



Executive-Board Relations in Public Libraries

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE is to determine what trends are observable in the relations of library executives to governing authorities in public libraries. Whenever the term "governing body" or "governing authority" has been used in library literature, the assumption has almost always been that the reference is to the board of trustees, except in the very few manager-type cities and counties. Whether this definition is still adequate is open to considerable question in the light of recent developments.

The merits of board control as against direct control by a manager or other single executive need hardly be a part of this discussion, since these arguments have been aired thoroughly by librarians and political scientists for the past half-century. The consensus is always that, despite logical arguments made against it by some public administration experts, the library board is probably here to stay. Board government is almost unanimously defended by the librarians who work under it, even though some express disenchantment with boards in practice and enumerate the difficulties encountered in dealing with them.¹

In libraries governed by boards, that is administrative boards as distinguished from advisory boards, there has been general agreement among librarians and library writers that the board's role is policy-making and that it is the librarian's responsibility to suggest a program to the board, and to administer it, once adopted. No official or acknowledged change in this basic relationship can be discerned, except as some authors have assumed or even pointed out that there are differences between the boards of large libraries and the boards of small libraries in the degree to which they may enter into the actual administration of the libraries.

While this clear distinction between the policy-making function of the board and the administrative function of the librarian is seldom really

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Executive-Board Relations in Public Libraries

challenged in theory, there are numerous indications that in actual practice the picture may be somewhat clouded. As Oliver Garceau points out, "[This formula] betokens . . . the state of mind of librarians who have been struggling to establish themselves as responsible executive officers in their own shops. . . . But . . . in practice librarians are inclined to load the board with detail and carry on policy pretty much by themselves, leading the board from step to step."²

One point where practice greatly varies is the degree to which respective powers and responsibilities are formally defined in writing. As Marian G. Gallagher³ has said, although the division of administrative and policy-making duties by the librarian and board has universal acceptance, the question of its legality seldom arises—and it is certainly fortunate that it does not. For, as against the board, whose powers are clearly set forth in statute or charter, the librarian seldom has legally defined powers or legally defined duties, except in cases where civil service regulations may specify them. Such powers as he exercises are usually not by statute but by delegation, often unwritten, from the board, and his role in the library's management is based on sufferance. A good example of a clear delineation of the respective functions of board and librarian is provided in the 1957 *Annual Report* of the Board of Trustees of the Newark Public Library.⁴ In that library the Board's By-Laws set forth the librarian's responsibilities in explicit terms.

A frequently encountered indication of improper division of powers, in spite of lip service given to the board's traditional policy-making function, is the prevalence of standing board committees devoted to such clearly administrative activities as buildings, supplies and finance, personnel, books and magazines, and others. As excellent and recent a manual as Marian M. Winser's *A Handbook for Library Trustees*⁵ suggested such standing committees, although C. B. Joeckel⁶ in 1935 and Anna G. Hall⁷ in 1937 agreed in seriously questioning their value, and in 1943, E. W. and John McDiarmid were citing committees as a device "to enable the board to do more efficiently things it should not do."⁸ Garceau in 1949 reiterated the arguments against committee organization of boards, characterizing most committees as "largely perfunctory, if not wholly defunct."⁹

Various devices can be employed to good purpose in routinizing librarian and board relations to save time and to prevent friction. Most of these are discussed both by Miss Hall¹⁰ and by Mrs. Winser.¹¹ They include agenda written up and mailed in advance, or at least

presented at the beginning of a meeting; mailed minutes; and a reasonably fixed order of procedure. It is obvious from perusal of recent surveys which detail confused or unhappy board-librarian relations that the excellent advice available is not always followed.

In spite of the virtues of law and order, from this writer's experience and from discussion with other operating librarians the conclusion seems inescapable that the actual working relationships between librarian and board often depend more on local conditions and personalities, than on either law or machinery. The new American Library Association standards, *Public Library Service*, stress that policy establishment is the joint responsibility of the chief librarian, his staff, and the library board.¹² In the ideal situation the librarian studies and develops policy with the aid of his staff, recommends it to and tests it on his board; the board adopts or modifies his recommendations in the light of its lay approach, and the librarian carries them out. The librarian who so contributes to his board's understanding that policy determination becomes a truly shared function is most likely to find himself with a board that is neither tyrant, rubber stamp, nor seesaw.

