Administrative Information
Brooklyn Public Library: BKLYN Incubator
Amount Awarded: $25,000
Total Project Cost: $78,653
Project Dates: November 1, 2015 – October 31, 2016
Project Administrators: BKLYN Incubator was administered by the Incubator Advisory Board. This Advisory Board included Lisa Chow, Web Analyst; Nicholas Higgins, Director of Outreach Services; Ames O’Neill, Project Manager; Kerwin Pilgrim, Director of Adult Learning; Diana Plunkett, Manager of Strategic Initiatives; and Brynna Tucker, BKLYN Incubator Manager (began in August, 2016).

Abstract
BKLYN Incubator is a program developed by Brooklyn Public Library (BPL). The Incubator draws its format from the incubator models in the tech sector, but instead of incubating early stage startups, it incubates innovative programs by providing resources, mentorship, and funding to public service staff who work directly with patrons of the 5th largest library system in the country. The purpose of BKLYN Incubator is to build the public programs and services from the ground up and support ideas that are responsive to the communities that house the 59 branches of the BPL system. Additionally, the Incubator opens new channels of communication from the public service staff to the administration so that problem areas can be identified, new programs can be tested, and innovative staff members can receive support and recognition for implementing changes that shape the future of the Library.

Introduction
In January 2015 BPL conducted a survey asking public service staff for their feedback on if and how they share project ideas. The survey results, detailed below, revealed a clear opportunity to leverage the individual knowledge of the service staff, an existing source of intellectual capital that had been underutilized in the past. The launch of BKLYN Incubator offered a solution with four performance goals:

1. To engage staff and patrons in a formal process for developing and testing new and innovative programming ideas while fostering a deeper relationship with BPL, public service, and the community.
2. To pilot promising short-term projects that have the potential for meaningful impact.
3. Design scalable and adaptable library programs that leverage existing community resources.
4. Create a replicable staff and community engagement framework and open source web-based application that will have national relevance.

Problem Definition
BPL currently employs 1,320 staff at 58 branches and Central Library. Of these employees 850 are full-time librarians or other staff directly serving the public which includes children, teens and adults, as well as veterans, immigrants, persons experiencing homelessness, people with disabilities, etc. As a reaction to the American Library Association’s 2013 "Public Library Data Service Statistical Report" where BPL ranked second for public programs offered and third for program attendance among public libraries in the country we began to look at how new programs are developed. While the bulk of programs are offered at the Library’s 58 neighborhood branches they are largely designed and coordinated by several centralized departments. BPL’s Programs and Exhibitions department is charged with providing a limited number of branch programs for children that meet the interests of each community, such as chess clubs, art classes, and cultural celebrations. The Youth and Family Services department also implements programming at branches such as First Five Years and school-readiness workshops, family STEM programs, inclusive after-school programs and gardening clubs, summer reading, and teen tech time. For adult programs, the
Library relies on departments, such as Adult Learning and Outreach Services, to provide programming aligned with the host department’s goals. Before the Incubator, the system for implementing new programs left many branch requests and interests for new programs unmet.

Library staff regularly receive suggestions and feedback from patrons about the types of programming they’d like to see offered and staff gain new ideas for programs through conferences, meetings, etc. Individual branches often lack the budget for implementing new programs and there was no clear channel in place for staff to test new ideas. In January 2015, the Library emailed 715 public service staff an online survey asking for their feedback on if and how they share project ideas. The results revealed that many staff were unaware of who they should contact when they have an idea worth exploring. Of those who responded to the survey 55% stated that the Library does not have a good mechanism in place for sharing project ideas and 40% felt that the Library has a somewhat good mechanism. Eighty-five percent shared that they have ideas they would like to propose for funding and 74% would like to build their project development and management skills. Many respondents used the survey as an opportunity to share ideas, some of which included hosting neighborhood history classes, robotics programs and talent shows.

**High Level Solution**

Based on the data gathered from the 2015 survey a need emerged to develop new lines of communication to encourage innovation from all levels of staff at the Library. To meet this need, BPL launched a multifaceted incubator that nurtured new ideas through an eight-stage process outlined below.

In its first iteration, two rounds of the Incubator (beginning in November 2015 and ending in October 2016) were conducted in eight-month cycles beginning with a 13-week competition open to all full-time public service staff that included workshops on designing impactful programs, budgeting, and measuring outcomes. Projects were required to involve a community partner and went through a series of internal and public review and refinement stages to ensure they were feasible, met the needs and interests of the community, aligned with the Library’s organizational goals, and could be adapted in other communities. An open source web-based application, the **Incubator Web Tool** (available for download in the Incubator Toolkit below) was developed for staff to submit project ideas and for the public to comment and vote on projects. All project ideas are archived in a **staff idea bank** for future reference.

