*

How the Six Convenings Compared

The evaluation results were consistent from city to city. Logistics ratings were nearly identical across all six sites. Atlanta attendees gave the highest ratings in almost every session. Washington DC attendees were generally positive, but they rated the speakers' programs lower than other sites. Reno attendees were the least likely to say they had shared their own library's Semiquincentennial work. St. Louis attendees gave the highest rating of any site for learning from their peers, while their ratings for the learning labs and for gaining new skills were among the lowest. Site-by-site results are in Appendix E.

Feedback Attendees Sent on Their Own

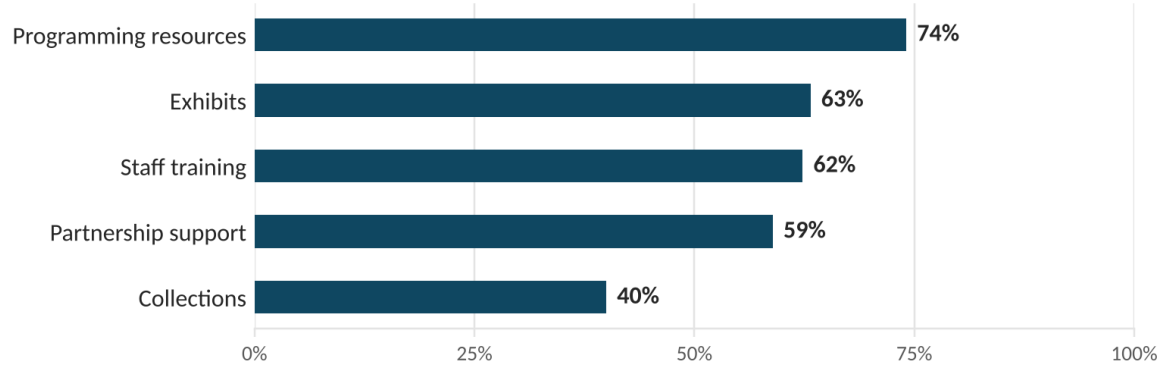
After the convenings, attendees sent 71 unsolicited thank-you emails and letters to the planning team. None were critical and all gave greater context to the value the attendees experienced. They echoed the survey: writers described connecting with peers, bringing ideas home and a smoothly run event. Twelve called it one of the best professional events of their careers, several after 20 to 40 years in the field. Six described things they had already done since returning, from launching new programs, partnerships, and celebrations to sharing out their work with their communities and boards. Beyond the professional benefits, many messages reflected a sense of appreciation for being included in an event specifically designed for small and rural libraries. These personal reflections suggest that the convenings helped attendees feel recognized, valued, and connected to a larger professional community.

> *"Instead of feeling small because of my library size, you made me feel important and part of Our American Story. Instead of feeling inconsequential, I left feeling proud for what I do in my community through my library." — Attendee, Cincinnati*
>
> *"We have already started implementing some of the ideas we learned in our library." — Attendee, Atlanta*
>
> *"It was honestly just fantastic that all [of] us little libraries could get together because of IMLS." — Attendee, Reno*

6. What Small Libraries Need Next

The survey asked attendees what kinds of support they need from IMLS to serve their communities. Programming resources topped the list at every site, chosen by about three in four respondents (Figure 4). Exhibits and staff training followed, each chosen by nearly two in three. Most attendees selected several types of support; nearly one in five chose all five.

Figure 4. Resources Attendees Need from IMLS



Share all 560 survey respondents who checked each option; respondents could choose more than one. Results by site are in Appendix E.

Although funding was not included as a survey response option, it emerged as the most frequently identified need among attendees who provided a write-in response. It was by far the most common write-in answer: 39 of the 89 attendees who added their own response asked for funding or grants. The next most common write-in request was for more convenings, networking and training like this one. Smaller numbers asked for help with advocacy and communications, legal questions, AI and information literacy, and exhibits sized for small buildings.

Needs differed somewhat by region. Phoenix attendees were most interested in exhibits (75%), while staff training ranked second in Washington, DC, Cincinnati and Reno (about two in three) but was less often chosen in Phoenix and St. Louis (about half). St. Louis attendees ranked partnership support second (64%) and were the most likely of any site to ask for help with collections (48%).

7. Opportunities for Future Enhancement

Approximately 30% of respondents indicated that no changes were needed when prompted to offer suggestions for improving future convenings. Among those who provided suggestions, feedback was largely focused on ways to further strengthen an already successful experience. A notable strength of the six-city convening series was the team's ability to review attendee feedback after each event and implement practical improvements throughout the tour whenever logistics, timing, and venue constraints allowed. This continuous improvement approach enabled the team to refine the attendee experience throughout the series while gathering valuable insights for future events.

- **More structured time with peers.** The most common suggestion was for even more organized networking, such as state meetups on day one, roundtables grouped by library size, and more chances to present their own work.

- **Building trust in the invitation.** Twenty-two attendees said they or colleagues first assumed the invitation was a scam because the offer seemed “too good to be true,” and some eligible

libraries missed out as a result. Attendees wanted clearer communication on how to validate its authenticity through the IMLS website or to have State library staff announce the opportunity first. This feedback highlights an important outreach challenge: even when opportunities are fully funded, they may not reach their intended audiences without trusted communication and personal follow-up.

- **Earlier timing.** Some attendees wished the series had started in 2025 to allow more planning time before the anniversary, and a few noted conflicts with the summer reading season.
- **Less choosing between sessions.** Attendees asked to attend every learning lab and to take both a tour and a training, and many wanted more time at tour sites.
- **Speakers matched small library practice.** Attendees asked for more speakers who work in or with small libraries. At the Washington, DC convening, the storytelling keynote drew notably lower ratings than at other sites, and some attendees there objected to its content even though it was virtually identical to content at the other convenings. At the other five sites, it was rated highly. The political context associated with any event in Washington, DC likely influenced attendee perceptions, although the reasons for the differing responses cannot be determined from the survey findings alone.

