# A Community Dialogue Guide for Public Libraries

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**STAR★net**
Science-Technology Activities & Resources For Libraries

**SPACE SCIENCE INSTITUTE**

**NCIL**
National Center for Interactive Learning

**NASA@ My Library**

**NSF**

**SEPA** SCIENCE EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP AWARD
SUPPORTED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

**ALA** American Library Association

**EDC** Education Development Center

**COLORADO AHEC** Colorado AHEC Program "Making Connections for a Healthy Colorado" Area Health Education Centers

## About This Guide

Public libraries are vital community centers offering resources, activities, and other learning opportunities. In order to best serve their communities, libraries must look outward to discover more about how community members think and feel about important topics and to make connections with local organizations and partners that can help address these issues to achieve a common goal. *Community Dialogues* are one way in which libraries can more fully engage and learn from the communities that they serve. While this guide and program are designed to help libraries address STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) topics with their communities, the strategy can be applied to any challenging issue that requires community engagement to solve.

The National Center for Interactive Learning (NCIL), with funding from the National Institutes of Health and NASA, has developed a *Community Dialogue* framework to assist libraries in identifying underserved audiences in their communities (and ways to reach them), as well as determining how STEM fits into their library practice. In 2015, NCIL successfully piloted this framework as part of its NIH-funded Discover Health/Descubre la Salud program (Holland, 2015) and continued to refine the strategy with dialogues conducted at three pilot libraries from its *NASA@ My Library* program. Similar to elements of ALA's *Libraries Transforming Communities* model (Harwood, 2017; ALA, 2018), this strategy facilitates conversations between library staff, community members and leaders, and project team members to inform project direction and design. These dialogues have yielded valuable data about the needs of identified underserved audiences (e.g., how they use the library, barriers to participation in certain types of programming), identified or solidified potential community partnerships, as well as provided an opportunity for programming librarians to give feedback on the types of STEM programs they are planning and how community partners can help to promote them (Holland, 2015).

This guide provides information for public libraries on how to host and conduct *Community Dialogues*. It was originally developed as part of the STAR Library Network and it's *NASA@ My Library* initiative. See Appendix A for more information about *STAR Net*. This guide is a tested and vetted resource for all public libraries to begin the conversations that can lead to building strong, durable relationships with their community. Read on to find out how opening your doors can open new doors!

**Here's what librarians are saying about their experience with *Community Dialogues*:**

*"There is no doubt that the Community Dialogues are beneficial to all parties. I think this method should be employed more often when we are considering all kinds of services, initiatives and programs for our community."*

*– Lisa Jackson, Youth Services Librarian, African-American Research Library and Cultural Center, Fort Lauderdale, FL*

*"Our first dialogue was with various leaders who work with the target populations. Thanks to the conversation, we are pursuing a STEM Fair and have new connections who promote our services even as we promote their events."*

*– Elena Rosenfeld, Associate Director of Public Services, High Plains Library District, Colorado*

## What is a *Community Dialogue*?

A *Community Dialogue* is a loosely facilitated discussion that provides the opportunity for library staff and community leaders or members to discuss common, community-based challenges or aspirations.

*Community Dialogues* can help your library:

- Expand your understanding of patrons' feelings about their local library and its programs, including programming related to STEM

- Obtain meaningful feedback from the community on who visits the library and why

- Have a conversation about how the library can better serve ethnically, economically, and geographically underserved and underrepresented audiences

- Better connect with local organizations and potential future partners that have shared interests with the library and community

These events are about more than leaving the room with a list of to-dos and answers to all the questions. Rather, they are about discussing topics and issues in an inclusive and uninhibited environment, with community representatives and stakeholders.

