

Libraries' Data Tells The Real Story

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- MICHAEL GANNON, COO, SUPPORT SERVICES



With 19 locations, more than 500,000 card holders and at least 1.2 million titles in circulation, the Prince George's County Memorial Library System (PGCMLS) is deeply ingrained in the community it serves. PGCMLS sees itself as a technology connector, a hub of early literacy and a center for skills development.

Running the system efficiently is crucial to its long-term success. That means maintaining appropriate staffing, ensuring visitors have the services and resources they want and need, and overseeing the proper distribution of the collection. But it's not so easy to do when your data is buried in Excel spreadsheets and Google documents!

In January 2020, Icimo Analytics was acquired by Cherry Bekaert.

Drowning in Data

Michael Gannon, Chief Operating Officer of Support Services, knew the information he needed was there, but it was nearly impossible for his team to quickly and accurately interpret it to benefit PGCMLS in these areas:

- ▶ **Mandatory reporting:** As a taxpayer-funded organization, PGCMLS is required to provide regular in-depth reporting to county, state and federal governments.
- ▶ **Floating collection:** Any title can be requested by a library member at any location at any time. Understanding how the titles move between branches is key to meeting the needs of each branch — and its cardholders.
- ▶ **Evaluating "anecdotal" data:** Michael often heard anecdotes related to key indicators: most popular titles, busiest days of the week and most attended events. Michael wanted a way to systematically evaluate these indicators in real time.

Measurable Impact

PGCMLS engaged Icimo Analytics by Cherry Bekaert to build out Tableau dashboards to harness data in a more powerful way. From very early on, Michael was impressed. "It was clear from the beginning that the team was not simply out to implement a solution for us and move on," he said. "They very quickly learned the library business and developed an understanding of the issues most important to our success."

For example, Michael points to the following:

- ▶ **Reporting efficiency:** It now takes 60 percent less time to generate the mandatory reports for county, state and federal governments, freeing up staff to focus on other key activities.
- ▶ **Future upside:** Data showed that PGCMLS per capita expenditures are among the lowest five of the 24 library systems in Maryland, even when compared with counties that generate a tenth of its revenue. This could have a positive impact on funding in the future.
- ▶ **Higher circulation:** The impact on the proficiency of the floating collection has been dramatic. “We can now anticipate which type of titles will be in demand at specific branches, so we are able to provide the titles that the public wants not the ones we simply think they want,” Michael said. “This has led to an increase in system-wide circulation.”
- ▶ **Community outreach:** Michael and his team now have access to precise data points related to daily door counts, total checkouts and program attendance — all on a branch-by-branch level. For example, they learned only five percent of one elementary school’s students were visiting the library, so PGCMLS conducted outreach to that school. Just a few months later, nearly 60 percent of the students had visited.

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An Understanding of Anecdotal Data

The availability of visualized and accurate data has allowed Michael to more easily evaluate the anecdotes he would hear at the branch-by-branch level. Certainly, Michael depends on the talented, highly experienced professionals who work in each of the branches. However, he was now able to dismiss some assumptions that even he subscribed to:

- ▶ **Busiest times:** Previously, weekends were thought to be the busiest times for library traffic and branches were staffed accordingly. It turns out that system-wide, Tuesday evening tends to be the busiest time. This is just one of many data points that has led to the more efficient scheduling of staff.
- ▶ **Children’s genres:** Children’s books are among the most desired parts of the PGCMLS collection. A closer look at the data revealed that 25 percent of the system’s total checkouts are not just children’s books, but children’s picture books. “It is the ability to drill down deeply into each category that has impacted our ability to truly understand what our cardholders want and increase our total circulation.”

Better, Quicker Decisions

“More than anything else, the implementation of Tableau and the insight from the Icimo Analytics by Cherry Bekaert team has undoubtedly allowed us to make better decisions — and ake them quicker — on operational issues that directly affect our users,” said Michael. “They have become an integral part of our team.”

Cherry Bekaert believes you should be enlightened by your data - not limited by it. We can help you uncover the hidden story in your data so you can make critical business decisions based on knowledge, not anecdotes or assumptions. Let us show you how.



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Your Guide Forward