

# The Power of Learning

An Interview with Anthony W. Marx, President and Chief Executive Officer, The New York Public Library

**EDITORS' NOTE** Anthony Marx is President of The New York Public Library, the nation's largest library system, with 88 neighborhood libraries and four scholarly research centers. Before joining the Library, Marx served as president of Amherst College from 2003 to 2011, during which time he tripled enrollment for low-income students. Earlier in his career, Marx was a political science professor and director of undergraduate studies at Columbia University. Marx has a BA from Yale, an MPA from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University, and a PhD, also from Princeton.



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**INSTITUTION BRIEF** The New York Public Library's ([nypl.org](http://nypl.org)) 92 locations include four research centers focusing on the humanities and social sciences, the performing arts, black history and culture, and business and industry, and a network of neighborhood libraries throughout the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island. Throughout the system, the Library provides free and open access to its physical and electronic collections and information, as well as to its services for people of all ages, from toddlers to teens and adults. Research and circulating collections combined total more than 51 million items, among them materials for the visually impaired. In addition, each year the Library presents thousands of exhibitions and public programs, including classes in technology, literacy, researching, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The Library serves some 18 million patrons who come through its doors annually. In addition, the Library's website receives 32 million visits annually from more than 200 countries.

## Will you discuss the history of The New York Public Library and how The New York Public Library has evolved?

The Library was founded as a research collection in 1895 by three New Yorkers, the city's richest man, greatest collector, and leading politician, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden respectively, whose combined Trust still "runs" the library. In 1901 the then richest man in the world, Andrew Carnegie, gave one of the largest gifts in the history of philanthropy to create the city's branch libraries in every neighborhood, with the city

committing to pay for the operations. Today there are 215 public libraries in New York City, and before the pandemic, in total we saw just under 40 million physical visits per year, making libraries the most used civic spaces by far. As the nation's largest public library system and the world's most used library, our \$350 million annual operating budget is supported 60 percent by the city, which now faces huge cuts, and by an endowment and essential private support.

## How has The New York Public Library adapted the way it works based on new technology and digital advances?

With no way of being able to foresee the current crisis, we have significantly invested for a decade in our digital offerings and could shift seamlessly to all online, thanks to our first-ever Chief Digital Officer and his 50-person team. That may be more than all digital staff at all other libraries combined. Virtual applications for library cards soared when we closed branches in March, as patrons checked out hundreds of thousands of circulating library books available on SimplyE, our app designed to meet patrons' needs consistent with privacy against public or for-profit surveillance. Publishers, authors' organizations, and vendors have cooperated in the formation of the largest publicly available e-book research library anywhere. With Google having now agreed for the first time to share their scans of millions of books, we can now offer those to anyone in the world. Our unique special collections are also available online, with additional documents to be provided on request.

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We have also had to shift our education programs, which had almost two million annual visits, to online. That includes pre-K literacy, homework help, and after-school, the City's largest free computer skills and English language programs. As we look at continued remote learning for students home from school, we know there will be many opportunities for us to support students, teachers, and parents. Just one other example: about two million New Yorkers cannot afford broadband at home, which means now they cannot attend school, do homework, or their jobs. Before the pandemic we were lending thousands of free WiFi hotspots. Now we know we need a much bigger solution.

## How do you describe your leadership style and what do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

Leadership means being able to foresee the future as best as possible, which is clearly so much more difficult in our current uncertainty, and to shift efforts toward that future. Just presiding won't do. I embrace that challenge and have been fortunate to find myself first at the helm of a college and now at a library ready to rethink. The key to that process is the team we have gathered, every one of which is absolutely best in class. To benefit from their wisdom, I try to listen and encourage debate about the big issues and leave them be on everything else. I do not always live up to that ideal, but I know I can and do fully rely on my senior colleagues. That trust is based not only on their effectiveness, but also on our shared values and commitment to public learning and opportunity, which must remain the key guide, especially in turbulent times. It helps that we can raise significant private support to fund innovations.

## How do you define resilience and how is resilience ingrained in the culture of The New York Public Library?

As my friend Adrienne Arsht reminds us, resilience is everything, the gumption to not just survive, but to learn and improve ourselves and our communities. That is what the library has always been in business to do. We have always been the first port of call for waves of struggling immigrants who have given this city its greatest strength, our diversity. Carnegie knew we were the essential step ladder for success, as libraries had been for him even before he came to America. The library has remained foundational to this go-getter city, a place defined by its resilience and the resilience of our people now tested anew.

### **How has your personal resilience helped to drive your work?**

For me, resilience is based on your personal commitment to what you are doing. I am fortunate to have an incredibly interesting and challenging job where we can really serve the public, at scale, and across all the economic, racial, and cultural divides. I find that so energizing, even more now. The fit for me is perfect, since I am a fanatic about the power of learning, and have been since early days helping to set up a college in the midst of a near civil war in South Africa. When I might waiver, I am always reminded of the true resilience of that country in its fight against apartheid. When Amherst lost a third of its endowment in 2008-2009, or when the library was hit by the pandemic, protests and budget cuts this year, thinking back to those who have faced down harder struggles kept us going. In neither did we lay off our valued colleagues, the college maintained our record-breaking financial aid and the Library has invested even more in digital and educational programs.

### **Has your work changed as a result of COVID-19 and the anti-racist movement across the U.S. and the world?**

Day to day has changed completely, of course, with non-stop zooming from home and in the last months distanced visits to our operations as they begin to reopen, carefully. Everyone is scared and angry and that means we need to communicate more, especially when we cannot reach out to support everyone in person. We are prioritizing health in a way we never have before, even as we continue to learn how to ensure safety. While before we were running both an analog and digital library with a budget designed for just the former, now we have to reopen physically while massively expanding digitally in uncharted waters. All that said, the basic mission of spreading learning and ideas for free to everyone has only gained in import. That has not changed.

The pandemic has made more visible our racism and deepened the racial divide of this country and around the world, even as it has inspired so many to rethink and get engaged. These are not new issues for us, for they are etched into the founding of the country and all our institutions, and we all have to do so much better at thinking what inclusion and respect really mean and making those real. The Library has always undergirded such efforts by collecting and sharing the historical and cultural record

upon which we build, and now we do that fully online, adding to our offerings, for instance from the Schomburg Center in Harlem, the world's foremost repository of African American and diaspora culture. We need to find other ways to engage the citizenry in this and other pressing issues and, if we can, also bring together those of differing views to reopen conversations that have retreated into echo chambers.

### **Who are some of the resilient leaders you see today?**

I confess that we seem to see more resilience locally and in our communities, and everywhere that people are coming together to learn the lessons of this last year and rethink how we can more equitably ensure housing, food, and education, how we can restore the reality and faith in the American dream, and how we get past our divisiveness and political dysfunction. I hope we will see more of that on the national and global level. Meanwhile, I remain so inspired by our front line staff who have and continue to face a pandemic and come into work to serve the public, even after they suffered tragedy in this pandemic. That is real resilience, and reminds us why all the folks we “lead” are truly essential to what we all need to achieve together. ●



*The New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan*