LSA AND THE FUTURE

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To attempt some guess as to the future—whatever the context—requires that one pay some service to the past. The strength of the position which the public library occupies today and upon which its future will be based is a tribute to past generations. We inherit a high moral position which has made it possible for high-minded people to join with us in the drive to bring library services to all parts of our states and to improve those which already exist. Whatever paths we take must preserve this position so that our successors may have that same advantage.

As to the ideas which will be mentioned in this talk, none is either new or my own in any real sense. I shall try only to bring together thoughts which are drawn from reading and experience. Perhaps this group may develop some truly new plans, though we have far to go if we only follow the directions which Joeckel, Martin, Leigh, Eastlick, and others have pointed out.

Librarians face a period of exceptionally hard work and of adjustment to the notion that libraries are a popular topic with the public generally and with legislators—at least in some places. This popularity seems to be filtering down from the top. That downward movement from the Congress to state legislatures to local governments is at odds with all we preach about the public library as a phenomenon of a democratic culture, a responsibility first of town and county.

Perhaps this interest from the top is merely a result of an increasing tendency to generate governmental programs at a federal or state level. It may be—and I prefer this explanation—that the professional librarians have merely been more successful in describing their vision of library service

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in an atmosphere where professionalization is becoming the norm rather than the exception.

The professional view of the public library is strongly colored by the relative handful of outstanding libraries. The public view of the public library is commonly quite different. It is strongly colored by the many miserably inadequate libraries which are the average state library's everyday business. The public, furthermore, is concerned almost solely with services; the librarian must also be concerned with structure. I do not suggest that you do not know this nor that the professional view should be changed. I do suggest that this divergence has perhaps kept the profession at large from making meaningful contact with the public at large.

Despite the unfortunate public image—or, perhaps, because of it—the public wishes for more and better libraries. Unfocused, sporadic, and ill-defined, this wish is strong and growing stronger. Our future (the future of library services) depends to a great extent upon focusing the public's interest, helping to even out its cycles, and defining for it the programs of tomorrow. We have barely begun to realize the public support which we may now gain.

Perhaps, then, the most important job ahead for the state library agency is to lay such plans as will bring together all of the people and groups who are interested in books, reading, and the growth of educational opportunity. As Joeckel put the matter:

In their efforts to serve the people of America, the library forces, to use a military analogy, are fighting a disjointed battle on a whole series of disconnected fronts. In some manner these isolated detachments must be consolidated, united, and strengthened and made to advance on a broad front to common, well-defined objectives. 1 The chief administrator of the state agency must be willing to look into the future and must have the courage and energy to work toward what he sees, in concert with those parts of the public he can identify as friendly forces.

Now, to try to be more specific. One trend which seems clear is that state library agencies are beginning to move from a position of leadership by indirection to one of leadership by direct action. This move has taken various forms, and I can bear witness that this shift in position is a difficult process. It will be realized only where genuine agreement can be achieved among professional and civic groups as to what authority is to be vested in the state and what is to be reserved to other units of government. This agreement must be based upon
tangible programs in the general public interest, not on good intentions or some vague good or administrative tidiness.

State libraries have traditionally been advisors and have worked more with small libraries than with large libraries. We must now change this approach: the cities are losing population—at least in the East—and are also losing their traditional tax base to a degree, at least. They must be brought to realize that the day is coming rapidly when they will need the suburbs and rural areas as now the rural areas need them. Thus, the state librarian must work in the future with the cities. For this, and other reasons, I believe that the task of recruiting state library staff will grow more and more critical.

If this restatement of the position of the state library agency is, indeed, desirable, then overall review of the legal structure within the state for the establishment, operation, and financing of public and state libraries is necessary. Some review of library law should, of course, be underway at all times. However, comprehensive review at intervals of perhaps ten years seems desirable. It is painfully time-consuming, this review, but it will offer opportunities to eliminate contradictions, to introduce new ideas, and to keep the law alive. The realization of our ideas as to changes in the unit of service, financing, and other vital matters will often depend upon whether or not the law permits change. If Pennsylvania's experience is a true guide, review of the law should start with the active support of the Attorney General. Involvement of a good law school will also be wise.

A change in state law can sometimes attract the attention of groups who cannot make rapid progress locally. Here, public interest can crystallize perhaps more readily than in the town or county.

If the state library is to lead by direct action, it will become more or less directly involved in local library programs. This is a very sensitive area, as I need not say to you. The nature and extent of involvement will vary, but the Library Services Act provides one approach to this matter which has been quite successful. The submission of a plan for the use of LSA funds places the responsibility for best use of the money in the hands of each state. We believe in Pennsylvania that this general method is a good one to apply at the state-local level, and it has been incorporated into our new Library Code. Each local library wishing to receive state funds will submit a plan, and disbursement of money will follow approval of the plan. Other methods may be developed in other states. But placing responsibility for planning in local hands should stimulate badly
needed advance planning and remove the stigma of state control. At the same time, authority to approve plans should enable the state agency to exercise general direction of statewide development programs.