8. Did the Convenings Meet Their Goals?

Taken together, the attendance data, survey findings, participant feedback, and unsolicited follow-up messages indicate that the convening series successfully reached its target audience, delivered meaningful professional development, and inspired participants to apply what they learned in their communities.

The series met its overarching aim of reaching small libraries and having them share national and local stories. Among attending public libraries, 68% serve 10,000 people or fewer, and 86% have ten or fewer staff. These figures demonstrate that the initiative successfully reached its intended audience, including institutions that often face financial, staffing, and geographic barriers to participating in national professional development opportunities.

IMLS established learning objectives for both attendees and the agency (Appendix A). Survey results show that the convenings met the objectives tied directly to the event experience (Table 5). Attendees received practical training, visited historically significant sites, heard from storytellers and history experts, and exchanged ideas with peers. Just as importantly, the convenings created opportunities for librarians to connect with colleagues, access national resources, and feel recognized as contributors to America's story.

Goals focused on post-event outcomes, such as launching Semiquincentennial programs and developing partnerships with historical organizations, show particularly promising results. Nearly all respondents reported gaining new skills and indicated that they planned to apply what they learned in their communities. Early follow-up messages from attendees suggest that

implementation has already begun, although a future follow-up assessment would be needed to measure longer-term outcomes and community impact.

Together, these findings suggest that the convenings achieved more than strong participant satisfaction and learning outcomes. Attendees reported gaining practical skills, new resources, professional networks, and ideas they intended to apply in their own communities. As a result, the convenings not only strengthened the capacity of small and rural libraries but also increased the likelihood that communities across the country will engage with America's 250th commemoration through locally relevant programs, partnerships, and storytelling efforts.

The agency objective, gathering stories of local America's 250th celebrations, is supported by 225 recorded participant interviews rather than survey data (see Section 2). 35% of the interviewees tied the anniversary to local history, 20% explicitly linked it to the national story, and 24% described story-collecting projects. Appendix B provides detailed evidence and findings related to each learning objective.

Table 5. Learning Objectives at a Glance

Participant Goal	What the evidence shows	Result
Skills training before the convening (grants, space)	Nearly all participants were satisfied with both trainings.	Met
Visit a historically significant site	Nearly all tour participants were satisfied.	Met
Learn about storytelling from the keynote	92.3% of attendees agreed that Lee Habeeb's keynote was informative.	Met
Hear from history experts and America's 250th planners	Library of Congress, presidential libraries and state presenters rated useful by 90–99%.	Met
Practical learning labs	At least 97% felt confident using what they learned.	Met
Share ideas with peers	Nearly all learned from peers; fewer strongly agreed that they shared their own work.	Met; sharing could grow
Launch Semiquincentennial programs and partnerships afterward	98% plan to; early emails describe first steps. In recorded interviews, 61% described programs already held or under way, and 32% described work with historical or archival partners.	Promising; needs follow-up
Learn what resources libraries need	Clear priorities: programming, exhibits, staff training, funding.	Met

9. Additional Insights

Reaching Libraries and Overcoming Barriers

Achieving the participant goal of 150 attendees per site, except for St. Louis with a 75-person goal, required considerably more than distributing invitations. Personal outreach became an essential part of reaching smaller and often rural libraries, particularly those with limited staffing and resources. For the Atlanta convening alone, 566 invitations were sent, and 193 personal phone calls were made, the highest number of calls for any of the six convenings. Despite that effort, the planning team had to increase the population-served profile in order to be close to reaching their goal. While this required a significant amount of effort, these conversations played an important role in reaching smaller libraries, answering questions, and building trust. Many librarians initially struggled to believe the opportunity was real. The idea that their travel, accommodation, and participation would be covered seemed almost too good to be true. Some questioned why their small library had been selected or whether an opportunity like this could truly be intended for them.

Through these conversations, it also became clear that accepting an invitation was not always simple. Some librarians were the only full-time employees at their libraries. Others had to arrange additional staffing, navigate limited budgets, or figure out how their library could remain open while they were away. These were not necessarily librarians who lacked interest in professional development, but people whose everyday responsibilities made accessing these opportunities incredibly difficult. Personal outreach helped us better understand these barriers and, when possible, work with attendees to make participation a reality.

Reflections on Impact

One of the clearest lessons from the convening series was the importance of investing in library professionals who may have few opportunities to participate in national professional development experiences. Many attendees serve small or rural communities with limited staffing, modest budgets, and little access to training or peer networks outside their immediate regions. Throughout the convenings, participants repeatedly expressed appreciation for being invited, included, and recognized as important contributors to America's story.

The impact of the convenings extended beyond the knowledge and skills gained during the events. Attendees left with new professional relationships, increased confidence, practical ideas they could implement immediately, and a renewed sense of purpose in their work. For many participants, connecting with peers facing similar challenges was just as valuable as the formal training sessions.

Perhaps most importantly, the benefits of the convenings are likely to extend far beyond the individuals who attended. Libraries serve as community anchors that support lifelong learning, preserve local history, foster civic engagement, and connect residents with information and

resources. When librarians return home with new ideas, partnerships, and tools, the potential impact reaches the families, students, researchers, and community members they serve every day.

The convening series reinforced the importance of ensuring that small and rural libraries have access to high-quality professional development opportunities and meaningful connections with peers, state libraries, and national organizations. The strong evaluation results, participant feedback, and continued engagement following the events suggest that these investments can strengthen not only individual library staff, but also the communities they serve.

10. Recommendations for Next Steps

Ultimately, the success of the convening series is reflected not only in attendance numbers but also in its ability to reach historically underrepresented libraries and reduce barriers to participation in national professional development opportunities. By combining financial and logistical support with intentional, personal outreach, IMLS made national-level learning and collaboration more accessible to library professionals who are often underrepresented in these settings. The evaluation results contribute to several considerations for future work.