## *Community Dialogue* Goals

**1** **Strengthen librarians' roles in establishing a STEM Learning Environment**

**2** **Identify under-represented community groups**

**3** **Identify possible collaborations and partnerships within the community**

**4** **Contribute to developing a flexible *Community Dialogue* framework that all libraries can use**

**Popular Quote:**

*"Public libraries are a key access point for community-based education for life-long learners. Libraries link independent learners, materials, programs, and other community agencies, and provide a common touchstone for all segments of the population."*

*– Van Fleet*

# Planning Your *Community Dialogue*

## Who to Invite

The focus should be on bringing in new partners and more voices to the conversation and connecting with groups not normally represented at the library. In order to keep the audience size manageable, try to focus on a few groups for each dialogue. You can schedule more *Community Dialogues* in the future to gain additional insights.

Invitees could include stakeholders and individuals from groups such as:

- Education (e.g., universities, colleges, community colleges, local school districts, teachers, PTA/PTO, homeschool representatives, afterschool providers, etc.)

- Local government agencies and government labs

- The Chamber of Commerce and business organizations (e.g., tech companies, engineering firms, advertising agencies)

-  Representatives from traditionally underserved/underrepresented groups (e.g., tribal elders/leaders, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, immigration and naturalization services staff, cultural centers, refugee centers)

- Local chapters of professional STEM societies (e.g., AAAS, American Astronomical Society, Society of Women Engineers, American Indian Science and Engineering Society, National Society of Black Engineers, Society for Hispanic Professional Engineers, Society for Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science)

- STEM engagement groups (e.g., science museums, zoos, children's museums, NASA Solar System Ambassadors, Space Grant program, amateur astronomy clubs)

- Clubs, groups (e.g., Kiwanis Club, Scouts, 4-H) and places of worship

- Neighborhood associations, parenting groups

- Social service groups (e.g., YMCA, Rotary, literacy groups, local food pantry, homeless shelters)

- Local media (e.g., local newspaper, radio and TV)

- Friends of the library, members of the library board

**One pilot library held two dialogues on the same day with two different groups:**

*"It made sense to us to hold two Community Dialogues, one in the afternoon and one in the evening on the same day. The afternoon event was held for local educators, homeschool parents, 4H groups, etc. People working directly with the kids who would benefit from our efforts. The evening group was held for elected officials, members of local groups such as Optimists, PTO, school administrators, clergy, other area librarians, etc. People who are still connected with the community's needs, but do so on a more administrative level. Both dialogues featured good discussion and I think it was a good way to focus the conversation for each group."*

*– Kathy Condon-Boettcher, Director, Festus Public Library, Festus, MO*

## How to Invite

According to Libraries *Transforming Communities*, the ideal size for a *Community Dialogue* is 8-15 people to ensure that you gain enough input while allowing everyone's voice to be heard. You also want a variety of people in the room so that a varied and rich conversation can take place about STEM in your community. If your final number of attendees is more or less than this target, don't worry. You'll still get valuable infor-mation! The following tips can also help you reach your target number of participants.

A personalized approach will help increase your chances of recruiting par-ticipants. Try to personally invite people and utilize existing partners, library staff, and volunteers. Make sure to provide information about why you are having a dialogue and explain that it's not an information session, meeting, or focus group, but rather a chance for the community to come together and learn from one another. You can also have informal conversations with individuals to gauge interest and find out when they would be able to attend. Be sure to provide potential invitees with information about your library goals and the need for the *Community Dialogue* so they understand what they are being invited to. A sample *STAR Net* Program Summary is included in Appendix A, which you can modify to suit your specific needs.

Directed invitations can also help control numbers and ensure your group is not too large. If you are interested in reaching many stakeholder groups, you should also consider holding multiple dialogues to keep numbers manageable.

Follow-up any initial conversations with formal invitations at least four weeks before the dialogue and send a reminder a day or two before the event. A sample invitation can be found in Appendix B, which you can send along with the Program Summary in Appendix A.

## Suggested Timeline
**6 months before**

- Make a list of potential stakeholder groups that you want to engage

- Determine the best way to reach out to them. Do you have any staff, volunteers, or partners who can make an introduction?

