



Present-Day Public Library Executives

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LINCOLN STEFFENS, in reporting an incident in which he was involved with President Woodrow Wilson, quotes him as follows:

“An executive is a man of action. An intellectual—such as you and I,” he smiled—“an intellectual is inexecutive. In an executive job we are dangerous, unless we are aware of our limitations and take measures to stop our everlasting disposition to think, to listen, to—not act. I made up my mind long ago, when I got into my first executive job, to open my mind for a while, hear everybody who came to me with advice, information—what you will—then, some day, the day when my mind felt like deciding, to shut it up and act. My decision might be right; it might be wrong. No matter. I would take a chance and do—something.”¹

Most library executives will be thankful that they do not have to decide whether or not to take their country into war, but they will recognize the problem. Librarianship is a learned profession, and the library executive is, or should be, well educated and well read. He has an obligation to his patrons and to his staff to be continually building on his cultural background. He should belong to the intellectual elite of his community. At the same time his chief role is to be a man of action, who makes decisions and who gets things done.

There are few executives today, in public libraries at least, who profess to great scholarship. Those with advanced degrees in subject fields appear to be rare. Most librarians, however, whether they are heads or not, make a habit of extensive reading, and although this may be on a broad rather than a specialized base the result is a substantial accumulation of knowledge. The library executive, therefore, should be and usually is an example in his community, of the thoughtful, well-informed citizen.

Does the necessity for learning impair his ability to execute? Is he

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in danger of being trapped, like Hamlet, between thought and action? It would seem to be, as President Wilson found it, a matter of discipline. The greater likelihood is that a library executive will neglect his reading rather than his administrative responsibilities.

What does a library executive do? Although generally removed from all the processes connected with the collection and the preparation of books and making them or their contents available to the public, no effort seems necessary to convince board, staff, and public that he is busy. Yet there is little in the literature on just how his time is occupied. In this paper the executives of public libraries chiefly are in view, and the comments relate particularly to their field. It is hoped, however, that much which is said is pertinent by analogy to the heads of school, college, and special libraries.

One of the executive's primary duties is to plan. Libraries, by necessity, are in a continual state of development, and there can be no orderly progress without this. The library chief first must have an intimate knowledge of and contact with the planning activities in the community itself. Population trends, land use and urban renewal, industrial and business development, street and highway construction—all have a bearing on proposals for library extension and improvement. Similarly, plans being developed by educational, cultural, and welfare agencies must be closely followed.

In these days when communities are expanding with almost explosive force it is important to know the people most responsible. As Floyd Hunter² and others have pointed out, every community has a small group of individuals who determine the directions in which the area will go. Rarely occupying any elective public offices, these leaders exercise a great deal of influence on those who do, and thus wield considerable power over the public purse. It is important for the library executive to know who they are and, if possible, to gain their confidence.

To do this he must himself become a civic leader, although at a level somewhat lower than the top. While he will not be directly involved in the planning for adequate highways, streets, sewers, and public safety services, and will be only partially concerned with that for schools and other cultural agencies, he must recognize that these require public knowledge and understanding. Such knowledge and understanding come from education, and education is the librarian's business. Hence the library executive should realize that the development of his library is part of an over-all community plan, and that by

participating in the development of the whole he is furthering that of his own institution.

In order to participate, he must be included in the committee structure of the community, which follows from demonstrating an active interest and a willingness to work. Serving on committees and boards with other civic-minded persons broadens the librarian's acquaintance, enhances his local standing, and often can provide many opportunities for promoting the interests of the library itself.

Active participation in community planning is the only proper background for library planning. What is projected should derive from the application of accepted library standards to the local situation, with due consideration of the ways and means of attaining desired goals. These goals will include, primarily, the adequate provision of books, staff, and buildings. The inclusion of trustees and staff in these discussions is essential.³

With clear and specific plans, long and short term, the library executive's next concern is to obtain the finances for their realization. Sources of funds and their control vary widely, but one factor is constant: requests for money must be justified. It is the executive's job to marshal the facts and figures for this purpose, to get the support of his board or committee, and to present a budget that is reasonable and convincing. It is most important in this connection to have comparable figures from similar libraries and to view them in their relation to accepted national standards. The lack of current comparative statistics has long been a handicap at this point, and it is hoped that the deficiency will be corrected soon by the Library Administration Division of the American Library Association.