For Future Programs or Grant Design

- Funding was by far the most common write-in answer for additional IMLS support needed: 39 of the 89 attendees who added their own response asked for funding or grants. These evaluation responses specifically mentioned small grants of $500 to $1,000, as well as funding to cover staff time, would be beneficial. The findings highlight how even relatively modest financial assistance could help small libraries overcome practical barriers to developing new programs.

- Keep the focus on small and rural libraries and on peer learning when developing targeted programming. Favor practical, practitioner-led sessions, with small and rural library representation within the programmatic content.

- Follow up with attendees 6 to 12 months later to document programs and partnerships that grew from the convenings and better understand how the experience has benefited their communities.

For Future Events

- Plan ample time for one-on-one engagement with this set of libraries in advance of the meeting. For the Atlanta convening, the planning team made personal outreach phone calls to 34.1% of the libraries invited. Calls helped reach staff at some of the very small libraries, clarify eligibility and travel support, and help update the invitations to go to the correct contact. Continue personal phone outreach, which proved especially helpful in reaching smaller libraries, answering questions and reassuring invitees that the opportunity was legitimate.

- Establish trust before invitations go out: send them from a government address, coordinate with State libraries to help promote the given initiative, and post event details publicly first. It cannot be overstated: State library agencies are the primary conduit of funds flowing from IMLS to public libraries across America. Without their support or engagement, small and rural libraries would not have understood the importance and legitimacy of this event.

- Strong demand for additional convenings, combined with consistently positive evaluation findings and requests for continued peer networking, suggests value in recurring regional opportunities tailored to small and rural libraries.

11. Conclusion

The IMLS Library Convening 250: Telling America's Story series set out to bring national-level learning and connection to the libraries that are hardest to reach, and the evidence shows that it succeeded. Across six convenings held from April to October 2026, 712 people attended, including staff from 644 public libraries. About two in three of those libraries serve 10,000 people or fewer, and 86% have ten or fewer staff. More than three in four attendees (79%) completed the evaluation survey, and ratings were consistently high at all six sites: **nearly every respondent said they learned from their peers and gained new skills. Further, one of the primary goals was to empower, equip and encourage small, rural libraries to actively celebrate America's 250th birthday. Responses showed that this goal was met by 98% of attendees who reported they planned to use what they learned in their own programming.**

The value of the series went beyond the content of any single session. Attendees most often named connecting with peers who share their circumstances as the most valuable part of the experience, and many described leaving with renewed confidence and a sense that their libraries and communities matter in the national story. Covering travel costs and offering staffing stipends turned an invitation into a realistic opportunity for libraries that could not otherwise send anyone, while personal outreach and State library partners helped build trust in an offer many first doubted. Participants were also clear about what they need next: programming resources, exhibits, staff training and, above all, flexible funding.

The convenings offer IMLS a tested variation of a model for reaching small and rural libraries: targeted invitations, trusted outreach, covered costs, practical content and protected time for peer learning. Recurring regional gatherings, small and flexible grants, and a follow-up assessment of what attendees put into practice would help IMLS build on this momentum. Because these libraries are anchors in their communities, investing in their staff reaches well beyond the people in the room, helping people across the country tell their own part of America's story in 2026 and beyond.

Appendix A: Event Learning Objectives

For Attendees

- a. Pre-convening (1 day includes ½ day of training, ½ day of site visit):
  - Option 1: Receive targeted, skills-based training on the following topics: (1) How to use AI to help with grant applications; (2) Displays/Space; (3) Freedom Truck Tours
  - Option 2: Attend historically significant location to help further knowledge about America's founding
- b. During Symposium (~2 days):
  - i. Provide ample opportunities through formal (recording) and informal (peer sharing) for libraries to share what they are doing for America's 250th anniversary celebrations
  - ii. Hear from Keynotes about storytelling
  - iii. Hear from history experts about opportunities for partnerships or resource sharing
  - iv. Hear from America's 250th planners about designing historical exhibits or OTHER
  - v. Engage with learning lab trainers on topics that could be applied back at their respective library, e.g. meeting community needs, sustainable partnerships, information and childhood literacy, history/storytelling projects, etc.
  - vi. Discuss with other attendees about ideas on how to celebrate within their own respective communities in 2026 and beyond
- c. Post-event
  - i. Develop and implement America's 250th celebration projects/programs in their libraries and beyond 2026 (2-5 years)
  - ii. Develop partnerships with other historical/archival partners
  - iii. Apply skills gained during pre-convening & learning labs

For IMLS

- a. Grantmaking/Project Design:
  - i. Provide targeted training around AI with the intent of helping make the grant application process easier for small/rural libraries or staff with limited capacity to apply

  - ii. Gather feedback from attendees about what works/what doesn't about different approaches to history (storytelling, America's 250th sharing, etc.) for future funding opportunities

- b. Congressional Conversations:
  - i. Gather stories from library staff about their own respective America's 250th celebrations
  - ii. Gather feedback about attendees for what they need for resources to better serve their communities

- c. Agency Priorities
  - i. Deliver a successful set of skills-focused trainings for attendees
  - ii. Feel confident that library staff will be able to return to their communities with the knowledge or resources needed to develop America's 250th programs or projects in 2026 and beyond
  - iii. Gather feedback that will help the agency develop a successful online event in the fall, develop a final report, and continue to create new content or support for libraries about celebrating America's 250th

Appendix B: Learning Objectives and Survey Evidence

Table B-1. IMLS Library Convening 250: Telling America's Story Learning Objectives