Round one resulted in 30 applications submitted by staff from 18 branch libraries and involving a total of 29 community partners. Eight winners were selected to implement programs at eight different branches. The second round drew 21 applications representing 13 branch libraries and participation by 30 community partners. Five winners were selected in round two to implement programs at four different branches.

**Incubator Process**

**Orientation**

A pre-orientation worksheet was made available to those interested in BKLYN Incubator. The worksheet mimicked the submission form (outlined below) and got applicants thinking about their ideas in advance of the orientation session, where they would be able to refine and clarify their ideas. All staff members interested in submitting proposals for BKLYN Incubator were required to attend one of the orientation sessions, which included a review of the proposal guidelines, training in outcomes based evaluation, and facilitated conversations among potential applicants to receive feedback from their peers. A worksheet based on the rubric for evaluation was also given out at the orientation sessions so applicants would have a clear sense of how their proposals would be evaluated in the selection stage and to ensure transparency in what the Library was looking for in successful proposals.
Submission
BPL partnered with Bureau Blank, a NYC-based technology and digital design organization, to create an open source web-based Drupal application called the Incubator Web Tool. This tool enabled staff to submit ideas for projects, allowed for public comment, houses all of the proposals from Incubator applicants in an idea bank for future use by BPL staff, and serves as a public archive of all projects piloted through the Incubator. In addition to basic information about the project team, program, budget, and target audience the submission form also required applicants to identify the community need that their proposed program would help address, how their idea aligned with the Library’s strategic plan, any potential solutions for anticipated challenges, and the metrics for success. Applicants also had the opportunity to submit any work they had done to develop their idea including research, planning documents, and timelines that might indicate their aptitude and potential to succeed.

Revision
Applicants were offered feedback and edits from other BPL staff before submitting their proposals. This provided an opportunity to fine-tune their submissions and get valuable feedback on their content before it went into the selection process. Applicants were paired with Library staff that had previous experience working with grants, project management, or a content-based specialty that they shared.

Public Participation
Once the proposals were fine-tuned, both social media and the Incubator Web Tool were utilized to involve patrons in the selection process. Library cardholders could access the proposals online and rate them or leave comments through social media to have their voices heard about programs that were in the running for funding. These comments were solicited to offer feedback to support and improve the proposals. Public interaction was measured and used as part of the evaluation rubric used in the selection process outlined below.

Selection
After the final applications were submitted the Advisory Board scored them based on nine weighted categories pulled from both the application form and the input from the public.

- 20% - For full program descriptions that provided an excellent picture of what patrons and staff could expect when participating in the program and demonstrated an innovative approach to transformative library services.
- 15% - For applications that were well researched, and identified and addressed a specific community need.
- 15% - For the work done to develop the idea including detailed planning documents, mock-ups of marketing materials, timelines, and community outreach.
- 15% - For detailed program outcomes that explicitly link to the program activities.
- 10% - For the narrative content and connection to the Library’s strategic plan.
- 10% - For expressing an acute sense of the challenges that may come up and reasonable plans to address those challenges.
- 5% - For the one-sentence descriptions that acted as the program tagline and were succinct, easy to understand, and conveyed key information.
- 5% - For a detailed budget that specifically addresses the needs outlined in the proposal.
- 5% - For strong engagement or support from the public.

The weighted totals from each Advisory Board member were combined and calculated to reveal the finalists. There were 15 finalists in round one and 10 finalists in round two.
White Paper – BKLYN Incubator

Presentation
The final judging was based on both the written proposal and a project pitch presented by each of the applicants to a group of seven internal judges from the Library’s senior staff. The presentations were judged based on whether there was an established community need for the program; the program’s original and innovative solution; whether the program had a realistic structure (including budget) and a feasible set of goals; and the potential of the program to be repeated or scaled moving forward.

Eight winners were announced from the round one presentation and five from round two.

Implementation
Once the winners were announced they were paired with a BPL mentor with whom they could work throughout the implementation of their program. Participants were invited to a planning workshop that taught the basics of program management including how to budget time and funds, project management tools, and promotion. The workshop also reviewed specific policies and procedures that the Library required for submitting purchase orders, check requests, contracts, as well as key staff members to contact for specific requests. Monthly budget reports were submitted to the Advisory Board to track expenses and help facilitate the process.

A midpoint check-in was hosted by the Advisory Board to help capture feedback from participants. The open forum format allowed for a dialogue among the Advisory Board and the participants to gather expert advice as well as feedback from their peers. The conversation centered on the following four questions:

- What has surprised you the most so far?
- What aspects of your program/planning have worked best and why?
- What obstacles have you encountered and what did you do to deal with them?
- Do you feel on track to complete your program, spend your full budget and gather your data for evaluation before the end of the cycle?

The participants felt that the meeting created a sense of comradery and that the most important outcome was the opportunity to learn that everyone was experiencing challenges and to get advice from each other to work through those challenges. The conversational format allowed for a frank discussion where they could speak freely, learn from their peers and advisors, and be honest about points of tension they were experiencing as they implemented their programs.

