

Nobody's Core Business

Confronting Cross-Cutting Problems in the Public Sector

Educator Guide

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Overview

This educator guide is designed to assist instructors in teaching this case to students and practitioners. It is based on [case pedagogy](#), which invites participants to put themselves in the shoes of the protagonist(s) of the case and imagine how they would respond to the circumstances. Participants should read the teaching case in advance and identify key issues as a preliminary step toward meeting the learning objectives. Instructors may then use the time in the classroom to guide participants in exploring the issues and examining the challenges in the case; to introduce key concepts, tools, and frameworks; and to assist participants in applying their learning to their own environments and challenges. (For a diagram depicting the general flow of a case session, see Appendix 1.)

This guide includes learning objectives, a synopsis, key questions, a roadmap for discussion, and appendices with some additional pedagogical information and theoretical applications. The roadmap and appendices are offered to initiate meaningful conversation but are by no means the only way to teach the case. Each instructor or facilitator should feel free to design their own teaching plan; both the structure and the time allotted for each component are suggestions.

Learning Objectives

The aims of the case, “Nobody’s Core Business: Confronting Cross-Cutting Problems in the Public Sector,” are to help students and city leaders:

- Identify and evaluate opportunities for making social contributions (creating public value) outside of traditional understandings of organizational missions.
- Identify conditions unique to public-sector managers’ environments, including complex lines of accountability, nuances of value, and the co-production of social outcomes.
- Recognize possible avenues for collaboration across organizations and sectors to address social problems that cut across missions and organizational capacities.



Case Synopsis

A city librarian grappled with the question of what to do about opioid use and overdoses in her library. Changes over the past two decades had dramatically expanded the mission of the public library. What began as a repository of human knowledge, offering lending services and study space, had become a community and cultural center with programming and services for people of all ages, from all walks of life. As the library's mission expanded, its partnerships with other municipal organizations, local businesses, and nonprofits multiplied. The librarian, who once advocated for expanding the mission to accommodate young people in need a safe indoor place after school, faced a new set of library users with needs that seemed far outside her mandate. *Should she have further expanded her mission to include providing lifesaving or other services for opioid users? If not, how should she have handled these new "customers"?*

This case explores tensions between working to achieve a prescribed mission and adapting missions and organizational capacities to changing social, political, and practical realities.

Key Questions

1. What is the mission of a public library?
2. How has the mission of the library changed over the past quarter century or so? What has driven these changes?
3. Did preventing substance abuse and/or administering Narcan fit into the library's mission? If not, whose responsibility *was* it to do this work? If so, who would you have approached about the problem if you were Jenny?

Roadmap for Discussion

Introduction (5 minutes): Briefly state the goal of the session in reference to the case, cite specific conflicts facing the protagonist, and foreshadow broader learning objectives.

Exploration (30-45 minutes): Use class discussion, "buzz groups," and board work to explore the issues and options confronting the protagonist.

Diagnosis (20-30 minutes): Introduce key concepts, frameworks, and tools to help participants pinpoint possible solutions to conflicts in the case.

Application (15 minutes, optional): Ask participants to relate the concepts and frameworks to their own organizations' challenges.

Wrap-Up and Takeaways (5-10 minutes): Review the learning objectives and discuss insights most relevant to participants' challenges.

Introduction (5 minutes):

In your introductory remarks, briefly describe the case and foreshadow the learning objectives: In the midst of a widespread opioid epidemic, a city librarian weighed her options for managing opioid use and overdoses on library property. She wondered what role, if any, the library should play in responding to the crisis. *Should she have stocked Narcan, an antidote to opioid overdose, and trained her staff to use it or leave it to the paramedics? Thrown suspected opioid users out of the building? Taken a more proactive approach to preventing opioid use in the first place? What considerations would have helped her decide?*

Exploration (30-45 minutes)

Use class discussion, “buzz groups,” and board work to explore the issues and options confronting the librarian. (See Appendix 2 for a Board plan.)

Begin with a straw poll asking what participants would do in Jenny’s position:

- *Would you have stocked and administered Narcan?*
(Show of hands, yes or no?)
- *Would you have offered substance abuse prevention programming?*
(Show of hands, yes or no?)