Audience / phase	Objective	Survey evidence	Assessment
Attendee – Pre-convening	a.i Targeted skills training: AI for grant applications; displays/space; Freedom Truck tours	Q1a Winning Grants: mean 3.75, 99.2% satisfied (n=246). Q1b Small Space: mean 3.74, 97.9% satisfied (n=242). Freedom Truck tours not measured in the survey although they were on-site for two locations. Interviewees also reported on its presence in their towns: • one hosted it, with 791 visitors in a town of about 1,200 • two had confirmed visits • four were hoping to book it • one saw it at a state fair	Met
Attendee – Pre-convening	a.ii Visit a historically significant location	Q2 tours, 12 venues pooled: mean 3.79, 98.4% satisfied (449 ratings). Top venues: Museum at the Gateway Arch 4.00; Taft Museum of Art 3.98; Virginia City 3.95.	Met
Attendee – Symposium	b.i Formal (recording) and informal (peer) opportunities to share America's 250th work	Q6 learned from peers: 99.6% agree, 79.1% strongly agree. Q7 shared own America's 250th work: 94.1% agree. 225 attendees (32%) recorded video interviews about their America's 250th work.	Met
Attendee – Symposium	b.ii Hear from keynote about storytelling	Q3 Habeeb informative: 92.3% agree (n=546); Q4 learned useful info: 89.3% (n=540). Learned useful info ranged 94.3–96.3% at Phoenix, Atlanta, Cincinnati, Reno and St. Louis vs. 60.4% at Washington, DC.	Met
Attendee – Symposium	b.iii Hear from history experts about partnerships or resource sharing	Lee Ann Potter (LOC): 98.3% learned useful info (n=177). Tamara Martin (Presidential Libraries): 89.9% (n=367). Q9 plan to identify new partnerships: 97.8% agree.	Met
Attendee – Symposium	b.iv Hear from America's 250th planners about designing historical exhibits or other	Mississippi Library Commission (Atlanta): 98.8% learned (n=82). Oklahoma Department of Libraries (Phoenix): 97.2% (n=106). Commemorating America's 250th lab: 97.5% confident (n=316).	Met

Audience / phase	Objective	Survey evidence	Assessment
Attendee – Symposium	b.v Engage with learning lab trainers on topics applicable back home	Q5 confidence using lab material: Partnerships 98.8%, Commemorating 250th 97.5%, Child Reading Literacy 97.2%, Information Literacy 97.1% agree.	Met
Attendee – Symposium	b.vi Discuss with other attendees how to celebrate in 2026 and beyond	Q6 99.6% agree; Q16 informal time 98.9% satisfied; networking/peer exchange named in 74.9% of Q19 'most valuable' responses (364 of 486).	Met – strongest outcome
Attendee – Post-event	c.i–iii Develop/implement America's 250th programs; develop historical/archival partnerships; apply skills	Intent: Q8 plan to use info 98.2% (4 sites, n=384); Reno and St. Louis revised stem 98.2% (n=168); Q9 97.8%; Q10 gained new skills 97.8%. Early anecdotal action: 6 of 71 unsolicited emails reported implementing ideas, America's 250th programming under way, or joining ARSL.	Intent strongly evidenced; early anecdotal signs of implementation; systematic follow-up needed
IMLS – Grantmaking	a.i AI-focused grant training for small/rural libraries with limited capacity	Q1a 99.2% satisfied; grants named among most valuable aspects (Q19). Funding/grants is the most common Q11 'Other' write-in (39 of 89).	Met
IMLS – Grantmaking	a.ii Feedback on what works in different approaches to history for future funding	Indirect: Q18/Q19 open-ended comments (storytelling, LOC/NARA resources, tours, practitioner panels); Q11 resource needs.	Met with changes applied during the convenings and to be used in future planning activities
IMLS – Congressional	b.i Gather stories of library America's 250th celebrations	225 recorded video interviews (32% of 712 attendees) from libraries in 47 states and two U.S. territories; transcripts coded by Lindenstar Consulting. 61% described programs held or under way at the time of recording; 35% described plans in development.	Met
IMLS – Congressional	b.ii Feedback on resources needed to better serve communities	Q11: Programming 74.1%, Exhibits 63.2%, Staff Training 62.3%, Partnerships 58.9%, Collections 40.0% (n=560). 89 'Other' write-ins, led by funding/grants.	Met
IMLS – Agency	c.i Deliver successful skills-focused trainings	Q10 97.8% gained new skills (69.2% strongly agree); Q1 and Q5 items 97–99% positive.	Met

Audience / phase	Objective	Survey evidence	Assessment
IMLS – Agency	c.ii Confidence staff return with knowledge/resources for America's 250th in 2026 and beyond	Q8 98.2% (both wordings); Q5 labs 97–99% confident; Q19 program/ America's 250th ideas named in 29.6% of responses.	Largely met (self-reported intent)
IMLS – Agency	c.iii Feedback for fall online event, final report, new content/support	Q18 (412 suggestions) and Q11 provide direct input: more peer time, practical content, shared slides/recordings, follow-up channels.	Met

Percentages are the share of survey respondents who agreed/strongly agreed or were satisfied/very satisfied. n = number answering the item.

Appendix C: Event Details

Ideal Attendee Profile: As Stated in Formal Communication

The ideal attendee should have job duties that are primarily related to program design or public-facing outreach or engagement. While a library staff member may also be in an administrative role, the individual is still expected to be able to return to their libraries and implement conference learnings. These learnings are intended to help grow library skills that directly benefit library patrons and/or their communities. While the goal is for public library staff to be primary attendees, other library staff, especially those in particularly remote communities, may also represent community college or K-12 libraries.

Selection Criteria and State Involvement

- First-round invitations used FY22 Public Library Survey data (legal service area, FTE staff, urbanicity) by proximity to each site, prioritizing small, rural, remote, fringe or distant libraries. Ideal attendees serve fewer than 10,000 people and have fewer than 15 FTE. While the thresholds needed to be adjusted by site, especially for Atlanta, they largely held for most of those who decided to attend.

