

“All social movements are founded by, guided by, motivated and seen through by the passion of individuals.” - Margaret Mead



In less than five years the New York Library Association (NYLA) has sparked new thinking and momentum by creating ground-breaking tools to help libraries be sustainability leaders in their communities, campuses and schools far beyond the borders of New York State.

Elevating the profile of libraries’ commitment to environmental sustainability and social responsibility. With a strategic approach that has already inspired dozens of libraries to change the way they govern and operate their libraries, the New York Library Association’s influence on the topic of sustainable libraries has changed the narrative at the national level, inspiring the Council of the American Library Association (ALA) to adopt sustainability as a “Core Value of Librarianship” and *“Evolve accreditation standards to ensure the topic of sustainability in an inherent element in library school curriculum.”*¹

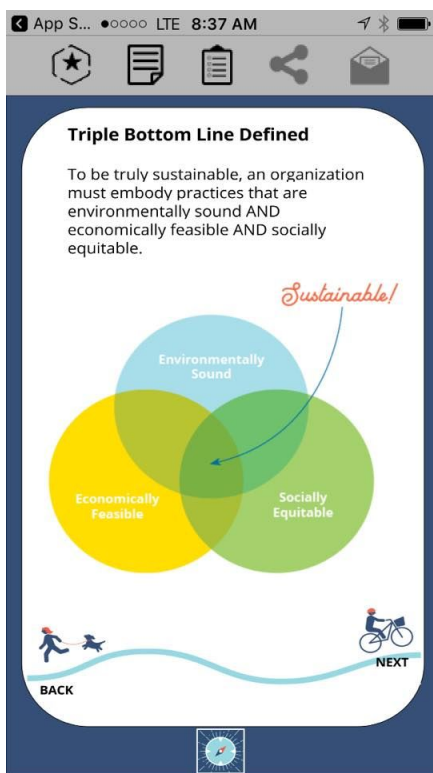
This strategic approach of NYLA’s Sustainability Initiative (NYLA-SI)² includes the creation of a common vocabulary; a publication and mobile app entitled the “Roadmap to Sustainability”; the first-of-its-kind “Sustainable Library Certification Program”; and a leadership development program focused on inspiring library leaders to work with community partners to broaden the scope of their impact on important issues in their community called “Community Change Agents.”

¹ Resolution for the Adoption of Sustainability as a Core Value of Librarianship, American Library Association (2019) <https://bit.ly/2D6xqXd>

² <http://www.nyla.org/sustainability>

A seismic shift in the conversation surrounding sustainability and libraries in the United States occurred in January 2019 when the ALA Council voted to add sustainability to the “Core Values of Librarianship,” a recommendation from the 2019 report from the ALA Special Task Force on Sustainability³ which drew from the work of the NYLA-SI. The Core Values list is a systemic list of values taught in library schools throughout the U.S. which means while social responsibility has been on this list for quite some time, now there is a direct tie between our professional values and leadership in environmental education. You can read the text of that 2019 resolution here:

<https://bit.ly/2D6xqXd>



The ALA resolution is based on the definition of sustainability adopted by the NYLA-SI in 2015: *“To be truly sustainable, an organization or community must embody practices that are environmentally sound AND economically feasible AND socially equitable.”* This definition was chosen by the NYLA-SI Committee, a group of 25 library professionals from libraries of all types, who came together in a distributed leadership setting we call “co-creation” to delve into the issue of sustainability and libraries. Co-creation enables a shared, collective and extended leadership practice that builds the capacity for change and improvement. Co-chairs Rebekkah

Smith Aldrich and Matthew Bollerman deliberately chose to model the type of leadership we

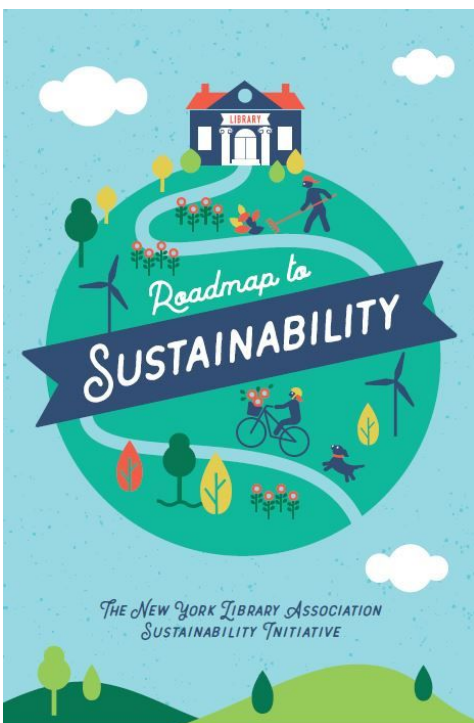
³ Final Report of the ALA Special Task Force on Sustainability (2018) <https://bit.ly/2JWQ11E>



feel is needed worldwide to tackle issues related to sustainability in our own group. We attempted to live our values and the results are impressive, if we do say so ourselves!