Some developments of the past few years indicate clearly that we must continue to pay attention to the organization and financing of libraries. The support accorded to major state-aid programs in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania obviously points toward the encouragement of regionalization of library services through enlarged financial incentives by the state on a continuing basis. This will come as news to no one here, but the exploration and development of these ideas remain to be carried forward. Fullest possible use of all available resources will be wise. The potential use, for example, of public and private college libraries in the Pennsylvania plan is a most interesting prospect. In this respect, I should like to express my belief that federal funds in the future should be granted so as to make possible even more experimentation than has been carried on so far. The Library Services Act has made us focus on the weakest point of public library service. Experimentation at the strong points might, in the long run, be more rewarding.

As we experiment, we must keep our eyes open to developments in other governmental areas. When multistate planning achieves some success, for example, we should be prepared at least to examine it to see whether or not there are some implications for library organization. Wherever the channel ice is broken by someone else, we should follow at least far enough to see where the channel leads. Similarly, we should observe the failures of others. School districts have, at least in Pennsylvania, gone through some very uncomfortable periods; perhaps we can avoid similar periods.

This line of thought suggests to me that experimental funds might be used for limited objectives, perhaps radical in nature and not necessarily with the thought that they will result in continuing organizations. In Pennsylvania, we are experimenting with educational programs varying from unstructured discussion groups to short but formalized courses in reference work. We have also experimented briefly with the types of non-fiction materials which adults in rural areas will use. In both cases, we have gained useful information which has in one way or another affected our approaches to rural librarians and boards of trustees.

John Eastlick has said that we talk about larger units of service but librarians seem not really to want them to come
into being. Of course, this problem is to some extent one of education. Perhaps, too, it is a prod to us to experiment in the methods of achieving the larger unit. Ways must be found to give the librarian and the board of trustees of the small library a feeling of contributing to the total resources of the area or state while retaining the dignity which local responsibility implies. If this can be done, then perhaps the library user may benefit immediately while the organizational process goes on.

Perhaps we are too concerned with structure, and thus do not see the ways in which standards may be met by developing new channels of access to existing collections. Librarians and boards of trustees may not shudder so over the national standards if shown avenues for reaching them other than administrative subordination or grossly increased local budgets. The concept of graded levels of service plus development of rapid communication within a state system should be explored.

There are many particulars which might be suggested as promising for the future. The development of service centers not only to handle the purchase and preparation of materials but also to care perhaps for other routines such as circulation control is one. Another is the potential development of electronic information centers, through the pooled efforts of perhaps an entire state or of several states. Supplying some uniform standard of basic reference tools, development of library districts or "authorities" as a form of governmental unit which can cross municipal or state lines, certification of librarians as well as librarians, and recruitment and educational programs on a scale far beyond the present are only a few of the many other possibilities.

However, attempting to speak in broad terms, I believe that technical advance will best follow—not precede—a full recognition of the place of libraries as book and information centers in a society which has apparently decided to place greater emphasis on education.

The standard problems brought to us, for example, by student use of public libraries must be solved, while, at the same time, we must see ourselves as aiding in the solution of newer problems such as the drive to retrain workers unemployed through technological change. Libraries are in the mainstream of education—and are generally unequipped for the job. I often have the feeling that the professional educators at all levels are being swept along, too, and have only the advantage that their part in what society wishes is slightly better defined than ours. Should we, in some degree at least, run with that tide? We all know the risks, yet how can a high school or col-
lege be accredited today unless public libraries are available to its students? State-level coordination of schools and libraries might yield some solutions to these difficult problems.

There are times when I wonder if the public library will survive, much less flourish. These moments pass, of course, and are usually the result of some especially rasping experience. However, it is well to point out that many public libraries could disappear tomorrow without a ripple. Their effect has been so slight that it has not been measurable in the communities they profess to serve.

The program of tomorrow is a fascinating topic for speculation, but a clear-eyed critical view of today is our first requirement. In many places and in many respects, we have only one foot in the twentieth century—and we seem at times to have got that far only by accident. Programs of review or evaluation and research should become more common. As one who has reviewed sizable portions of library literature, I can attest to its weaknesses. It is repetitive and self-congratulatory to an appalling extent. Escape from this self-justification in which we all indulge is absolutely essential before real progress can be made. Alliance between state libraries and library schools should increase; we should see the creation of research positions on state library staffs and an increase in contracted research.

There is great promise in the future. We have tradition and present opinion moving the right way. If we can maintain a sense of urgency and if we can pursue big plans, we shall see remarkable progress in the sixties.

References