- Additional invitations went to larger or multi-staff libraries based on RSVP rates; stipends were available for libraries needing extra support.

- IMLS invited one State library staff person per state; State library staff and the Association for Rural & Small Libraries were asked to help with outreach. This was a significant benefit to confirming initial emails and outreach efforts to validate the invite was not a scam.

Table C-1. Convening Sites, Invitations, Attendance and Survey Response

Location	Dates	States invited	Invitations	Attendees	Survey respondents	Survey Response Rate
Phoenix, AZ	April 14–16	AZ, Southern CA*, CO, KS, NM, OK, TX, UT	720	134	112	83.6%
Atlanta, GA	May 11–13	AL, AR, FL, GA, LA, MO, MS, NC, SC, TN	566	124	85	68.5%
Washington, DC	June 10–12	CT, DC, DE, HI, MA, MD, ME, NH, NJ, NY, RI, VA, VT; American Samoa, Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Mariana Islands, Palau, Puerto Rico	861	132	97	73.5%
Cincinnati, OH	June 22–24	IA, IL, IN, KY, MI, MN, OH, PA, WI, WV; Marshall Islands	1317	127	98	77.2%
Reno, NV	September 1–3	AK, Northern CA*, ID, MT, ND, NE, NV, OR, SD, WA, WY	626	125	110	88.0%
St. Louis, MO	October 14–16	All 50 states	1619	70	58	82.9%
TOTAL			5709	712	560	78.7%

Invitation counts from planning team records; attendee counts from the final attendee master list. Response rate = survey respondents ÷ attendees.

**California was split into two geographic locations due to geographic size.*

Sessions and Presenters

- **Winning Grants for Rural Libraries: Practical Strategies and Responsible AI Use** — Stephanie Gerding, 4Libraries (pre-convening).
- **Small Space, Big Possibilities: Creative Space and Display Strategies for Libraries** — Rob Cullin, Janet Nelson, and Angie Schoenech, ReThinking Libraries (pre-convening).
- **The Partnership Playbook for Small Libraries / Building Sustainable Partnerships** — Rob Cullin and Janet Nelson, ReThinking Libraries (learning lab in Phoenix, Atlanta and Washington, DC; main-stage session in Cincinnati, Reno and St. Louis).
- **Child Reading Literacy and the Role of Public Libraries** — Jen Walzer, Mathematica (learning lab).
- **Literacy: Beyond Books** — Erica Jaros, IMLS (learning lab; listed on the survey as "IMLS's Information Literacy Resources").

- **Commemorating America's 250th** — Lisa Lewis, Viney Jones Library (AZ); Micaela McDonald, Johnson City Library (TX); Jolene Poor, Ada Public Library (OK); Ray Walling, State Library of Kansas (KS), moderator; Ruth Bonzo, Nephi Public Library (UT); Elsie Purcell, Hondo Public Library (TX); Ana Lash, Hayden Public Library (CO); Tim Gleisner, Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TX) (Phoenix); Jonathan Darby, Alabama Public Library Service (AL), moderator; Stephanie Brianna Williams, Lamar County Library System (MS); Jodi Cook, Sabine Parish Library (LA); Carla Waldrep, Haleyville Public Library (AL); Jennifer Lena, Mississippi Library Commission (MS), moderator; Mary Ann Griffin, Sunflower County Library System (MS); Clare Graham, Mid-Arkansas Regional Library System (AR) (Atlanta); Lauren Moore, New York State Library (NY), moderator; Cindi Beede, Fitzwilliam Town Library (NH); Susana Gardner, Island Free Library (RI); Ian Graham, Rockingham Free Public Library (VT); Tamar Sarnoff, Maryland State Library (MD), moderator; Emaline Bergeron, Dublin New Hampshire Public Library (NH); Michelle Farrand, Central Square Library (NY); Will Johnson, Wilmington Free Public Library (DE) (Washington, DC); Brenda Hall, State Library of Iowa (IA), moderator; Kristi Hileman, Walton & Tipton Township Public Library (IN); Barry McKnight, Winding Rivers Library System (WI); Anni Paulsen, Fisher-Whiting Memorial Library (IA); Ben Miller, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WI), moderator; Melissa Brown, Hamlin-Lincoln County Public Library (WV); Brenda Miller, New Madison Public Library (OH); Cherie Davis, Ronceverte Public Library (WV); Genevieve “Gigi” Nelson, Alta Community Library (IA) (Cincinnati); Mike Strom, Nevada State Library, Archives, and Public Records (NV), moderator; Teresa Johnson, Siskiyou County Library (CA); Shasta Hochstrasser, Mountain Home Public Library (ID); Melody Sky Weaver, Port Townsend Public Library (WA); Dylan Baker, Idaho Commission for Libraries (ID), moderator; Beth Quetschke, Del Norte County Library District (CA); Heather Miles, Mineral County Public Library (MT); Mandie Medalen, Heart of America Library (ND) (Reno); Phillip Carter, Association for Rural & Small Libraries/-Starkville-Oktibbeha County Public Library System (MS), moderator; Kathy Brownell, Garfield County Library (NE); Colleen Leddy, Stair District Library (MI); Tammy Pickerill, Mt. Olive Public Library (IL).