The item in the budget which usually requires the most vigorous defense is that of salaries. Here the natural reluctance of trustees and public officials to contribute further to inflationary trends appears. It must be pointed out with all possible emphasis that the quality of the entire library operation depends on the quality of the staff, that salary rates for librarians are determined by national conditions rather than local, and that it is a matter of simple justice to reward employees in accordance with their training, skill, and competence.

With three-quarters of his budget given to salaries it is necessary for the library executive to devote a considerable amount of time to recruiting or attracting adequate personnel. Employment of clerks, janitors, and pages may be left to others, and in the largest libraries a personnel department may carry out much of the detail work; but

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most library executives cannot avoid the extensive correspondence and interviewing necessary to the maintenance of a strong professional staff, nor the necessity for an intimate knowledge of the performance of each individual member of that staff.

Much time is necessarily involved in the assignment of personnel to places of maximum usefulness. A simple change may involve a number of conferences—those necessary to make the proper decision and those required to affect the transfers without undue friction. The problems of planning staff meetings and maintaining in-service training can also occupy much attention.

Although the head librarian cannot delegate responsibility for decisions, he should consult his staff in all major policy matters. Committees can do much toward creating a sense of such participation, and assure greater support for the policies or decisions which may result from their deliberations. In all staff contacts the chief should remember that his associates are not just employees—they are people, beset with the usual assortment of problems, personal and otherwise. In dealing with them he has to reconcile a decent respect for their opinions, feelings and desires, and his primary responsibility for the efficient expenditure of the public funds which go into their salaries. Fair dealing is not only essential morally, it is requisite to their morale.

The other major item in the library budget is that designated for books and other materials. The extent to which the chief executive will be involved in the processes of selecting, classifying, cataloging, and preparing books for public use will vary widely according to the size of the library. Regardless of the size of his institution or the extent of his other manifold responsibilities, however, the library executive cannot escape the necessity of keeping informed and up-to-date in the world of books. This will entail homework involving the extensive burning of midnight electricity. He cannot read all the new books, but he or his staff should read most of the significant titles which are being added. If he expects his colleagues to devote many hours of off-duty time to this he can do no less than set a good example. The quality of the book collection will be a direct reflection of his achievement in this respect. The distribution and control of the book funds to the various departments and branches, in which the executive must assume major responsibility, requires at least a general knowledge of all subject fields and a sense of the demands and interests of the public.

In addition to all this the executive must keep abreast of the professional literature which comes to his desk so regularly. This is a

necessary part of the continual study which must go on to improve library techniques. He constantly must be examining ways of cutting costs and reducing the preoccupation of the professional staff with routine tasks, thus freeing them for the creative aspects of librarianship.

In the pioneer days of library development, executives were noted for their inventiveness in the development of library methods, many of which are now called routines. Dewey, Cutter, Dana, and the rest had to be resourceful because there were no trails to follow. The executive of today, in building on their work, has the great advantage of utilizing the research facilities of such great corporations as International Business Machines, Eastman Kodak, Addressograph-Multigraph, and many others which are ready and willing to help him work out the most efficient ways of carrying forward technical and lending processes. Many devices developed for business can be applied with little change to the needs of the library. Although much has been accomplished toward this, the rapidly mounting flood of printed matter to be dealt with makes it clear that there is much more to do. Where the recent experiments in the application of electronics will lead is impossible to foresee, but it is significant that librarians are directly involved in this area of research, and that a librarian, Verner Clapp, has been selected to head the newly created Council on Library Resources, Inc., one of whose functions is to study the "development of applications of scientific techniques and mechanisms to library procedures."⁴

In these days of expansion in all directions it will be the exceptional library executive who is not directly concerned in the planning or construction of a new building or buildings. This means a substantial challenge, requiring much study and creative thought. A building involves a large expenditure of public funds and will last for many years, probably beyond the life span of the librarian and architects who determine the form it takes. Mistakes once made will persist with the building. The library executive will, of course, have a major part in deciding the arrangement of rooms, shelving, study areas, and other facilities. He should exert much influence in the selection of the site. The architect's job is to translate the physical needs into a structure which is both efficient and beautiful.