Evaluation
Throughout the implementation stage, Incubator participants were required to gather both quantitative and qualitative data to measure the impact of their program. Each participant was required to submit a final report that included project activities, community partnerships, outcomes and impact, lessons learned and challenges, future plans and sustainability, feedback on the Incubator process itself, and a final budget. The mentors and Advisory Board offered edits to the final reports and hosted a final lunch to thank participants for their work and receive candid feedback to the Incubator initiative.

Outcomes
The BKLYN Incubator project is an exciting effort to engage front-line staff in best practices in programming, including assessing community needs and defining target audience, defining and measuring outcomes, working with partners to design programs to achieve those outcomes, and then implementing the programs, complete with budgeting, detailed design, scheduling, promotion, and evaluation. The BKLYN Incubator process resulted in successful programs aligned with the Library’s strategic plan. By creating an application process that identifies this connection early on, participants had to think about how their idea fit in with the bigger picture from the beginning. With the ongoing feedback provided throughout
the process there were several opportunities for the program to be realigned and to ensure that the connection was maintained.

Participants developed confidence, knowledge, skills, and support to implement impactful programs through the incubator process. A workshop focused on practical details of program planning and resources from within the Library was held for all program winners. The workshop also reviewed outcomes and assessments, project planning, budgeting, contracts, and program promotion. The workshop successfully prepared the Incubator winners to implement their programs with participants appreciating the opportunity to discuss their work with their peers and develop a sense of camaraderie. In addition to the workshop each winner was assigned a Library staff mentor who could help with navigating internal resources, assist with program implementation, and/or provide time for regular check-ins to track progress and help sort out issues.

Patrons, judges, and mentors felt very positive about their input into program development. As participants in the application process they were able to share helpful feedback as well as discover the depth of creativity, ambition, and management skillsets of the applicants – traits not necessarily revealed as part of their day-to-day responsibilities. The use of social media and the Incubator Web Tool allowed for the public to share feedback, rank proposals, and share links to projects.

The Incubator project also served to leverage community resources to strengthen programs as each winning team was required to work with a local partner. The community partners helped in several ways including developing content, providing program space, promoting the program to their constituents and in the community, and handling administrative details. Although the community partnerships demanded significant time from participants, including time away from their branch, participants and the Advisory Board agreed that they were a major strength of the programs.

**Lessons Learned/Moving Forward**

At its best BKLYN Incubator has proven to be a very thoughtful, creative, empowering and exciting process. It is also labor-intensive and requires significant time commitment from participants, mentors and community partners, as well as institutional support including budget, technology, and facilities. The perception is that these programs are special, on top of regular duties, rather than a new and better method for carrying out these duties. This is normal for any externally funded short-term “project” and especially when staff learning is at the heart of the project. Moving forward, we will look for opportunities to reinforce this new model as the way the Library does business and integrate it into regular BPL duties. Additionally feedback from participants revealed the need for more training before the actual application process began. In future cycles BPL will offer several preliminary workshops to guide staff members through the process of ideating, prototyping, testing, and iterating before the application process begins.

The initial timeline to implement the BKLYN Incubator—from orientation to completed project—was a six-month cycle. This short timeframe proved a strain—in particular the time between selection of winning teams and implementation of programs—especially for Program Team members and Mentors who also had their regular duties. Going forward, the Incubator will shift from a six-month to a one-year cycle to allow for more in-depth training before the application process, improved support from mentors, assistance from experts in the field, and a longer implementation period that allows programs to take place throughout the year.

The funding for BKLYN Incubator programs ranged from $1,500-$5,000, however based on our final survey conducted after rounds one and two, we recognized that time and people were the biggest barriers to entry for staff considering building new programs. This is a clear indicator that libraries of any size can
launch a similar program if they are willing to offer staff the time to develop new programs and the mentorship, support, and training needed to test and implement new ideas.

The overall Incubator design—including professional learning opportunities, opportunities for brainstorming and feedback from peers, mentoring, public feedback, internal and external funding, community partners, and coordination from the administrative level—worked well and will remain unchanged. With private funding, we are able to continue to offer BKLYN Incubator and explore ways to improve the program, create a community of innovators, and offer professional development for two more years.

**Resources**

- Incubator Toolkit - [www.bklynlibrary.org/ incubator-submissions/toolkit](http://www.bklynlibrary.org/ incubator-submissions/toolkit)
- Incubator Web Tool - [https://github.com/bplweb/incubator](https://github.com/bplweb/incubator)
- Successful proposals - [http://www.bklynlibrary.org/ incubator-submissions/winners](http://www.bklynlibrary.org/ incubator-submissions/winners)
- For inquiries and information, please reach out to Brynna Tucker, BKLYN Incubator Manager at btucker@bklynlibrary.org.