- Make a plan for reaching out to these groups

- Book a venue (ideally your library, but consider a more neutral ground if there a reasons to do so such as logistics or you want to hold the meeting at a partner location)

**Popular Quote:**

*"A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people."*

*– Andrew Carnegie*

**3-4 months before**

- Start contacting potential invitees to gauge their interest and availability. Include the *STAR Net* summary in Appendix A along with your initial contact so that they understand the project and the need for a *Community Dialogue.*

- Begin brainstorming discussion questions.

- Identify your facilitator, note takers, and assistants. If possible, include them in conversations about discussion questions so they understand the goals of the dialogue.

**2-3 months before**

- Send out formal invitations and the project summary. If refreshments will be served (which is highly recommended!), be sure to include this in your invitation.

- Request potential discussion questions in the invitations (make sure you share with them your draft questions!)

**4-6 week before**

- Finalize discussion questions

**1 week before**

- Briefing session with facilitators, note takers, and assistants.

- Reminder invitations either via email or phone.

## Where to Hold the Dialogue

Your library can be a great place to hold a *Community Dialogue* event, but other venues should be considered as well, especially if your goal is to reach groups or individuals who do not normally frequent the library. *Libraries Transforming Communities* suggests looking for a venue that:

- People are familiar with and use frequently

- Is considered to be part of the community. Usually this excludes government or "official" places

- Is available in the evenings and/or on weekends

- Offers a comfortable environment

**Popular Quote:**

*"We are witnessing huge shifts in the public's expectations of public institutions like libraries and museums."*

*– John Falk*

- Is not too noisy or full of distractions

- Is easily accessible to all participants: plenty of parking (free is best!), centrally located, safe, near public transportation, accessible to those with disabilities

- Is affordable given project resources

**Some suggested venues (other than your library) include:**

- Community centers

- Community organizations (e.g., YMCA)

- Recreation centers

- Wherever your community already is! –Consider asking leaders of underserved or underrepresented communities where the Dialogue should be held before you even begin planning

## When and How Long
A typical dialogue will last 90 minutes to 2 hours, so you should consider the audience you wish to attract, the time of day, and when they may be available for this length of time. More people may be available during evening and weekends. Also check your community calendar for events that target the same audience as your dialogue and schedule it for a different time so that they don't conflict. You may also wish to hold a series of dialogues at different times to reach more stakeholders.

## What to Ask
In general, the discussion questions for *Community Dialogues* that are focused on increasing STEM programming and/or increasing service to underserved and underrepresented groups should address the following three themes. Sample questions related to each theme are provided for reference, but feel free to add or adapt questions for your specific audience or community.

**Connections to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)**

- In what ways are STEM fields relevant to our community?

- How would you describe our community's view of the importance of STEM?

- What extra-curricular options are provided to support STEM related skills? Is there interest in collaborative efforts?

**Popular Quote:**

*"Public libraries are poised to play a leading role in helping individuals and communities adapt to our fast changing world."*

*– Rising to the Challenge*

- What STEM organizations (with resources and connections) are already in our community? Are these organizations represented at our Dialogue? If not, ow do we engage them?

**Underserved and Underrepresented Groups**

- What populations from our community are not participating in library programs? What is the best way to invite them to a future dlalogue? (This question should be asked at all *Community Dialogues*)

- What's your perception about why these underserved audience(s) don't frequent the library as often (e.g., other activities/resources in the community meet their needs, difficulties getting to the library, aren't aware of library resources, don't feel welcomed, library rules unfamiliar, etc.)?

- Do you notice any difference in participation in library programming/activities between different groups of people? Are there certain events/programming that certain population segments avoid, or come to at higher numbers?

- What types of STEM-related activities/programs would be most welcoming to the groups who aren't currently attending programs at our library?

- How can STEM events like science/engineering festivals, or Family STEM Days help attract underserved audiences to our library?

**Community Needs around STEM**

- How can you and the community help our library build on its strengths and bring STEM learning to all audiences?

