Evaluation of State Aid to Public Libraries

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Many older librarians can recall the Indian medicine man, or the old pitchman, on the downtown street corner with the little box on the tripod, selling the snake oil: "good for man or beast, falling hair or fallen arches" and practically everything in between. To the skeptic, he would boldly assert: "You don't have to believe me, you don't have to take my word for it, ladies and gentlemen! This information is printed right on the bottle!"

Librarians can be rightfully proud of the extent of their collections and services, and of their essential nature in modern society. Yet it must be recognized that the modern world wants to see some more basic proof. In these times of "payola," rigged television shows, fulsome advertising, and "image" politicians, real interest in facts and figures should be welcomed. Evaluation is the opportunity to get the library story "printed on the bottle."

For the purposes of this paper, "evaluation" is defined as the means of getting reliable and specific answers to the question: "Is state aid doing what we said it would or say it will?" Evaluation must be distinguished from survey.

A survey is a general overview. It is not usually the result of long pre-planning. It is generally a one-shot affair, and very broad in coverage. It often springs from a vague feeling that "something needs to be done." Evaluation implies a more specific purpose and a more specific answer, in a narrower area. An evaluation suggests a checking of assumptions, premises or hypotheses, and assessment of results. It is not quite of the order of research on a controlled experiment, but it has some of these elements of determination of cause and effect. It should be an expression of both responsibility and desire for a check-up. It is useful as a look backward, but more useful as a gauge to advance. Its primary purpose is good management.

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To be successful an evaluation project needs to have some continuity over a period of time. It should be planned for years in advance. It should have an avowed purpose, and commitments, real or implied, from those in authority to accept and act favorably upon the results. It needs wide involvement by people with confidence. The evaluation may be a modest “self-evaluation,” but more often and more successfully it is done by “outside experts.” A good evaluation has a high degree of specificity, yet is more than just a counting or audit. It is a determination of worth, of success or failure in achieving set objectives, and of extent of acceptance by the clientele. The public relations aspect of this evaluation is exceedingly important. It builds up confidence and acceptance of successful projects; it extends involvement and participation; and if often provides ideas for correction and future improvement.

Evaluation periodically applied has been a powerful tool in New York State, and an important part of a successful program of state aid to local public libraries and local library systems. Its program is believed to be the most extensive among the states, and certainly is the most familiar to the writer. It will be treated fairly fully, and comparisons will be made with other states.

The first big boost to state-aid for local libraries in New York State came a century and a quarter ago as a result of a surplus in the Federal Treasury. From the income of the United States Deposit Fund an annual grant of one hundred dollars a year was paid to approved local libraries, and indeed some 350 libraries are still getting this. If durability be a criterion for evaluation, this system certainly was good. Nevertheless, from time-to-time understandable dissatisfaction was manifest with it.

In the 1890's under Melvil Dewey there was great expansion of state aid in the form of services. Use of the rich resources of the State Library was liberalized. The traveling libraries and library extension services were developed. But through great changes in concepts of library service, the growth of large city systems, and monetary inflation, the grant-in-aid program remained unchanged.

Following a request from the New York Library Association in 1944, the Commissioner of Education and the Regents of the University of the State of New York authorized a full survey of public library service in the state. This included a thorough evaluation of the financing of public library service, and resulted in the conclusion that (1) much was to be gained from consolidation of many operations and from the
pooling of books into larger units of service (2) on the basis of encouragement of consolidation, and on relative income, the state's share of support should be increased.1

A result was a recommendation for a series of regional centers, and one was set up on an experimental basis in Watertown, New York, to serve local libraries in Lewis, Jefferson, and St. Lawrence counties. The word experiment was used advisedly. The Regional Library Service Center in Watertown was not a demonstration—it was an experiment. It was to be watched thoroughly by the Research Division of the Education Department and to receive a full evaluation at the end of a three year period. A series of control communities elsewhere in the state were selected, to be watched on a comparative basis.

Many questions were to be answered as to financing and service in communities served by the Center as compared with similar communities not served. For example, would the availability of state aid in books and services from the Center cause a relaxing of local effort? The answer was no—the presence of larger quantities of new books from the pool stimulated the local communities to improve local library quarters and to extend hours and raise staff salaries at a more rapid rate than in comparable libraries outside the experimental region. This was confirmation of a hypothesis, and evaluation in its highest and best sense.2

Acceptance of the experiment and its results were evaluated less rigorously and somewhat informally. It was clear that the North Country liked the Center, and the people there rose valiantly to support its continuation beyond the end of the first experimental period. Acceptance elsewhere in the state was less enthusiastic and occasionally hostile.

