



Responsibility to the Profession

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TO WHOM ARE PUBLIC LIBRARY BOARDS really responsible? To librarians? To city councils? To the voters? To bibliophiles? To the general public? Or to all of these people in some way or another? The obvious answer is that the library board's responsibilities are to all of these groups, and to more besides, but in greatly varying degrees. Assuming this general responsibility to diverse groups and individuals, let us then concentrate upon only one aspect of a library board's responsibility, and one that is seldom discussed, that of responsibility to the library profession in general. This paper will discuss the responsibilities of a library board not to its specific local situation, but to other librarians, libraries, and library boards throughout the country.

One of the first responsibilities of a library board to the profession in general is that of a realistic approach to the provision of library service to people outside the legal service area of a particular library. This responsibility is twofold, that of a service responsibility to people who directly use the library, and that of encouraging library service where it does not exist and of cooperating with neighboring libraries in improving service programs.

A library board has a direct responsibility not only to its own taxpayers, but to the profession in general, to charge a service fee for non-resident use of library facilities. The scope of this paper does not cover exactly what constitutes the term "non-resident" as regards students, business owners, employees, and the many other "exemptions" which are often found listed within library rules, and which are often debated at library meetings. This question, plus the question of what services if any should be granted to non-residents, constitutes a whole subject for discussion in itself. However, a line must be drawn somewhere beyond which point a library user who is not a direct or indirect taxpayer or resident of the library service area must pay a fee for library service.

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How many areas of the country, particularly areas surrounding major cities, have delayed securing or establishing library service either alone or in cooperation with other libraries simply because a neighboring library has allowed free library service to the surrounding residents? Or perhaps even more damaging to library development, how many libraries have set their non-resident fee so low that neighboring appropriating bodies have thought in effect "why should we establish library service and tax ourselves an average of two dollars, three dollars, or more per capita when we can receive library service nearby by paying only one dollar per year for the whole family?" A city councilman or a county commissioner would, by establishing his own library service, pay an added tax on his home or business of three or four dollars or more per year. Even when this is actually a low rate for the value received, he would think twice before establishing a library tax when he could obtain library service for less money as a non-resident user of a neighboring library system.

Fortunately more and more library boards today are acknowledging this situation by the realistic application of non-resident library fees. A colleague reported that one of his board members cynically remarked upon hearing of a nearby library which charged only one dollar per year as a non-resident fee, "They know what their service is worth." One of the responsibilities of a library board to the library profession then is to make certain that their library has a definite non-resident service charge, and that this service charge is an amount which adequately reflects the value and worth of their library service as it has been developed over a period of years and through a large investment of public funds.

In connection with this library board responsibility not to retard the growth of library service in new areas by either charging no fee or by charging too low a non-resident fee is the other responsibility of actively investigating the possibilities of library cooperation and even more important, taking advantage of them when they are found. Far too often cooperative library ventures, regional library development, and the formation of efficient, economical, and really useful library service units are retarded if not actually stymied by the parochial attitudes of library boards. The fear of loss of control, loss of autonomy, or loss of prestige as a member of a local library board has led many library trustees to hinder the development of larger and more efficient units of library service.

In feeling a sense of responsibility to their localities, some library

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board members interpret this responsibility as a duty to protect the *status quo* to the bitter and often uneconomical end. In reality, a trustee's obligation to his community goes hand in hand here with an obligation to the library profession. This obligation is to provide the most useful unit of library service which can be made available to his own constituents. For in this provision it is axiomatic that the larger modern library service unit of today is the foundation upon which the library profession must build for the push-button, micro-material library of tomorrow. The library of the nineteenth century cannot be the bridge into the twenty-first century.

In this aspect of interlibrary cooperation, it is the concurrent responsibility of the library administrator and staff to prepare the library board for future growth and cooperative enterprises. It is the responsibility of the library board to lead the way in the community towards library cooperation and to assuage local fears of the loss of non-resident library users who may shop on the way to or from the library or of the loss of local library autonomy or control.

What responsibility has a library board to its own administrator and staff as compared with its responsibilities to the library profession in general? In the history of almost every library board and/or library administrator is at least one instance of complete disagreement or disillusionment over the ability or performance of each other. Stated in another way, what are the responsibilities of a library board to the profession when it no longer has faith in the librarian-administrator?

The theoretical answer to the above question is easy: the librarian resigns, or in some cases is released. In practice what usually happens? Some library boards write a glowing letter of recommendation and push the librarian to an even better position elsewhere. The trustees then sit back, heave a collective sigh of relief, interview applicants, and perhaps appoint some other board's problem. This is certainly not the typical situation, but it does happen, and it reflects a complete disregard by a library board of its obligation to the library profession in general.