It has appeared that there is little in library literature to challenge the traditional division of powers and responsibilities between librarian and board. In the face of this unanimity, it may be somewhat daring to suggest that no student of library government has yet tackled the most important current factor affecting board-librarian relationships. This element is in fact so basic that it may require a complete redefinition of the term "governing authority," which once clearly meant the library board.

Actually, "governing authority" today has a much broader meaning. Prominently figuring in the real government of a library, in addition to the board and the elected policy-making officials, may be a city or county administrative officer and a complex of city hall and county staff agencies and controls, mainly legal and fiscal. As a result, subtle but drastic changes in the relationship of the library executive to his board have taken place, and many new connections have arisen with authorities whose significance is little acknowledged in library literature. The movement is toward multiplication of these new relationships and intensification of their importance.

The McDiarmids took note of four major trends in public administration which seemed destined to play a significant role in determining library-governmental relations of the future: (1) concentration of authority and responsibility for city administration in a single execu-

Executive-Board Relations in Public Libraries

tive; (2) installation of modern budget and finance procedures; (3) growth of civil service and progressive personnel practices; (4) growth of centralized purchasing.¹³ They then ask a serious question: "Can the library continue to enjoy the large measure of freedom from central administrative control it has had in the past?"¹⁴ The answer to that question has proved to be a definite negative, not so much because of the actual increase of single-executive cities and counties, as because of the installation of city- or county-wide budget procedures and uniform personnel practices.

The library climate which has fostered this trend requires description. First of all, the professionalization of library administration, most strongly evidenced, of course, in the larger libraries but filtering down through the years into smaller and smaller systems, has tended to hasten the withdrawal of library boards from their inclination actually to administer libraries. Professionalization of librarians has paralleled a similar process in other fields of public administration, and most significantly in personnel and fiscal administration. The professionals within these fields have come to expect the librarian to be well grounded in the principles and practices of public administration and to speak a common language, with which the library board is often not conversant. Withdrawal of boards from the library's special domain of book selection (except in cases of great controversy, when they can still be most helpful) began much earlier, of course. Now the mastery of personnel management techniques, and the dawn of the machine age in technical services, require a librarian to develop new facets of administrative personality which a lay board can hardly expect to follow in full.

A second element is the growth in complexity of government agencies, the expansion of public payrolls, and the resultant demand for scientific management and cost control, particularly on the part of organized taxpayer groups. The sequel has been the emergence of the intermediary—usually the budget bureau or administrative office—as an expert staff agency which stands between the library and the political and legislative officers.

At this point should be mentioned another extremely important element to which not enough attention has yet been paid, but which, it is to be hoped, will have a potent effect in the future. This is the development of standards of library service, stressing quality and hence tending to offset over-emphasis on the cost approach which bedevils many libraries today. The standards also advocate fewer

and larger systems of library service. As units become larger, more professionalization of administration is likely to occur.

The fact that library literature gives so little recognition to the library's place in the new complex of governing authorities leads this observer to suggest that a reappraisal of the library's position in government is needed. Garceau, although he wrote only nine years ago, may be excused for giving scant attention to this aspect of city-library relations, because most of the more significant developments probably have come since 1949. In his summary of the Public Library Inquiry, R. D. Leigh reported boards are largely autonomous, but recognized "some regulation by the general municipal officers in charge of personnel, accounting, and purchases."¹⁵ It is somewhat startling to realize that even in 1950 there was so little foreshadowing of the important role that these extra-library agencies would shortly assume. Even Mrs. Winsor, writing in 1955, while she briefly described the library's relations with the finance officer in budget preparation, did not indicate that the role of the board or librarian was greatly affected.¹⁶ In today's practice, the range runs from the librarian without a board, who deals directly and solely with the city manager, through librarians who are involved in varying degrees with staff agencies, to the one who is responsible to a board still autonomous in every legal sense, but with powers abridged by the factors already noted.