- How interested do you think various parts of our community would be in having activities and events at the library and in the community related to STEM?

- What gaps or challenges do you see children struggling with in STEM-related classes? How can the library help?

- Is there a better reframing of STEM that would attract diverse audiences? (e.g., Maker Spaces, Lego Club, family events, etc.)

- Who are the other leaders in the community who aren't with us today? How do we bring them into the conversation?

**Media Quote:**

*"On May 7, 2018 a group of educators, STEM professionals and community leaders gathered for a roundtable discussion at the Macron County Public Library in an effort to get a better picture of what MCPL's NASA program could bring to the county and what sorts of needs exist in STEM education here. One of the primary focuses of the discussion was improving access and engagement for STEM, by offering programs that are relevant to the people living in Western North Carolina."*

*– The Franklin Press*

# Hosting Your Community Dialogue

**Staffing**

To host your *Community Dialogue*, you'll need to recruit a facilitator, note-taker, and assistants. The roles of each are described below. You can look to library staff, volunteers, or other community members with an interest in the topic to fill these roles. When possible, you should include these individuals (especially facilitators and note-takers) in planning conversations so they understand the goals and bigger picture of the dialogue.

- **Facilitators** introduce and guide the *Community Dialogue*. Effective facilitators are good listeners who are curious about what people think and able to remain neutral about the topic being discussed. The facilitator does NOT need to be an expert on the issues being discussed. Ideally, the facilitator would be the library director or other library staff member in order to help bring forward the library as a go-to place for STEM learning in the community.

- **Note-takers** record important points discussed during the dialogue. Effective note-takers are observant and able to capture the essence of a conversation without inserting their own thoughts or ideas. They do NOT need to record every word that was said, but be able to identify important details and relate them to the larger goals. Some exact quotes are helpful, however, when analyzing what was discussed after the meeting.

- **Assistants**: to help with set-up, welcoming people, etc.

- **Translators**: someone who can provide translation services in various languages (e.g., Spanish) might be very useful and could be seen as culturally sensitive.

**Setting up the Venue**

A comfortable setting will go a long way in promoting good conversation!

- Ensure the space is well lit and free of distractions

- Set up a screen and projector for PowerPoint slides (recommended if they are visually appealing, e.g., not too many words)

- Set up chairs in a circle, or semi-circle if using a projector

*From Libraries Transforming Communities: A Step-by-step Guide for "Turning Outward" to your Community*

**Ground Rules:**

1. **Have a "kitchen table" conversation.** Everyone participates; no one dominates.

2. **There are no "right answers."** Draw on your own experiences, views and beliefs. You do not need to be an expert.

3. **Keep an open mind.** Listen carefully and try hard to understand the views of those who disagree with you.

4. **Help keep the discussion on track.** Stick to the questions; try not to ramble.

5. **It is okay to disagree, but don't be disagreeable.** Respond to others how you want to be responded to.

6. **Have fun!**

- Provide printouts of the discussion questions and ground rules for attendees (see Page 2 for an example of ground rules)

- Set up a laptop with a copy of the discussion questions for the note taker to use

- Provide refreshments

- Provide nametags for staff and participants

- Have a sign-in sheet to gather names, place of business/affiliation, mailing addresses, and email addresses in order to be able to contact people after the event

**Outline of the Event**

The following information, adapted from *Libraries Transforming Communities*, provides an outline of the *Community Dialogue* and sample script for you to adapt for your individual needs.