Next, explore their answers:

- *What are the arguments for and against stocking and administering Narcan?*
(See Appendix 2, Board 1.)
- *What are the arguments for and against offering substance abuse prevention programming?*
(See Appendix 2, Board 2.)

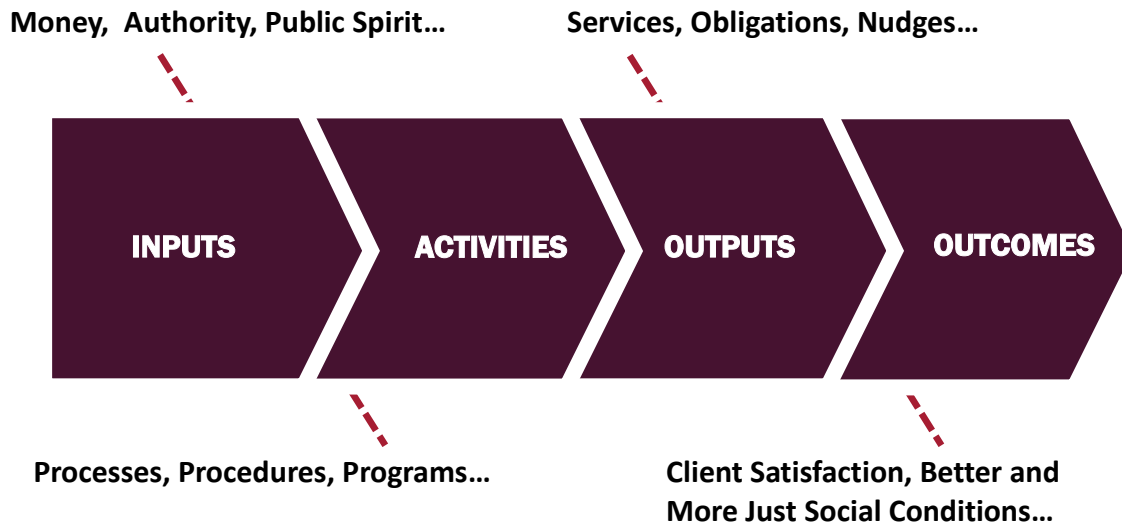
Then, consider ideas regarding the mission and valuable uses of a public library:

- *What is the mission of a city library?*
(See Appendix 2, Board 3.)
- *What does the public use the library for?*
(See Appendix 2, Board 4.)

At the end of the exploration section, have participants consider which actors Jenny should have or could have consulted in making her decision and who will evaluate her decision:

- *Who decides the important purposes of the library?*
(See Appendix 2, Board 5.)

To clarify the distinction between public value (outcomes) and organizational outputs, make a drawing or show a slide depicting the public value chain (a generic logic model for public leaders).



The diagram shows an organization taking inputs (primarily money and authorizations), carrying out activities (refining and implementing policy, hiring and training staff, tracking and analyzing data, etc.), and generating specific outputs (interacting with clients, issuing reports, offering programs and public events, etc.).

When people interact with the organization as clients at the boundary of the organization, they may resemble customers, but their individual satisfaction should not be mistaken for the ultimate purpose of the enterprise. To the extent that the organization's interaction with them had the intended effects, clients then become co-producers who intentionally or unintentionally help advance the outcomes the organization is pursuing.

In this sense, both outputs and "customer" (client) satisfaction are means to the ultimate end of achieving desired social outcomes at an acceptable cost (net public value).

- *How would the librarian have responded if she were running the library for profit?*

To help clarify the concept of public value, you may use this question to compare and contrast management in public and private sectors.

The essential question in business is: *How many things can I create with my capacity (and sell at a profit)?*

Refer back to answers on Board 4 (Uses of the library) to answer the first part of this question. Then, invite participants to imagine that the library's goal is to provide each of these things at the lowest possible cost.

- *To what extent would that create more (net) public value? Are there evident trade-offs? Can the library shut down one "line of business" to invest in a more "profitable" line?*
- *Which of the things listed on Board 4 are the "core capacities" of a library? Are there other valuable goods and services the library could produce with its core capacities? What else could it lend, for example? What other market segments could it serve with its safe, quiet, indoor space? How would creating more offerings with its core capacities change the value it was producing?*

The essential question in public management is:

- *What are the valuable social outcomes I am trying to produce (and how do I optimize production)?*

In business, investors and shareholders commit money to an enterprise that converts it into profits by making and selling products and services to willing customers. Getting to a bottom line is straightforward arithmetic.