Existing large library systems wanted direct grants-in-aid, with few or no strings attached. Hence a committee was established by the Governor, including librarians, trustees and representatives of the State Education Department and Library Extension Division, to review the financial situation and devise a plan for grants-in-aid. The plan developed was for grants-in-aid to county and multi-county systems meeting approval by the Commissioner of Education (through the Library Extension Division). The report concluded with the following recommendation: "After the expiration of five years from such time as its recommendation takes effect, the Committee recommends that library conditions throughout the State again be reviewed, taking into account the extent to which library systems have been established, the
effect of payments of aid, and the need for changes, if any, in the basis of such payments."

Thus New York State librarians found themselves with two relatively large scale projects side-by-side. One was frankly labeled an experiment. The other was a radical new approach to the problem under an injunction for review at the end of a five-year period. The Regional Center experiment had already survived its initial three-year period. It was a success in meeting objective criteria of service, and in local acceptance. But outside its area of influence it had not attained general acceptance as the best structure for providing the advantages of a wholesale and pooling operation. It was being continued as a somewhat permanent experiment in state aid. It definitely was not a demonstration.

On the other hand the new committee had proposed making the county board of supervisors the vehicle of local option and control for a larger unit of library service. As a means encouraging the formation of such systems, and as a sharing of continued support, a program of "grants-in-aid" was set up. Some of the indications of the success of this program would be the number of counties to be organized, and the extent of coverage. A third element remained—the areas where there was neither the regional center, nor the county systems. These libraries remained under the old hundred-dollar-a-year program, with some aid-in-kind from the traveling libraries and other sections of the State Library.

In the spring of 1956 the New York State Commissioner of Education, J. E. Allen, Jr., appointed a Committee on Public Library Services "to review the present status of public library service in New York State, to analyze and to evaluate the recent progress made and to make recommendations to continue the improvement and extension of library service to the people of the State." The first third of the 196 page volume is devoted to a summary and recommendations. The latter two-thirds contains reports of detailed comparisons and case studies, such as: "Services and facilities of a sample of system and non-system public libraries" and "Summary of case studies of successful and unsuccessful system movements."

These studies comprise what the writer believes to be the most detailed and comprehensive evaluation of public library programs ever made on a comparative basis. The resulting conclusions and recommendations took into consideration the good and bad features as they were brought out by the research. The final product was a new legisla-
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tive program. This legislation contained provisions for (1) continuing the regional center with slight modifications, (2) continuing the county and multi-county libraries, again with some modifications, and (3) permitting organization of cooperative systems on the basis of local initiative without a tie to county government.

The third provision was based principally on cognizance of the weakness in the county system and elements of strength in the regional concept, together with an appraisal of the nature of the areas yet to be covered with larger units of service. This legislation as recommended was enacted in 1958, with the exception of the full formula for grants-in-aid. The amount of grants-in-aid provided represented a substantial increase over the 1950 formula. A new element of aid was introduced, viz: state-purchased books for one central reference collection for each system, and for small libraries, outside systems, serving fewer than 5,000 population. This new program resulted in a snowballing of systems. Whereas from 1950 to 1958 only thirteen counties had been organized into systems, in the subsequent two year period the total rose to fifty-two, leaving only ten counties remaining without systems by 1960.

A brief evaluation made in January 1960 showed that the new legal structure was sound, needing only a few technical corrections which have already been passed at the 1960 session of the State Legislature. Nevertheless the financial situation of the systems remained precarious, and it appeared that added incentive was needed to accelerate organization of remaining areas. Bringing grants-in-aid to approved library systems up to the full formula recommended in 1958 has now (March 1960) been approved by the state legislature.

It is not suggested that this continuous process of evaluation has alone been responsible for the success of the program. But evaluation has been an important factor. It has been the foundation upon which quiet but effective legislative campaigns have been based. It has furnished the proof when needed. It will be continued.

The basic purposes of state aid, as conceived in New York are three-fold:

1. To promote efficiency and economy of service.
2. To provide incentive for local effort.
3. To equalize costs and spread the tax burden.

It is generally agreed that larger units of service can be operated more efficiently particularly in respect to acquisition of materials and
technical processes. A large pool of books gives the reader a larger range of choice. On a small population base such a pool is impossible or extremely costly. The 1960 report has a graphic presentation of the effects of systems in providing many more people with much larger collections to draw upon.6

Incentive is a subject upon which much can be written. This is no place to examine the psychology of incentive. It is sufficient to say that properly conceived incentives usually work. They must be clear and reasonable. They must have continuity. The *quid pro quo* must be clear and generally desirable. The most common form is matching. This is the basic principle of federal aid, and in book expenditures is an important part of the New York State program.

The present series of incentives are: (1) grants-in-aid to systems for getting started, providing for initial capital expenditures such as bookmobiles; (2) grants-in-aid for expansion of systems by total population and square mileage covered, and by specific grants for number of counties partially or wholly served; and (3) matching book expenditures.