1. **Facilitator introduces themselves, thanks any organizations or individuals involved in organizing the dialogue, and thanks participants for attending.**

   *"Hi everyone, my name is <name> and I am <role> at <organization>. I want to thank <other individuals> for helping us organize this dialogue. I also want to thank all of you for taking the time to join us today."*

2. **Describe what a Community Dialogue is, its purpose, and your goals for this dialogue. Provide definitions for any terms that may need clarification. You may need to define the terms STEM and underserved audiences.**

   *"A Community Dialogue is a chance for us to come together and discuss issues affecting our community. <Name of library> is interested in offering more STEM programming, that is, programming about science, technology, engineering, and math. We are also interested in exploring ways to reach underserved audiences, specifically, rural and geographically isolated areas as well as individuals underrepresented in STEM fields. This would include Hispanics and Latinos, African Americans, American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, the economically disadvantaged, people with disabilities, women and girls. Our goals for this dialogue are to learn more from you about our community's thoughts and needs around STEM and reaching underserved audiences."*

**Library Quote:**

*"Participants took off running-I was barely able to get questions in, but it was all good because by themselves they covered most of the questions"*

*– Charles Diede, Fontana Library*

3. **Review the ground rules and confirm that everyone is ok with them (see Page 2 for examples of ground rules)**

   *"Before we begin, we have provided you with some ground rules for this dialogue. Please take a few moments to read through them. (Pause.) Do these rules work for everyone?"*

4. **Explain your role as a facilitator.**

   *"My role is to ask questions to help us have a good conversation. Since we want to learn your thoughts, I won't be offering my views although I may ask some follow-up questions to make sure I understand what you meant or to keep the conversation going. To make sure we hear from everyone, I may also ask you to hold off on comments at times."*

5. **Introduce the note-taker**

   *"<Name of note taker> (point to note taker) will be taking notes to night to help us follow-up on what we discuss. The notes won't include anyone's name or be made public; we just want to make sure we catch what you're saying."*

6. **Have participants introduce themselves**

   *"Before we begin, I'd like to have everyone share their name, organization, and reason for attending."*

7. **Go through the Discussion Questions (see next section for tips)**

8. **Wrap up: Thanks everyone for attending. State some of the take-away messages that you heard during the meeting. Don't provide any solutions at this time, but ensure that you will be following-up on what was discussed.**

   *"Thanks so much for attending and sharing your thoughts with us. It seems like people are interested in finding out ways to connect economically disadvantaged youth who live outside of the city to more STEM opportunities. Over the next few months we'll be working to follow-up up on this and other points that were discussed."*

**Library Quote:**

*"Community Dialogue attendees have shown strong support for library STEM programs and would like to meet again. We have plans to meet again next year, which allows for enough time to implement new strategies and reflect upon impacts."*

*– Dianna Leighton, Fort Fairfield Public Library*
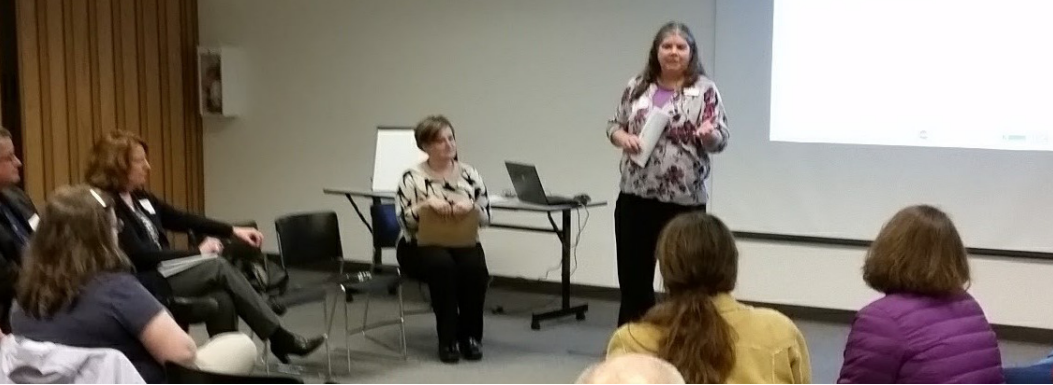
## Tips for Facilitators

If you've never facilitated a discussion before, never fear! Here are some tips for addressing potential challenges you might face. You can find additional tips for facilitating dialogues in the resources listed at the end of this guide.