In the public sector, nothing is quite so straightforward. The assets a public manager can turn into (net) public value include

- tax dollars;
- legal and regulatory authority; and
- public spirit (the public's willingness to support the goals of government with voluntary labor).

While business revenues register dollar amounts with each purchase, the value of public-sector outputs is highly subjective and its link to outcomes uncertain. Without a revenue measure to set against costs, it is hard to tell if outputs are creating public value at an acceptable price.

- *What does the public want from government entities?*

In principle, the public tells public managers what outcomes it wants them to produce through the formal and informal mechanisms of representative democracy (elections, referenda, public opinion polling, citizen petitions, public hearings, and so on). Because the mechanisms do not generally produce clear mandates that public managers can easily translate into concrete action, however, some work is required to both articulate and realize those outcomes.

This work involves engaging with the actors listed on Board 5 (Who Decides on Purposes) to formulate a "public value proposition": a description of the positive social outcomes that constitute the public value of a given public enterprise (such as a library).

To formulate that proposition, public managers must understand what values, or dimensions of public value, are at stake in their efforts:

- As taxpayers who have handed over a portion of their income, the public wants the state to produce material benefits for them at a limited cost.
- As democratic citizens who have handed over a portion of their freedom, the public wants the state to produce and uphold fair and just relationships among people, groups, and institutions with a limited exercise of authority.

Refer back to the answers on Boards 3 and 4 (Mission and Uses of the Library) to disambiguate utilitarian (material welfare) and deontological (fair and just relationships) concepts of value and present these together as a public value proposition. Work with the class to distill the underlying values or valued outcomes in the items on the list and enter them in their own table as shown in Appendix 2, Board 6.

- *Would administering Narcan or providing preventative education have advanced these values? If so, how?*

Additional Frameworks

You may also use the case to delve deeper into public value theory and introduce the “Strategic Triangle” (Appendix 4) and teach principles of cross-boundary collaboration (Appendix 5).

Application (15 minutes, optional)

In pairs or small groups, ask participants consider a problem in their organization that they may not have the tools or mandate to address.

- *Is there an opportunity associated with that problem? Can you apply the concepts and frameworks to it?*

Wrap-up and Takeaways (5-10 minutes)

Review the learning objectives and discuss insights most relevant to participants’ own challenges.

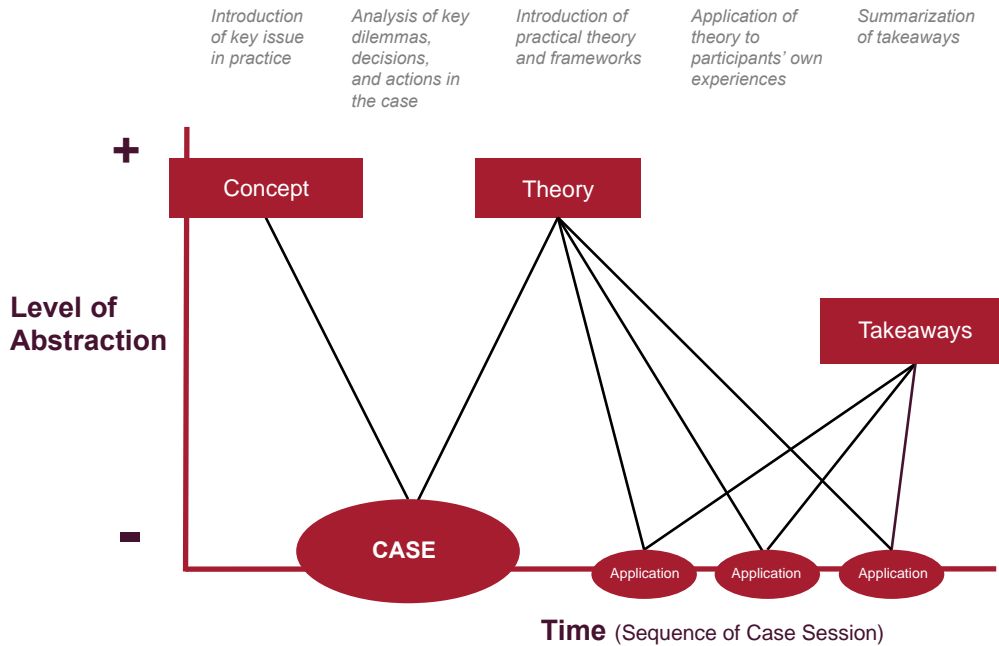
- *What did you learn? How will you use it?*