Assuming that the technical aspects of the job can be worked out jointly by any competent architect and librarian, what about aesthetics? Architecture is classified by Dewey as a fine art, but not all architects are artists. On what seems a proper assumption that a library should set the highest possible standard for the community in the beauty of

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its exterior proportions and interior appointments, it is important to select architects and interior designers who can help it meet this standard. The library executive should make every effort to achieve this and to train himself to talk the language of his collaborators. He should be aware of the effects of different building materials, considering their texture and proper balance; of color and proportion; and of the value of applied art in relieving the monotony or sterility which can occur in contemporary architecture. He should have an appreciation of good landscape design. Plantings, both inside and outside the buildings, can contribute much to their appearance, and should be in accord with the basic ideas which formed them. Contemporary architecture requires planting quite different from that of traditional buildings, and often architects know little about this subject and nurserymen even less. It behooves the library executive to find someone who understands how a modern building should be landscaped.

With regard to public relations the executive's first responsibility is to see that service of high quality is rendered—competence and courtesy on the part of the staff are more important than newspaper space or radio time. In the job of winning public support there is no substitute for satisfied customers. However, there is much that the library executive must do in maintaining good relations with mass media. He should be on intimate terms with managing editors, editorial writers, reporters, and television and radio station officials. He should be able to recognize what they regard as news and see that they know about newsworthy occurrences in the library. Obviously he makes the most of his annual report, but what about the rest of the year? The best way to get attention is to make news and to exploit it fully. For example, the building of a new branch library can result in the following newspaper stories, usually with pictures: announcement of plans to build, selection of site, designation of architect, calls for bids, announcement of successful contractor, ground breaking, progress in construction, moving in, dedication ceremonies, and often a follow-up on resulting increases in registration and borrowing in the new building. Activities such as children's summer reading clubs, story hours, adult discussions, special displays related to city-wide programs, all make news. The extent that the library executive and his staff can participate in a wide variety of community activities is a direct credit to the library and its reputation. It almost goes without saying that he should be ready and able to speak publicly on the library and its activities.

One item which touches the library executive directly and imme-

diately is the occasional effort of some group or individual to censor or otherwise limit the access of fellow citizens to certain books or classes of books. The executive must be prepared in advance to face these attacks with a courageous and clear explanation of the library's policy. He should also see that his staff is well equipped to answer derogatory comments across the desk.

The public library executive is inevitably drawn into activities related to legislation. He must, therefore, become acquainted with his local representatives, particularly those on the state level. Knowledge of how legislation originates and is processed is essential. He should know how to mobilize public support for favorable bills or proposals, and for opposition to any which might be damaging to the library's interests. He should be ready at a moment's notice to appear before legislative committees, or to assist in the calling together of his local delegation to the legislature for a discussion of the measures under consideration.

As he will be concerned with legislation, he will also be involved from time to time with the laws themselves. Litigation involving the settlement of a valuable legacy left to the Akron Public Library implicated this writer over a period of three years. Other legal problems such as public liability, the buying and selling of real estate, performance bonds and mechanics liens, zoning regulations, contracts, and the interpretation of the library laws may involve the executive directly in legal action.

From the foregoing it will be seen that the successful library executive today must be a many-sided individual. From a sound formal and professional education he must be continually expanding his horizon through the daily reading of books and periodicals. As far as possible, he must be a leader in his community, a good citizen cooperating and working closely with those who have the responsibility for the operation and future development of the city. In his own job he will need to know something about business administration, city planning, accounting, law, architecture and building construction, horticulture, politics, journalism, public speaking, and perhaps most of all how to get along with people—trustees, staff, and public.

How does the present-day library executive measure up to such requirements? In the judgment of this contributor, very well indeed. The extraordinary development of libraries throughout the United States and many other parts of the world in recent years attests to the effectiveness of his leadership. Libraries have flourished against the

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competition for public attention of such mass media as films, radio, and television. While these media have tended to debase public taste and cater to the trivial and superficial desires of the public, libraries, along with schools, museums, colleges, and universities, have been able to oppose their influence by offering the best in books, films, and recordings. Furthermore, the quality of men and women who have entered the profession in recent years, and the high standards maintained by the schools for library training, offer a promising outlook for the future. To put our leaders of today on a scale and weigh them against the great library pioneers and what they achieved is an impossibility. One can venture the opinion, however, that history will show that present-day executives have measured up to their predecessors in a world whose tempo and complexity have vastly increased.

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