**To get maximum participation and avoid a few voices dominating the conversation**
- Make sure everyone has a chance to say something early on

- Ask: "Does anyone else have something to add?

- Say: "We seem to be hearing from the same people. Let's give others a chance to talk."

- Call on people by name (make sure they have nametags!) if it looks like they're trying to jump in ("Susan, did you have something you wanted to say?")

- Remember: the conversation should be between the attendees, not an attendee and the facilitator. Speak only if needed to clarify something or keep the conversation moving forward.

**If the conversation goes off topic for too long**
- Relate it back to the main question ("We started off by asking (question). How does what you're talking about relate to this question?")

- If they continue to go off-topic say, "I hear what you are saying, but we need to focus on this question now."

- Set the idea aside in a "parking lot" for future consideration

**If people are reluctant to talk**
- Remind them that there are no right or wrong answers.

- Pause. It may feel uncomfortable, but people need time to gather their thoughts
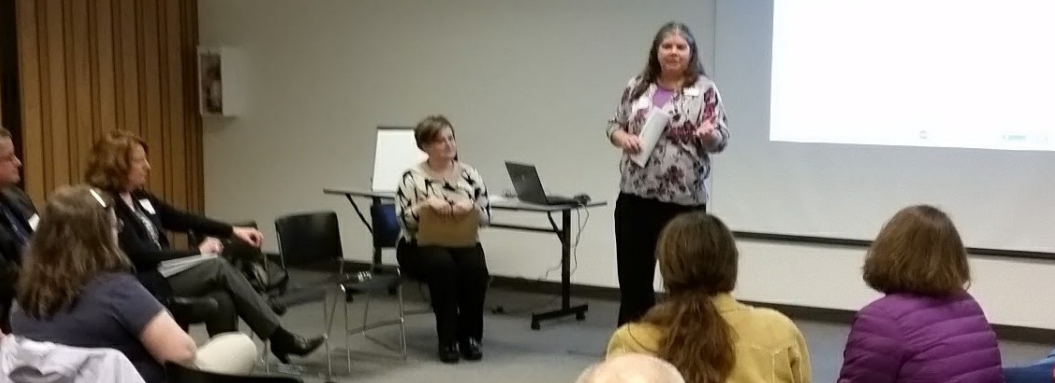
- Reword the question

**If people argue or the conversation gets heated**
- As long as it's not mean-spirited, know that this is normal. This is an indication that the topic is interesting to attendees and that they are engaged (even though they may not agree on solutions, for example)

- Say, "There seem to be different views about this. Why do you think that is?"

- Set ground rules in advance and refer back to them.

- Take a break ("Let's take a 5 minute break and then revisit this")

Also, keep in mind that these dialogues are meant to be an informal way for people to get to know and learn from one another; not a formal presentation. Give it a shot! The more sessions you run the more comfortable you'll become. Visit the *STAR Net* Resources Section for additional resources for facilitating *Community Dialogues*.

## After the Community Dialogue

The work doesn't end with the *Community Dialogue*. In fact, this is just the beginning. Be sure to send out a thank you note to all participants and ensure them that you will be following-up on what was discussed. If you collected participants' email addresses, you can set up a mailing list for quick communication and to contact them about relevant events and programming.

You can also consider planning a STEM-related activity shortly after your *Community Dialogue* as a way to immediately engage your audience as one *STAR Net* pilot library did:

*"We timed the Community Dialogue with a STEAM event the following Saturday. We had several different stations with learning tools and activities. The turnout was tremendous and it illustrated just how excited the community is about this kind of programming."*
*– Kathy Condon-Boettcher, Director, Festus Public Library, Festus, MO*

As a library, you will also want to schedule time to:

- **Reflect:** Who should have been there that wasn't? Are there any topics that arose that you need more information about? Who can you talk to about this? Try to address any gaps at future *Community Dialogues*.

- **Summarize and Plan:** Go through your notes as a team. What were the big take-aways and action items? Determine who will be involved in putting a plan in place to follow-up on action items, and schedule future meetings to check the progress of this plan.