Appendices

Appendix 1 Designing a Case Session

One Approach to Designing a Case Session

A case session aims to increase participants' ability to use theory and frameworks to guide their thought and action in practical circumstances. To train the mental muscle and integrate theory and practice, a case session moves up and down in level of abstraction frequently, testing and refining abstract theory through practical application.



Appendix 2 Board Plans

Board 1: Arguments For and Against Stocking and Administering Narcan (sample answers)

YES	NO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Saves lives ○ People with substance abuse disorders are already there ○ Opportunity to engage addicted individuals and direct them to services ○ Part of a first-aid kit, like defibrillators ○ Relatively inexpensive ○ Part of a community-wide response to an epidemic of opioid abuse ○ Etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Outside of mission ○ Lack of expertise ○ Condone drug abuse ○ Financial cost (supplies & training) ○ Needs authorization from local gov/board ○ Liability issue ○ Etc.

Board 2: Arguments For and Against Offering Substance Abuse Prevention Programming (sample answers)

YES	NO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Aligns with educational/informational mission of library ○ Could reach youth before they become addicted ○ Opportunity to engage addicted individuals and direct them to services ○ Part of a community-wide response to an epidemic of opioid abuse ○ Etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Outside of mission ○ Other organizations better suited for this purpose ○ Needs authorization ○ Liability ○ Etc.

Board 3: Mission of the Library (sample answers)

- Free access to information
- Foster a love of learning
- Opportunities for lifelong learning
- Community space
- Repository of knowledge
- Accessible archive and reading space
- Enriching the lives of citizens
- Etc.

Board 4: Uses of the Library (sample answers)

- Information
- Personal development
- Meeting space
- Community space
- Public art exhibition
- Cultural activities
- Shelter/bathroom
- Internet access
- Etc.

Board 5: Who Decides on Purposes? (sample answers)

- The librarian
- The board of directors
- The mayor of the town
- The town council
- The public/voters
- The taxpayers
- The clients/patrons
- The staff
- Etc.

Board 6: Exploring the Mission and Uses of a Library (disambiguating values)

The Good	The Just
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A warm space ○ Quiet space for study ○ Meeting space for community ○ Satisfied customers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Equitable access ○ People have a right to a safe shelter ○ An informed polity (good for democracy)

Appendix 3 What is Public Value?

Public leaders create public value when they make better and more just social conditions. They can act from a variety of positions and platforms: elected or appointed career government officials, community organizers, nonprofit managers, philanthropists, social entrepreneurs, and so on.

The social conditions they aim to improve may concern the material welfare of individuals and society as a whole, or the status of relationships among individuals and groups.

To improve material welfare, public leaders produce material conditions not reliably produced by the market, such as widespread access to essential goods and services, security and protection from risks over which individuals have little control, or special services for vulnerable individuals and groups.

To improve social relationships, public leaders: establish and uphold rights to ensure individuals can live free from oppression and discrimination; perform duties that ensure individuals and groups do not violate the rights of others; and provide opportunities to help create the norms and pass the laws that govern the public.

The Public Value Matrix below offers a basic framework for understanding public value.

	Individual	Collective
Welfare	<p>“My Wellbeing”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs met • Wants satisfied • Welfare and security advanced 	<p>“Our Wellbeing”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prosperous and inclusive economy • Safe and healthy social and physical environments
Justice	<p>“My Rights and Duties”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rights protected • Autonomy and dignity secured • Just duties fairly imposed 	<p>“Our Rights and Duties”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal protection of rights • Universal protection of dignity and autonomy • Fair and equitable treatment of groups • A just social order