- **Fireside Chat**— Eli Guinnee, New Mexico State Library (NM), moderator; Angela Watkins, Aztec Public Library (NM); Kiley Roberson, Bartlesville Public Library (OK); Cara Vanderre, Ashland Public Library (KS) (Phoenix); Leesa Aiken, South Carolina State Library (SC), moderator; Kassandra (Sandy) Floyd, Catahoula Parish (LA); Anna Louise Kallas, Shepard-Pruden Memorial Library/ Pettigrew Regional Library System (NC); Stephanie Freedle, Siloam Springs Public Library (AR) (Atlanta); Dennis Clark, The Library of Virginia (VA), moderator; Akiema Buchanan, Free Public Library of Audubon (NJ); Brittany Durgin, Moultonborough Public Library (NH); Nancy Troeger, Abel J Morneault Memorial Library (ME) (Washington, DC); Karen Egan, Illinois State Library (IL), moderator; Dr. Stephanie Addison, Ethel Everhard Memorial Library (WI); Jessica Hermiller, Bluffton Public Library (OH); Nichole Lauko, Millstadt Library District (IL) (Cincinnati); Jennie Stapp, Montana State Library (MT), moderator; Sharon Schrader, Coffman Cove Community Library (AK); Cheyenne Chontos, Harrisburg Community Library (SD); Marsha Richmond, Lake County Library District (OR) (Reno); Cara Rothman, Utah State Library Division (UT), moderator; Karen Furo-Bonnstetter, Woodville Community Library (WI); Jacquelyn Owens, Memphis Public Library (TX); Alex Bell, Frost Free Library (NH) (St. Louis).

- **Keynote and plenaries:** Lee Habeeb, Our American Stories (all sites, with fireside chat facilitated by Lisa Solomson, IMLS); Lee Ann Potter, Director, Professional Learning and Outreach Initiatives, Library of Congress (Atlanta, Washington, DC); Tamara Martin, Acting Executive for Presidential Libraries (Phoenix, Washington, DC, Reno, St. Louis); Jennifer Lena, Executive Director, Mississippi Library Commission (Atlanta); Courtney Rutledge, Library Development Consultant Team Lead, Oklahoma Department of Libraries (Phoenix).

- **Tours by site:** Phoenix — Burton Barr Library, Heard Museum; Atlanta — Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta History Center; Washington, DC — National Archives, Library of Congress; Cincinnati — Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati Museum Center; Reno — Virginia City; St. Louis — Museum at the Gateway Arch, Old Courthouse, Riverfront History Excursion.

Public Website and On-demand Resources

The public website has four sections: Home, Training Videos (five on-demand trainings), Resources (downloadable tools grouped under Grants & Funding, Partnerships & Community Engagement, Child Reading Literacy, Information Literacy & Learning, and Facilities & Spaces, plus this report), and Convening Highlights (featured keynote and plenary recordings and a snapshot video for each city).

Appendix D: Evaluation Methods and Data Notes

Survey. Attendees completed a two-page paper survey (OMB CONTROL NUMBER: 3137-0081) at each convening (19 questions) covering the pre-convening sessions, tours, speakers, learning labs, outcomes, resources needed, logistics, and two open-ended questions (suggestions, and most valuable aspect). Responses were transcribed into one combined dataset of 560 respondents: Phoenix 112, Atlanta 85, Washington, DC 97, Cincinnati 98, Reno 110, St. Louis 58.

How to read the numbers. Questions used a four-point scale: Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (4), or Very Dissatisfied (1) to Very Satisfied (4). The tables report the average score (closer to 4 is better), the percent positive (agree or satisfied), and the percent at the top of the scale (strongly agree or very satisfied). People who marked "N/A" or skipped an item, and items not offered at a site, are excluded.

Open-ended answers. Written answers were grouped into themes. Suggestions were coded by hand; answers about the most valuable aspect were coded by keyword and then validated by hand. One answer can fall into several themes.

Unsolicited feedback. The planning team received 71 messages from 68 senders (Phoenix 10, Atlanta 15, Washington, DC 15, Cincinnati 15, Reno 14, site not recorded 2). Because these are self-selected and not anonymous, they are reported separately and not combined with survey results. Quotes are shown without names.

Appendix E: Detailed Survey Results

Table E-1. Overall Results, All Sites

Item	n	Average (1–4)	% positive
Pre-convening: Winning Grants (Q1)	246	3.75	99.2%
Pre-convening: Small Space, Big Possibilities (Q1)	242	3.74	97.9%
Pre-convening historical tours, all venues (Q2)*	449	3.79	98.4%
Learned from peers about their library's America's 250th work (Q6)	554	3.78	99.6%
Shared my library's America's 250th work (Q7)	542	3.40	94.1%
Plan to use information for own America's 250th programming (Q8, 4 sites)	384	3.66	98.2%
Plan to use information to continue telling America's story (Q8, Reno & St. Louis wording based on the post-July 4th timing of the events)	168	3.53	98.2%
Plan to use what I learned to identify new partnerships (Q9)	553	3.58	97.8%
Overall, gained new skills (Q10)	552	3.67	97.8%
Registration (Q12)	552	3.88	99.5%
Travel support (Q13)	551	3.91	99.8%
Food that met dietary needs (Q14)	550	3.76	97.1%
Accessibility of IMLS staff (Q15)	552	3.87	99.1%
Time to meet informally (Q16)	553	3.79	98.9%
Pace of the event (Q17)	550	3.79	99.3%

**Q2 pools ratings across all tours at each site (St. Louis offered three, Reno one).*

Table E-2. Average Rating by Site (1–4)