The NYLA-SI Committee produced several products in three short years

that are lasting gifts to the library community. These products have been thoughtfully designed to help build an understanding of sustainability and how both individuals and libraries as institutions can become sustainability leaders in their library and community. From “Sustainability Spotlights” that provide brief, relatable case studies of libraries of all types practicing sustainable thinking to a full blown certification program that guides an organization through operational, programming and policy-making decisions to be a more sustainable organization and a sustainability leader in their community, on their campus or in their school.



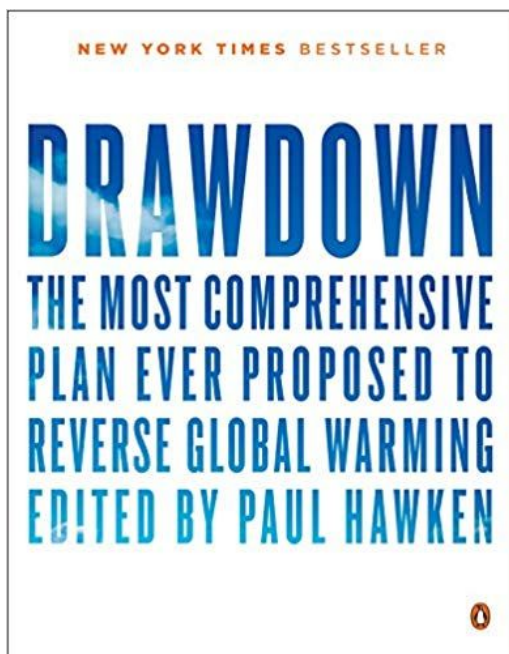
The Roadmap to Sustainability, the first official publication from NYLA-SI, is a booklet as well as a mobile app developed for library professionals and has been used all over the world - from the New York Library Association Conference to the American Library Association Conference to Next Library in Berlin, Germany last year - to help workshop attendees capture their evolving thinking on the

topic of sustainability in the context of libraries. Now in its fourth printing, it is a guided journal for library leaders to continue their educational journey, encouraging them to capture thoughts at any conference they attend where an idea has been sparked or understanding has been achieved. The mobile app was developed free of charge by our partner Capira, a New York based company that donated the development time so that we can offer the app for free for iOS and Android devices.

The Sustainable Library Certification Program is the first of its kind. A guided benchmarking program to help a library assess and fine tune their commitment to being sustainable. The public library product in the certification program helps a library's leadership explore and improve in twelve categories, and along the way the program helps a library create an organizational culture that asks the right questions about operational and outreach decisions, engages administration, staff and library trustees in a new line of thinking and collaborating; inspires colleagues and the community to join the library's efforts; and reduces greenhouse gasses, energy use and waste output. The public library version contains a greenhouse gas emissions inventory tool to help libraries track the impact of their good choices over time. A recent news story features a participating library that has recently completed the first phase of the certification, "New York State Libraries Hoping To Influence The Public With Dedicated Going Green Initiatives": <https://cbsloc.al/2VbhDyg> Versions of the certification program have been developed for academic libraries and school librarians will be released in late 2019.

Once libraries have done the work inside of their organizations to think sustainably through the certification program there is a "graduate level" professional development

program available through the NYLA-SI called “Community Change Agents” or CCA. Our goal with this program is to elevate library leaders’ capacity to engage in collective impact work in their community. The ALA Center for the Future of Libraries notes that: *“In the face of limited resources and persistent, big social issues (hunger, poverty, violence, education, health, public safety, the environment), organizations from different sectors are adopting common agendas to combat issues within their communities.”* We want to help position libraries as the catalysts and conveners of collective impact work in their communities so the CCA program is designed to help library leaders learn more about community asset mapping, needs assessment and collaboration with partners outside of the library.



In addition to these three large program areas (the Roadmap, certification program and CCA) we have developed a monthly enewsletter, webinars and in March 2019 launched the very first statewide “read” which featured the book *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*, edited by Paul Hawken. NYLA-SI members designed a book discussion toolkit that includes discussion questions, a lesson plan, handouts, program ideas, suggested readings and tools to tie in to the annual EcoChallenge, an “Engagement + Action Platform,” a “fun and social way to learn about and take measurable action on the most substantive



solutions to global warming.” The EcoChallenge is a ready-to-use digital platform that provides a unique framework and launching pad for emerging generations and sustainability leaders to experience “ah-ha” moments that can lead to extraordinary environmental and social change. The EcoChallenge is designed to be used by individuals, families and whole communities! This program was enhanced by partnerships with Rakuten OverDrive and Penguin Random House (PRH) to enable access to the ebook version of Drawdown for the month of March 2019 to library patrons in New York State. The first 2,000 downloads were underwritten by the NYLA-SI with proceeds from the Roadmap booklet sales and speaking honorariums donated to the project by NYLA-SI co-chairs Rebekkah Smith Aldrich and Matthew Bollerman.