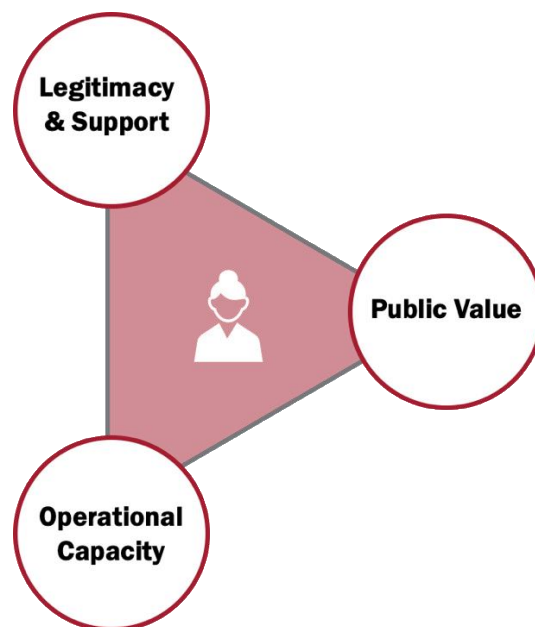
Appendix 4 The Strategic Triangle

- *If the librarian wanted to create more public value for her community using her position and the resources with which the public entrusted her, where should she have begun?*

Reintroduce public value as one of the three points on the “strategic triangle.”

The Strategic Triangle is a diagnostic tool to help public leaders create more public value. The three points of the triangle are:

- Public value: a conception of the outcomes you are pursuing
- Operational capacity: a characterization of the actions that could reliably produce the desired results
- Legitimacy and support: an account of how public support for the proposed collective action could be mobilized



The challenge of the strategic triangle is using it to navigate a complex and dynamic environment by

- ensuring that you have touched all the bases in developing your idea and aligned the different parts (completeness).
- diagnosing the particular context in which you are working to confirm that the idea could be politically, legally, and financially supported, and successfully implemented in that context (coherence).

Public Value

Return to the concept of a public value proposition as a description of both the “good” and the “just” outcomes the librarian is pursuing. Note that both types of public value register on both individual and collective levels, using the Public Value Matrix presented in Appendix 3.

- *What valuable goods or services does the library produce for individuals? For the public?*