It may be useful to detail some of the changes in relationship between librarian and board occasioned by the fact that libraries have been drawn increasingly into the policy and procedures of city management. Discussion with library executives has failed to discover one who does not acknowledge this inescapable trend. Like it or not, they say, the library is being drawn into the political arena.

Fiscal control is the area where the hand of the intermediary lies most heavily. The rise of the fiscal expert, the budgetary analyst, has coincided with the rise in number and strength of schools of public administration throughout the country. To the library this has meant a drastic change from the day not so long ago when the library board was supreme and the librarian spent whatever money was available pretty much as he and the board decided. In the new era the budget officer tends to deal directly with the librarian, not with or through the board. The structure within which the librarian must work is prescribed by the city, not the board. As long ago as 1943 the McDiarmids noted the marked trend toward closer city scrutiny of detailed budget requests.¹⁷ It is unlikely that they could have predicted

Executive-Board Relations in Public Libraries

then the ironclad framework that would envelop the library's financial procedures within the next fifteen years. The furthest reaching development to date in the attempt to measure and meet the library's financial needs statistically is the performance budget, so far employed by relatively few libraries. Librarians working within its framework inevitably find their prerogatives of choice and emphasis seriously hampered. It has generally proved to be an alarmingly imperfect instrument, which at worst can place a mechanical limitation upon the library's program.

Paradoxically enough, instead of being an ogre, the budget officer can be and often is the library's friend and ally. In many cities he is the only one in a position to make a positive critical overview of the library's needs in relation to the needs of other city departments and to present them objectively and forthrightly to legislative officials during the inevitable annual contest for the taxpayer's dollar. It is possible that his is as fair an approach as can be achieved for an agency such as the library, where quality, not quantity, is the most important factor in service.

In the light of all this, it becomes apparent that although the board is still nominally in control of policy, it really cannot exercise such control except when policy is not firmly grounded in finance. Book selection is a good example of a field where the traditional relationship of board and librarian can have full sway. But such questions as "Shall the library sponsor a television program?" "Shall the library circulate recordings?" "Shall the library establish a business department?" are no longer matters for the board's decision purely in terms of community needs. Now the budget officer often makes the decision as to whether the library may include the money needed for them in its budget request at all. In the end, the determining factor in establishing any new service policy, or even a major change, lies with the city's appropriating body, and the question to be decided becomes not "Does the city need this service?" but, "Will the library be permitted to ask the city council to appropriate the money for it?"

While most boards still enjoy on paper the powers that they have always had, actually there has been a quiet and gradual usurpation of these powers, particularly in the west and in the larger cities where budgeting offices have flourished most healthily. Public libraries where the board is paramount still exist, but their number lessens steadily as professionalization of librarians and growth of financial controls are extended. The result is that the board acts more and more as a re-

viewing body, giving approval after negotiations between the librarian and the budget authority have been completed. The board finds it is able to set policy only within the rather rigid bounds of city policy, especially fiscal policy. Thus the heart of the working relationship between librarian and board becomes more dependent on the total local situation than on law or even on personal relationship and attitude. The effect of all this is that boards clearly labeled "administrative" are many times in effect "advisory."

While fiscal controls have developed to a degree of overwhelming importance in the library's administration, personnel techniques likewise have greatly advanced, particularly during and since World War II. Either through civil service or through their own self-administered personnel systems, libraries have been falling into line with currently accepted practice in the important fields of examination, selection, in-service training, promotion, working conditions, and employee welfare and security. Witnesses to this fact are the establishment of personnel offices in libraries, the adoption of rules, classification plans, salary schedules, personnel manuals, and training devices. Few would quarrel with the desirability of such developments. It is important to note, however, that they do tend to remove personnel administration from the immediate direction of the principal administrator and from individual decision by the board. Despite this loss of personal contact, their prevalence makes for more sensible ground rules and fairer treatment of staff.