In February 2014 the New York Library Association (NYLA) - a professional organization with more than 5,000 members - passed the first “Resolution on the Importance of Sustainable Libraries.”⁴ The Resolution “enthusiastically encourages activities by its membership—and itself—to

be proactive in their application of sustainable thinking in the areas of their facilities, operations, policy, technology, programming and partnerships.”

Resolution author, Rebekkah Smith Aldrich, and, then, immediate past-president of NYLA Council, Matthew Bollerman (shown above) designed a retreat to bring together like-minded library professionals to discuss how to bring the resolution “to life.”

⁴ Resolution on the Importance of Sustainable Libraries, New York Library Association (2014) <https://bit.ly/1LHzre3>

Twenty-five applicants, called “co-creators,” who later became the members of the NYLA-SI Committee, were selected to participate in the initial retreat: “*Sustainable, Resilient, Regenerative: A Strategy for the Future of New York’s Libraries,*” held at the Carey Center for Global Good in Rensselaerville, NY.

The group worked hard to define basic vocabulary, identify actions and a mindset that would begin this work at the appropriate level. A guiding framework to the outcome of the retreat was the concept of “levels of thought,” an idea brought in to the group by Matthew through his exposure to the work of Carol Sanford, author of *The Responsible Entrepreneur* and *The Regenerative Business*.

This framework helps develop an integrative process that increases the chance that the results of the whole will align with the communities’ values.

Beliefs - How we believe “things work”

Philosophies - Our approach

Principles - Guides to action

Concept

Strategies

Design (most projects start here)

Audit

Evaluate

Maintain

The group realized that a purpose statement for our work was needed. It would align the team and provide a touchstone about our beliefs, philosophies and principles:

To create leadership and provide tools to mobilize libraries to think and act sustainably.

In a way that builds awareness and consensus while inspiring action by members of the library community to own their role as sustainability leaders in their communities,

So that communities thrive, bounce back from disruption and are infused with new and better life for everyone.

This allowed us to then look down the Levels of Thought framework to concepts and strategies. The group left as members of teams who needed to then design products to bring this thinking to life. As ideas come up over the course of the work, we held it up to the purpose to determine if it was applicable or outside what we had agreed to do. We also help up the purpose statement itself asking if it was still valid, or if I thinking had changed and required the purpose to be adjusted.

Another guiding framework for our work was an attitude of continuous iteration. We felt it was important to acknowledge that our thinking would shift, our work products would evolve - but most importantly we needed to start. We could not allow the desire for perfection get in the way of products that were good enough to get the conversation going throughout libraries in our state.

We feel this commitment to purpose, an attitude of continuous iteration, and the leadership framework of co-creation are key to the rapid success of the work of this group of library professionals.

Out of that first retreat we produced a white paper that outlined the work ahead of us which resulted in the products described above. Underpinning this work were the foundational

building blocks of the common definition of “sustainability” using the Triple Bottom Line framework described earlier in this essay which notes that to be truly sustainable, an organization or community must embody practices that are threefold: environmentally sound, economically feasible, and socially equitable.

Another building block: a conceptual hierarchy that defines both a library’s and a community’s desired state:

- Sustainable: to endure
- Resilient: to bounce back after disruption
- Regenerative: to bring new, energetic life; revive
- Whole Systems Thinking: a process of understanding how things/parts/systems behave, interact with their environments and influence each other

A third building block is the definition of “sustainable thinking,” a phrase designed to help evolve the mindset of library leaders from a “checklist” mentality to “go green” to a way of thinking and a lens through which to make decisions in their institution that integrates whole systems thinking related to the triple bottom line: *Sustainable thinking aligns a library's core values and resources with the local and global community's right to endure, bounce back from disruption and to thrive by bringing new and energetic life to fruition through choices made in all areas of library operations and outreach.*



The work of this band of professionals has inspired impressive action in a very short time. We have touched thousands of librarians and library stakeholders through our efforts. We have inspired libraries to begin the journey to becoming certified as sustainable libraries. We are seeing boards pass new policies and make long-term facility and budget decisions based on what they are learning through our resources. We are changing the future of New York, together.

Excitingly we are seeing others follow suit: from ALA to the Vermont Library Association to the American Association of Law Libraries, other pods of professionals are unifying around the ideals laid out in NYLA's work. Our hope is that through testing our resources in New York and fine-tuning them, they will be even more impactful when they leave our borders. Members of our committee have been invited to speak all over the country and Europe - from New York to Florida to California to Hawaii to Berlin to Denmark! New York is helping to lead the way and, we hope, serving to inspire others in the library community to do the same.