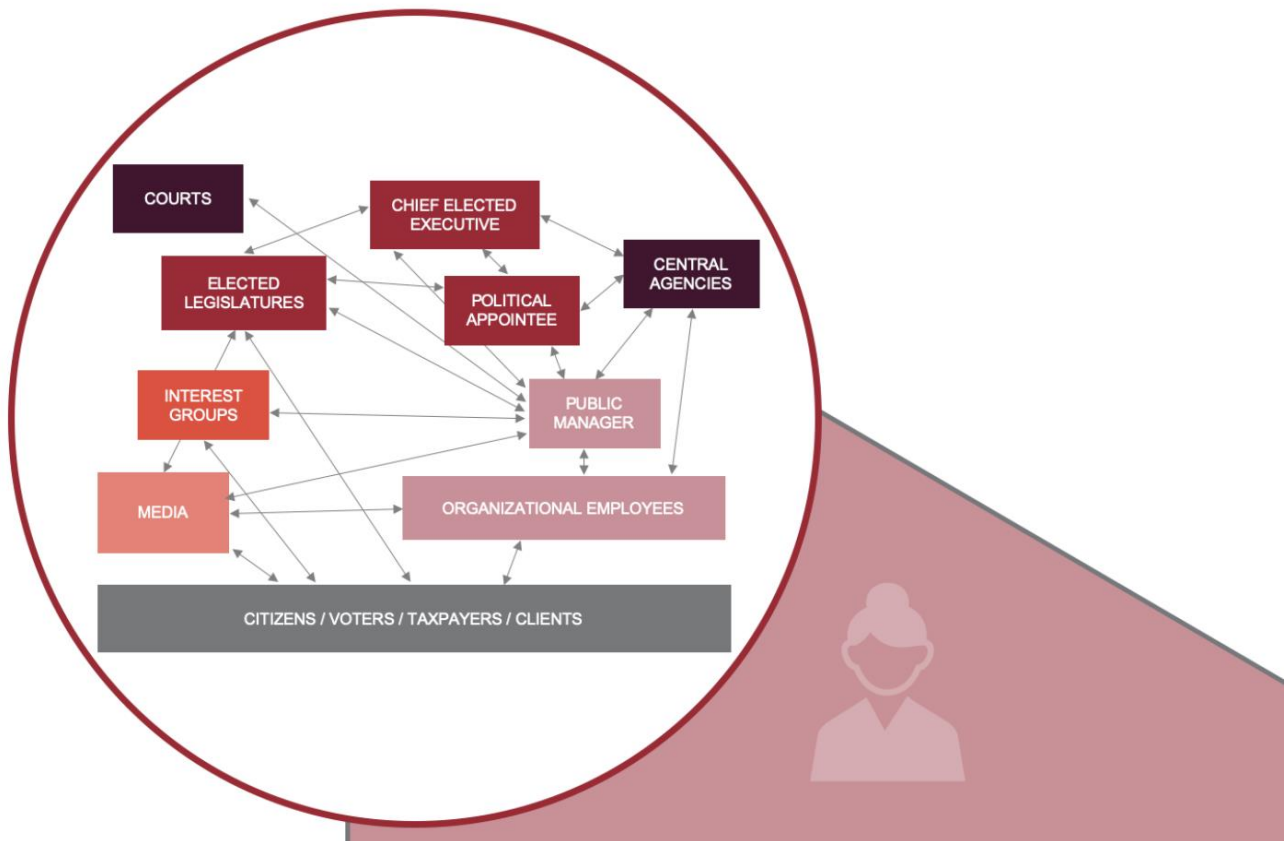
Legitimacy and Support

The librarian has to consider all possible sources of legitimacy and support to optimize her chances of securing the necessary resources and authorizations to do what she believes will create the most public value.

- *What actors in the librarian's environment could have provided the legitimacy and support she would need to enact her plan to create more public value?*

The librarian is accountable to individuals with particular interests and preferences (library patrons, taxpayers, etc.; categories are not mutually exclusive) and to actors that represent at least some of those interests and preferences in aggregate.

All of these actors are members of the librarian's authorizing environment. You may draw a picture using any or all of the elements in the figure below or show this figure as a slide.



Operational Capacity

For the librarian to realize the outcomes described in her public value proposition, she must have offered those in her authorizing environment a plausible explanation of how she would do so.

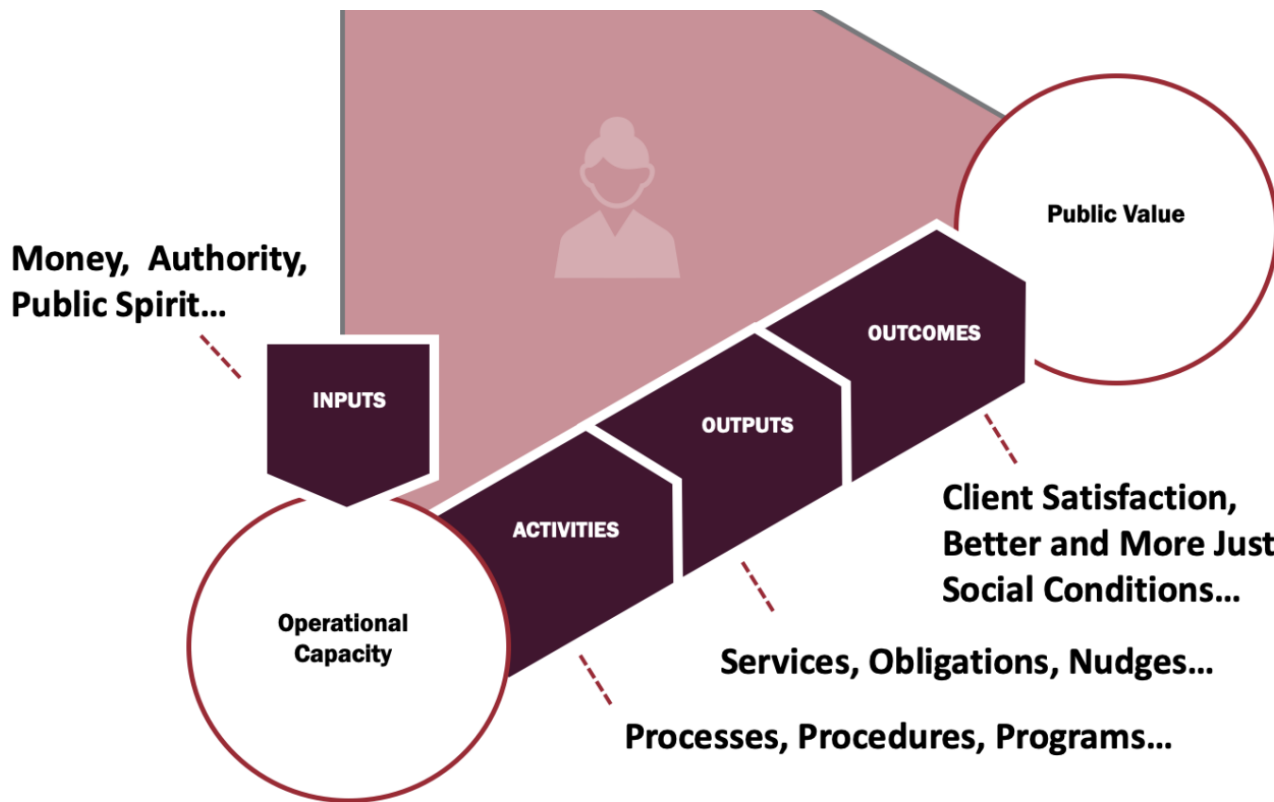
- *What activities, outputs, and client interactions did the library undertake to create public value?*