This situation is not peculiar to library boards. A review of school board operations, city manager appointments, and park and recreation boards would reveal similar circumstances and experiences. The problem in libraries is often one of an excellent reference librarian's not being a good administrator, or of an excellent cataloger's not being able to cope with a public board made up of many faceted personalities. Perhaps the problem is one of a questionable view held by far

too many in the profession that to be a success one has to be an administrator. Library boards would sometimes do a great service to the profession by admitting that a person is not an administrator even if he is a good order librarian. In the long run both the individual and the library would often profit from such a decision.

Library boards must remember, however, that they have another obligation to the profession and concurrently to their staffs: the obligation of acting as boards, not as administrators. Far too often board-administrator conflicts are caused not by a lack of ability or understanding on the part of the librarian-administrator, but by a lack of understanding by the library board member as to the rightful purpose and function of the board.

There is still another obligation to the profession which library boards have, that of an obligation to support local, state, and national library associations. However, there is a question raised by many people in connection with this obligation, the question as to exactly what should constitute library board participation in these organizations or associations. Do trustees have an obligation to participate personally in these associations, and if so, at what level or in what manner? The American Library Association and the state library associations have long emphasized their desire for membership and participation in their organizations by library board members. This is, however, not a view held universally by all members of the profession.

Not all professional organizations or associations admit nonprofessionals to full membership. The American College of Hospital Administrators admits as members only practicing hospital administrators, and they are admitted only after meeting a specific set of standards and a five-year tenure requirement. The member of a hospital board of directors, or even a board president, is not eligible simply because he is a member of a hospital board, despite any long-term interest he may have shown in the problem of hospitals. School board members may not belong to most of the professional educational associations unless they are also teachers or school personnel. State educational association relationships and membership qualifications as regards the National Education Association vary from state to state, and there are too many patterns to list here, but there are often restrictions upon membership. In Minnesota, for example, the teacher, principal, or superintendent may belong to the Minnesota Education Association because he holds an educational certificate of one type

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or another. The school board members, however, may not belong to the M.E.A. and have a separate association, the Minnesota School Board Association. The reason for this exclusion is what the Association terms a "possible conflict of interest." The National Recreation Association describes its membership of volunteer and professional recreation leaders as Associates, and government and private recreation agencies and parks departments as Affiliates. Returning to the hospital field again, we find that in the case of the American Hospital Association, the Institution is a member, but not the board member, and that its meetings and conferences are devoted to workshops for staff members. Thus, in some other professional fields we find distinctions made as to memberships, or to types of membership, in associations that the professional personnel belong to or that the institution belongs to, or that board members or "interested people" may belong to.

What obligation then do library board members have to the American Library Association? Or what obligations do they have to the Michigan Library Association or the Music Library Association? Their obligation is perhaps that they should see that such Associations as are needed are financially strong and professionally growing, and that they contain within their membership staff members of the libraries upon whose boards they serve. But what of the question of membership of library board members themselves in associations?

The point questioned by many with regard to the membership of the library trustee himself in associations which also have professional librarians as members is the question of the proper influence such trustee members should have in the state and national associations. They ask whether or not it is inherent in such an organizational structure that the trustees either dominate the associations completely—after all they are the employer—or else that by the sheer weight of numbers and professional jargon the librarians dominate the associations and make the trustees feel relatively useless. If this domination by one or the other is the case, then is this not a danger to the health of such organizations?

Some librarians raise another point here, that of professional prestige. They question the professional standing of an organization that admits anyone to membership, no matter what side of the hiring table he sits on. (Another point raised here is that of architects, free lance building consultants, booksellers, and others who are admitted to library association memberships and who may gain direct financial

benefit from such membership.) An interesting discussion on this question of board-employee membership would be the attitude of City Managers and City Councils regarding their joint membership in a professional association of city managers and employees.

On the other hand, many people believe that the librarians have an answer that some other professional groups are looking for, single state associations and a single national association in the professional interest to which all interested parties may belong. The arrangement of our associations by activities, divisions, and sections does have merit. It allows all persons interested in the growth of a professional service to work together in one group to improve and increase such service, and it does so in a way impossible within the structure of the City Managers' Association or of the National School Board Association, for example.

Conclusions

There are many ways in which a library board has a responsibility to the library profession. It has a responsibility to aid in the development of library service in those places outside established library service areas. Merely charging a "non-resident" use fee is only part of the answer. The fee must be one which is realistic and which will not allow appropriating boards to find it more desirable to suggest non-resident fee cards to constituents requesting library service than to levy a tax themselves.

A library board has another obligation to the library profession in the imaginative promotion and development of interlibrary cooperation with neighboring libraries and with regional libraries which already exist.

A library board has an obligation to the library profession to exercise fairness, honesty, and integrity in its dealings with the librarian-administrator and with the library staff. This obligation is most apparent in regard to personnel changes and recommendations of personnel as they may affect other libraries.

And, finally, the library board has an obligation to the library profession to promote the strength, usefulness, and value of professional associations. There may exist some disagreement as to the extent of board member participation in professional associations, but the library board must nevertheless participate in some manner and to some degree in the promotion of the usefulness and strengthening of these associations.

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