Item	PHX (n=112)	ATL (n=85)	DC (n=97)	CIN (n=98)	RNO (n=110)	STL (n=58)	All sites
Q1 Winning Grants	3.66	3.97	3.75	3.77	3.69	3.77	3.75
Q1 Small Space	3.63	3.84	3.62	3.78	3.85	3.76	3.74
Q3 American Stories informative	3.71	3.69	2.97	3.61	3.66	3.65	3.55
Q4 Learned from American Stories	3.69	3.57	2.84	3.58	3.58	3.62	3.48
Q5 Child Reading Literacy lab	3.59	3.85	3.49	3.56	3.62	3.49	3.59
Q5 Information Literacy lab	3.65	3.69	3.40	3.63	3.67	3.43	3.59
Q5 Commemorating America's 250th lab	3.59	3.89	3.50	3.71	3.72	3.44	3.64
Q5 Partnerships lab	3.56	3.76	3.60	—	—	—	3.63
Q6 Learned from peers	3.81	3.84	3.72	3.79	3.71	3.88	3.78
Q7 Shared own America's 250th work	3.36	3.60	3.38	3.51	3.21	3.45	3.40
Q8 Plan to use info†	3.67	3.78	3.49	3.71	3.52	3.55	3.66
Q9 Identify partnerships	3.47	3.66	3.51	3.58	3.65	3.64	3.58
Q10 Gained new skills	3.66	3.74	3.57	3.74	3.72	3.55	3.67
Q12 Registration	3.84	3.93	3.85	3.91	3.88	3.86	3.88
Q13 Travel support	3.89	3.95	3.88	3.94	3.92	3.88	3.91
Q14 Food / dietary	3.77	3.83	3.79	3.80	3.70	3.59	3.76
Q15 IMLS staff access	3.83	3.90	3.84	3.92	3.89	3.79	3.87
Q16 Informal time	3.78	3.81	3.68	3.88	3.85	3.71	3.79
Q17 Pace	3.79	3.81	3.73	3.82	3.85	3.72	3.79

†Reno and St. Louis used revised Q8 wording; "All sites" for Q8 = four standard-wording sites. — = not offered at that site. Atlanta rated nearly every content item highest; Washington, DC rated content lowest, most sharply for the keynote, while its logistics ratings were similar to other sites.

Table E-3. Keynote and Plenary Speakers

Speaker	Site	Q3 n	Q3 avg	Q3 % agree	Q4 n	Q4 avg	Q4 % agree
Lee Habeeb	Phoenix	112	3.71	97.3%	108	3.69	96.3%
Lee Habeeb	Atlanta	84	3.69	97.6%	82	3.57	95.1%
Lee Habeeb	Washington, DC	91	2.97	68.1%	91	2.84	60.4%
Lee Habeeb	Cincinnati	97	3.61	94.8%	95	3.58	94.7%
Lee Habeeb	Reno	105	3.66	98.1%	106	3.58	94.3%
Lee Habeeb	St. Louis	57	3.65	98.2%	58	3.62	94.8%
Lee Habeeb	All sites	546	3.55	92.3%	540	3.48	89.3%
Tamara Martin	Phoenix	111	3.55	95.5%	112	3.45	93.8%
Tamara Martin	Washington, DC	92	3.17	84.8%	91	3.11	78.0%
Tamara Martin	Reno	106	3.41	95.3%	107	3.36	92.5%
Tamara Martin	St. Louis	57	3.51	98.2%	57	3.42	96.5%
Tamara Martin	All sites	366	3.41	93.2%	367	3.34	89.9%
Lee Ann Potter	Atlanta	82	3.95	100.0%	83	3.83	100.0%
Lee Ann Potter	Washington, DC	94	3.77	97.9%	94	3.78	96.8%
Lee Ann Potter	All sites	176	3.85	98.9%	177	3.80	98.3%
Rob Cullin	Cincinnati	95	3.60	98.9%	93	3.48	97.8%
Rob Cullin	Reno	105	3.62	99.0%	109	3.56	98.2%
Rob Cullin	St. Louis	57	3.49	96.5%	57	3.42	93.0%
Rob Cullin	All sites	257	3.58	98.4%	259	3.50	96.9%
Jennifer Lena	Atlanta	80	3.74	100.0%	82	3.62	98.8%
Jennifer Lena	All sites	80	3.74	100.0%	82	3.62	98.8%
Courtney Rutledge	Phoenix	108	3.66	97.2%	106	3.58	97.2%
Courtney Rutledge	All sites	108	3.66	97.2%	106	3.58	97.2%

Table E-4. Learning labs and Pre-convening Trainings

Session	Sites offered	n	Average	% positive
Building Sustainable Partnerships	Phoenix, Atlanta, Washington, DC	168	3.63	98.8%
Child Reading Literacy & Public Libraries	All six sites	319	3.59	97.2%
IMLS Information Literacy (Literacy: Beyond Books)	All six sites	377	3.59	97.1%
Commemorating America's 250th	All six sites	316	3.64	97.5%
Winning Grants for Rural Libraries (pre-convening)	All six sites	246	3.75	99.2%
Small Space, Big Possibilities (pre-convening)	All six sites	242	3.74	97.9%

Labs: "I feel confident using material from the learning lab." Trainings: satisfaction.

Table E-5. Pre-convening Tours

Site	Venue	Respondents rating	Average	% satisfied	% very satisfied
Phoenix	Burton Barr Library	44	3.75	100.0%	75.0%
Phoenix	Heard Museum	44	3.82	100.0%	81.8%
Atlanta	Carter Presidential Library	41	3.90	100.0%	90.2%
Atlanta	Atlanta History Center	42	3.57	95.2%	61.9%
Washington, DC	National Archives	44	3.75	93.2%	84.1%
Washington, DC	Library of Congress	45	3.84	97.8%	88.9%
Cincinnati	Taft Museum of Art	42	3.98	100.0%	97.6%
Cincinnati	Cincinnati Museum Center	42	3.48	97.6%	50.0%
Reno	Virginia City	37	3.95	100.0%	94.6%
St. Louis	Museum at the Gateway Arch	25	4.00	100.0%	100.0%
St. Louis	Old Courthouse	18	3.83	100.0%	83.3%
St. Louis	Riverfront Historical Excursion	25	3.72	100.0%	72.0%

Respondents rating each venue, not headcount.