One important result of uniform personnel procedure is that it retains and strengthens the library's traditional freedom from political favoritism. Moreover, it protects the staff, including the head librarian, from action based on the whim, prejudice, or self-interest of board members, since the board must justify dismissals or other punitive measures on defensible grounds. There have been, and even recently, instances where clashes between a librarian and his board resulted in spectacular fireworks, although these contrast sharply with the generally favorable situation. The trend, however, is due more to the growing conformity with accepted personnel practice than to the legal security of the librarian's position. As Mrs. Gallagher has pointed out, differences are usually resolved "not by court action, but by negotiation or a parting of company."¹⁸

Having less bearing on the working relationships of librarians and boards, but considerable effect on actual administration, is the tendency of budget and efficiency bureaus to look critically at libraries'

Executive-Board Relations in Public Libraries

internal processes, particularly in the technical services of ordering, cataloging, binding, circulation, and duplicating. Although most gains so far in these fields have actually been made by practicing librarians rather than by efficiency agencies or even by commercial manufacturers, the motivation for such has often come from central staff agencies and has been based on financial considerations rather than service improvement. The result of replacing people with machines, sadly enough from the librarian's point of view, has often been reduction of staff rather than its utilization in more productive activity.

It has been shown that the librarian has come to work in an increasing complex of relationships with his board, with administrative or budget officer, and with a host of other staff agencies. This is a long way from the day when a librarian was in control of the whole situation in his library, including in some cases the board itself, and when he acted without access to outside advice and responsibility to external direction and control. The early library administrative fathers were often willful and opinionated, exercising strong initiative at every turn of their libraries' operations. Today the librarian finds himself circumscribed by a network of agencies, oftentimes with conflicting interests and attitudes. Incidentally, it may be noted here that his recommendations to his board today are much more likely to be the result of consultation with his staff than to be based on his own personal inclination or thinking, although a discussion of democratic administration is outside the bounds of this article.

The relationship between the librarian and the library's new complex of "governing authorities" clearly now becomes three-way: librarian, board, and a mass of city officers and agencies. Compatibility as a factor in their relationships is equally three-dimensional. In the library's relationship with the over-all policy-setting elected officials, i.e., mayor and council, or supervisors, differences can be argued out in terms of specific issues as a result of the budget officer's intermediary function. The councilman looking at a problem from his own "ward-interest" approach is met with a presentation of facts from an over-all city point of view and his parochial attitude is glaringly revealed.

These relationships can always remain calm and passive if the library is content to stand still or is retrenching. But libraries have a way of needing more and more money if they are to maintain their unique role in the community, and to expand their service and diversify their programs as their place in the communications picture requires. To secure revenues, the concurrence of the city's financial agency is

essential. During a period of high and increasing prosperity the going has not been too rough. But in a period of depression or financial stress, accompanied as it is bound to be by great increase in the use of libraries, disharmony between the library and the budget office may well arise. For in such a situation it probably will not be easy to reach agreement as to where economies can be made. Issues of public service are likely to be severely subordinated to cost considerations, and the overly-statistical approach to library service, which has not been a serious detriment in good times, can become a powerful weapon against high quality. The performance budget is particularly unhelpful in making decisions at such a time. This is a situation where the library board may have an opportunity to re-exercise its powers, both legal and moral, to see that quality is not sacrificed to cost expediency.

Emergence of new library standards during the past decade is the most significant development in putting service in proper relation to cost. The Public Library Inquiry has indicated that the library's program has lagged behind the development of mass communication. Both it and *Public Library Service* have approached the problem of financing libraries from the point of view of service programs rather than from that of past and present costs. Together they serve as a welcome antidote to the over-emphasis on cost. In their concern with the relationship of libraries of varying sizes to the total picture of library service, the standards presented in *Public Library Service* are a triply harmonizing device. They aid the librarian in presenting his needs both to boards and city officials by spelling out essentials of service. They reinforce the traditional definition of the respective responsibilities of librarian and board. They serve, if carried out with respect to the establishment of systems, to reduce discrepancies in service due to the differences between large and small libraries.

The present paper indicates how the relations of librarians, both with their boards and with the complex of officials and staff agencies which now have a finger in the library pie, have been strongly affected by the great growth of government and the demand for economy and efficiency, the increasing professionalization of library administration, and a parallel professionalizing of fiscal control, personnel practices, and other aspects of public administration. It points out, too, that in spite of these important developments, library literature has little to report on the changing role of the board or the new significance of

Executive-Board Relations in Public Libraries

the term "governing authority of the library." Again, this author suggests that here is a fruitful field for critical study.

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