Enter responses on a table like this:

ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	CLIENT INTERACTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Organizing information ○ Developing cultural programs ○ Stocking books and other media ○ Etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lending books ○ Public programs ○ Clean public restrooms ○ Etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Assistance finding books ○ Computer assistance ○ Collecting late fees ○ Shushing people ○ Etc.

To ensure her operational capacity was aligned with the value she is trying to create, the logic connecting the library’s activities, outputs, client encounters, and the desired outcomes should have been clear and convincing.

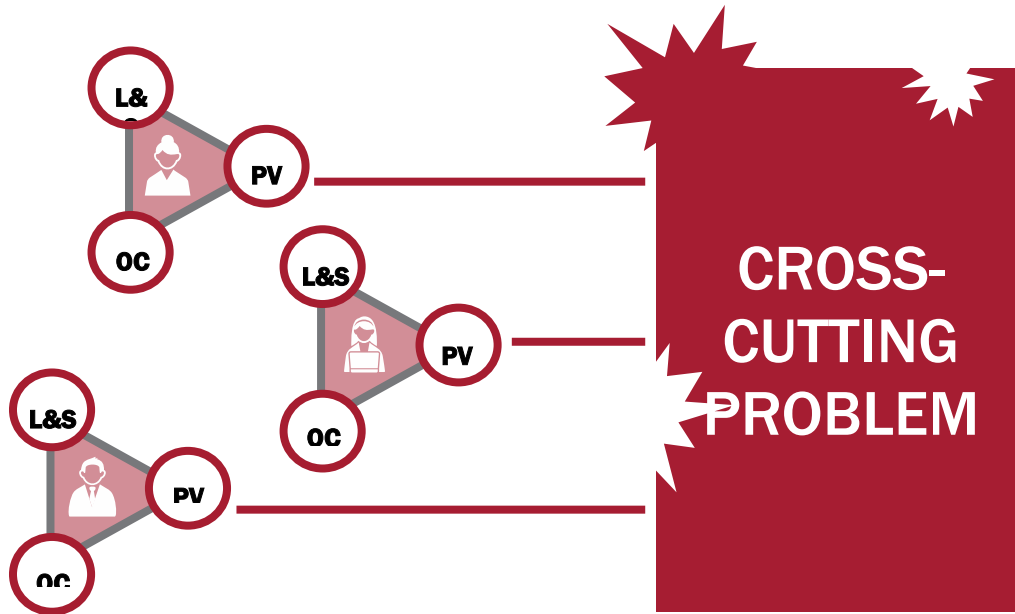
Use the public value chain shown below to explore different dimensions of public value the library could have pursued—on its own or in partnership with others—and different ways it could do so.



Appendix 5 Cross-Boundary Collaboration

- *What would a comprehensive approach to addressing the opioid epidemic have looked like, and how would the library have fit into that approach?*

The figure below shows a collaborative team working as a set of individuals representing particular groups or organizations—each with different public value propositions, operational capacities, and sources of legitimacy and support—to attack a cross-cutting problem.



The challenge of this work is to bring many triangles into harmony with one another without producing major distortions in any collaborator's individual triangle. See figure below.