Table E-6. Resources Needed from IMLS, % of Respondents Selecting

Site	N	Programming	Exhibits	Staff training	Partnerships	Collections	Write-ins
Phoenix	112	77.7%	75.0%	51.8%	58.0%	42.0%	14
Atlanta	85	68.2%	64.7%	63.5%	61.2%	36.5%	11
Washington, DC	97	73.2%	59.8%	68.0%	58.8%	44.3%	11
Cincinnati	98	70.4%	58.2%	66.3%	58.2%	31.6%	27
Reno	110	78.2%	58.2%	68.2%	56.4%	40.0%	18
St. Louis	58	75.9%	62.1%	53.4%	63.8%	48.3%	8
All sites	560	74.1%	63.2%	62.3%	58.9%	40.0%	89

Table E-7. "Other" Resource Write-ins by Theme

Theme	PHX	ATL	DC	CIN	RNO	STL	Total	% of write-ins
Write-in responses	14	11	11	27	18	8	89	100.0%
Funding / grants	8	4	5	10	9	3	39	43.8%
More convenings, networking & training	2	5	2	7	3	3	22	24.7%
Other request	1	1	2	2	2	1	9	10.1%
Information/AI literacy & digital tools	1	0	1	4	0	0	6	6.7%
Advocacy, communications & legal	0	0	0	2	3	1	6	6.7%
Exhibits (small-space / traveling)	1	0	1	1	0	0	3	3.4%
Collections & archiving	1	0	0	1	1	0	3	3.4%
Appreciation only (no request)	2	1	1	2	0	0	6	6.7%

Hand-coded; a write-in can carry more than one theme.

Table E-8. Most Valuable Aspect of the Convening (Open-ended)

Theme	PHX	ATL	DC	CIN	RNO	STL	Total	%
Respondents who answered	97	73	83	85	94	54	486	100.0%
Networking & peer exchange	73	51	63	64	73	40	364	74.9%
Program & America's 250th ideas	39	21	18	29	23	14	144	29.6%
Small/rural cohort & shared challenges	22	7	11	27	31	12	110	22.6%
Breakouts & learning labs	12	11	10	12	11	9	65	13.4%
Federal & national resources (LOC, NARA, IMLS)	7	11	26	2	9	9	64	13.2%
Keynotes & speakers	9	6	4	7	13	6	45	9.3%
Grants & pre-convening trainings	2	6	6	8	10	6	38	7.8%
General praise ("everything", "all of it")	6	4	2	3	4	3	22	4.5%
Access to IMLS staff	5	3	2	6	4	1	21	4.3%
Renewal, validation & feeling valued	3	2	1	6	7	1	20	4.1%
Funded access (travel & cost covered)	3	2	2	1	4	3	15	3.1%
Tours & place-based experiences	0	1	7	2	5	0	15	3.1%

Table E-9. Suggestions for Future Convenings (Open-ended)

Theme	PHX	ATL	DC	CIN	RNO	STL	Total	%
Respondents who answered	87	59	75	68	74	49	412	100.0%
Praise / no changes needed	28	21	9	23	23	17	121	29.4%
More structured networking & small-group/peer time	13	8	14	6	16	8	65	15.8%
Venue & on-site logistics (badges, seating, shuttles, hotel)	20	5	4	3	2	6	40	9.7%
Deeper, more practical or tailored content	4	3	5	9	9	10	40	9.7%
Continue, repeat or expand convenings for small & rural libraries	2	4	5	7	6	6	30	7.3%
More time at tours & off-site/historic sites	2	9	10	3	1	2	27	6.6%
Advance information (agenda, details, logistics) & outreach reach	2	2	10	4	3	2	23	5.6%
Invitation perceived as scam / legitimacy unclear	1	0	2	6	11	1	21	5.1%
Food, dietary options & allergen labeling	5	2	1	4	6	2	20	4.9%
Rebalance plenary time toward practitioner-led, library-relevant content	6	1	5	2	2	3	19	4.6%
Scheduling conflicts (wanted all labs; tours vs. trainings)	3	4	4	4	2	0	17	4.1%
Share slides/recordings & create follow-up channels	6	0	4	4	1	1	16	3.9%
Longer event / more time overall	3	4	2	2	1	2	14	3.4%
Objections to keynote speaker selection, content or conduct	0	0	12	1	1	0	14	3.4%
Earlier timing in the America's 250th cycle / calendar conflicts	4	1	2	3	2	1	13	3.2%
Accessibility (mobility, hearing, captioning, ASL)	6	3	1	0	0	2	12	2.9%
Appreciation that IMLS covered costs (made attendance possible)	1	1	0	2	5	2	11	2.7%

Respondents could raise several themes. Twenty-two respondents across all open-ended fields mentioned the invitation seeming like a scam (Reno 11, Cincinnati 6, Washington, DC 2, Atlanta 1, Phoenix 1, St. Louis 1).

Table E-10. Unsolicited Email Feedback by Site

Site	Messages	Unique senders
Phoenix	10	10
Atlanta	15	14
Washington, DC	15	15
Cincinnati	15	13
Reno	14	14
Not recorded	2	2
Total	71	68

Table E-11. Themes in Unsolicited Email Feedback

Theme	PHX	ATL	DC	CIN	RNO	Total	% of messages
Overall praise and gratitude	10	15	14	14	13	67	94.4%
Connecting with small and rural library peers	3	4	5	4	10	27	38.0%
Organization, logistics and staff support	5	6	9	4	1	25	35.2%
Ideas to bring home and share	3	4	3	6	3	19	26.8%
Among the best professional events of their career	3	2	3	4	0	12	16.9%
Cost coverage made attendance possible	0	2	2	2	2	9	12.7%
Professional growth, confidence and pride	0	0	1	3	4	8	11.3%
Hope the convenings continue	1	2	2	1	0	7	9.9%
Reported early action after the convening	0	2	0	2	2	6	8.5%
Specific sessions or speakers praised	1	1	0	1	3	6	8.5%
Logistics question or administrative follow-up	0	1	0	2	0	4	5.6%

"Total" includes two messages with no site recorded.