**Library Quote:**

*"This dialogue was very useful in setting up collaborations. The attendees weren't as keen on discussing issues as they were on talking and working together!"*

*– Mary Jenkins, Clarksdale Carnegie Public Library*

## Resources

1. American Assembly, Columbia University. (2002) Conducting Your Community Dialogue from Columbia University. Retrieved from:

http://ncdd.org/rc/wp-content/uploads/ConductingYourCommunityDialogue.pdf

2. American Library Association. (2018). Libraries Transforming Communities: Models for Change. Retrieved from:

http://www.ala.org/tools/librariestransform/libraries-transforming-communities/ltc-models-for-change

3. Communities for Public Health. Facilitation Tip Sheet. Retrieved from:

https://www.cdc.gov/phcommunities/docs/plan_facilitation_tip_sheet.doc

4. Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. (2017). Approach. Retrieved from:

https://theharwoodinstitute.org/approach/

5. Holland, A. (2015) Discover Health/Descubre la Salud Community Dialogues Report. Boulder, CO. Retrieved from:

http://www.nc4il.org/papers.html

**Popular Quote:**

*"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."*

*– William Butler Yeats*

# Appendix A: *STAR Net* Summary

The STAR Library Network (*STAR Net*) is a hands-on learning network for libraries and their communities across the country. *STAR Net* focuses on helping library professionals build their STEM skills by providing "science-technology activities and resources" (STAR) and training to use those resources. Over 8,000 library and STEM professionals have joined *STAR Net* to access webinar trainings, monthly newsletters, professional blogs, partnership opportunities, facilitation guides, book recommendations, and much more, including *STAR Net*'s STEM Activity Clearinghouse.

*STAR Net* is built upon a strong network of collaborators and partners, led by the Space Science Institute's (SSI) National Center for Interactive Learning (NCIL). Partners include the Afterschool Alliance, American Library Association's Public Programs Office, American Society of Civil Engineers, Chief Officers of State Library Agencies, Cornerstones of Science, Datum Advisors, Education Development Center, Lunar and Planetary Institute, Pacific Science Center, and University of Virginia. Major funding is provided by the National Science Foundation, NASA Science Mission Directorate, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Download a one-page flyer of the *STAR Net* Summary at:
www.starnetlibraries.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/starnet-summary.pdf

## STAR★net

### Science-Technology Activities & Resources For Libraries

## www.starnetlibraries.org

## Library Quote:

*"Public libraries are a pillar of education for all. We have an opportunity and a responsibility to offer educational experiences for our communities. STEM learning is part of this and highly important for the continued development and health of our society, both intellectually and economically."*

*– Discover NASA Host Library Staff Member*

## Appendix B: Sample Invitation

[Library letterhead]

Dear <Invitee>,

<Library Name> has the honor of being selected as one of 75 libraries in our country to participate in a new program called the *NASA@ My Library* project. The attached *NASA@ My Library* Project Summary explains more about the project and its partners.

You are invited to join library staff and others from our community to participate in a *Community Dialogue* at <Library Name>. The goals of the *Community Dialogue* are to:

1. Understand the needs of the community (i.e. workforce, education, economic, etc.) and identify ways the library can help provide ongoing access to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) experiences, resources and connections to experts to help with these needs;

2. Identify those groups within the community that are considered underrepresented/underserved in STEM, and find ways the library, in partnership with community organizations, can reach them;

3. Identify possible collaborations and partnerships within the community, including NASA subject matter experts, that will benefit the library in the long term;

The *Community Dialogue* will be held at <Library Name> on <Date> from <start time> – <end time> and light refreshments will be served. Your voice is an essential part of this dialogue. This is an opportunity for you to support the NASA efforts in <Library Name>, which will ultimately advise libraries across the country.

Be a part of this community conversation as you collaborate with your peers from our community to ask and answer questions and make new partnerships!

Please let me know if you can participate. Thank you!