Libraries in New York State have derived their principal support from local real estate taxes, endowments, and gifts. It is generally recognized that real estate taxes are becoming less desirable as a source. There are increasing inequities in the ratios of assessed valuation to the population and areas served. Other taxes are more equitable and have better yields. The principal sources of state funds are income taxes. Hence there are many advantages in use of state funds. Numerous studies on public finance are available and need not be cited here. It is clear that the New York State program has been successful in all three respects. It is predicted that by 1965 the entire state will be organized into systems serving all of the population. Grants-in-aid to the systems will amount to about 50 cents per capita, or between eight and nine million dollars annually.

Because of the growth of systems and as a negative way of further encouraging them, certain other state services have been curtailed or withdrawn. No longer are traveling libraries available to study clubs, or in areas otherwise unserved. This section of the State Library is concentrating on services such as clear-type and foreign language materials which cannot be economically handled in systems. Reference services are now being channeled through the systems and a teletype network has been established to speed up requests and interlibrary loans.
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Of course all these developments will be closely watched and continuously evaluated. In January 1960 a new Committee on Reference and Research Library Resources was established by the Commissioner of Education to deal with problems in this area. The goals are:

1. To identify and broadly evaluate existing major reference and research collections.
2. To study the needs for and use of such material.
3. To propose more effective ways of sharing resources and eliminating unnecessary duplication.
4. To discover gaps and propose means by which they may be filled.

The results will have important implications for state aid in the form of service from the State Library which is itself a major research library, issuing over 350 books and periodicals per day on interlibrary loan.

The writer has reviewed the New York State experience with evaluation in detail because it has been more extensive and because it has been remarkably successful. Extensive correspondence and searching of library literature has failed to produce much that may be used for comparison, with the notable exception of Michigan.

Michigan has had a substantial amount of state aid since 1938-39 when $375,000 was appropriated to encourage establishment of county libraries, to provide an element of equalization to libraries in areas of low assessed valuation, and to aid local public libraries generally. There was no appropriation in 1939-41, but $250,000 was granted in 1942-43, and there have been increasing amounts since then, and occasional changes in the law.

The program was reviewed in 1955 and a brief answer prepared to the question, “What has state aid accomplished?” Among the significant results were: reduction of unserved population from 27 per cent to 13 per cent; only three counties remaining with no local library service; substantial increases in local support, in size of staff and in book purchases.

A new study was begun in 1958 and a preliminary report was prepared in December 1959. The report appears to be directed primarily to adopting the A.L.A. standards for public library service to use in Michigan, and to devising ways and means of raising service to these standards. The advisory committee has had the services of a public administration analyst to assist in evaluation of the state-aid program. The report of this analyst is now available as a “working paper” for the
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Michigan State Board of Libraries. Publication of the final report on Michigan is eagerly awaited and expected later this year.

The federal aid program has been the source of funds for surveys in five states—Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Nevada, and Michigan. These have been briefly described by Helen Luce and W. L. Morin.7 Much attention to recommendation of a state aid program is given in the Pennsylvania report. In a letter to the writer, Ralph Blasingame, Jr., Pennsylvania state librarian,8 says:

"The Governor's Commission on Public Library Development, the Pennsylvania Library Association and the Pennsylvania State Library will be engaged in reviewing this entire program in preparation for re-entering bills to implement it in the 1961 session. It is my own strong feeling, and I believe shared by all of the people who helped to create this proposal, that the plan should be under constant evaluation. There is no fixed period for review of the entire operation. However, I feel quite sure that, if it goes into effect at some time in the future, it will be under close and constant scrutiny by everyone concerned."

A similar assurance has been received from R. H. McDonough of New Jersey. New Jersey now has a state-aid law and an appropriation will soon be available.

An early exception to the general rule is Illinois. Illinois has been a pioneer in state aid, although in a sense much of the aid was rather in the form of demonstrations. In the survey of the Illinois State Library by H. F. Brigham, F. B. Spaulding, and C. F. Gosnell, published in 1952,9 some attention was given to the comparative effects of various aspects of that state aid program.

No reference is made here to the impact of federal aid on state programs, or its re-distribution by the states in various forms of aid to the localities. This has been the subject of a great many articles and reports, and does not fall within the present assignment.

For comparative purposes mention may be made of two extensive evaluation projects sponsored by Unesco. These are rather in the realm of grants-in-aid from the national governments to local libraries. One is a thorough analysis of the operation and effects of the Delhi, India, Public Library10 and the other is the forthcoming report on the Medellín, Colombia, Pilot Library.11 Both of these reports are directed toward determining the impact of new and outside aid upon the respective communities.
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References

8. Blasingame, Ralph, Jr.: Personal communication to the author.