Organization of a Branch System

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There are certain basic judgments to be made and questions to be answered by any library board and library administrator whose library has reached the point at which a branch library system must be considered. By the time a city has reached the population of approximately 100,000, the library will have already begun to provide some extension services. These will probably be in the nature of a bookmobile or deposit stations, serving outlying areas of the city. By this time, also, the central library will have reached a point at which either some services to the public must be moved to other areas of the city, or a major expansion of the central building must be undertaken.

At this point in the growth of the city and in the development of the library, the board and the administration must determine the pattern of service which it will follow. They should consider all factors involved and not start a haphazard growth in response to pressures from a particular group or area of the city. It is much better to develop in a clearly established pattern than to attempt subsequently to patch an illogical system.

There are four major factors to consider in determining the organization of a system of branch libraries. These factors pertain equally to a city, a county or a regional system. The four factors are: (1) the goals of the library, (2) movement of population, (3) physical barriers to movement within the area, and (4) socio-economic factors in a particular community.

Within the past two decades, this country has experienced a great growth of suburbs of cities. From 1950 to 1960, the central cities in the

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United States grew 9 percent; the suburbs grew 48 percent. Philip Ennis states: "This high-speed suburban development presents an enormous challenge to the public library." He indicates that these challenges will be in three areas: (1) the library will try to follow its audience, (2) the ethnic minority will be left in the center of the city, and (3) the fragmentation of outlying suburbs will create real difficulties in establishing units of library service. He goes on to say that "The librarian must make a crucial decision: should he develop his central library's collection and services or should he try to expand outward to meet the needs of a physically dispersed and dispersing clientele?" 2

If the library has determined that its purpose is to provide reading material to every citizen of the community on an equal basis, then the library will develop a pattern of closely spaced outlets. However, if the goals of the library are to provide library service of a high professional character, then the development will be toward fewer large branches, employing specialists in professional library skills. All branches cannot expect to attain the status of full-fledged reference and research centers if for no other reason than financial limitations. Nor should each branch expect to be a small imitation of the central library. The general purpose of the branch is to provide greater access to materials through a collection and services specifically adapted to the needs of the particular community in which it is located. Ulveling conceives of this service as primarily popular education in nature located within easy reach of the patron's home. 4

The second factor to be considered in the establishment of a branch system is the movement of population. The consensus of professional literature seems to be that a branch must serve at least 35,000 to 50,000 population in order to be effective. Recent studies have raised this figure to 70,000 or more. In any case, a branch must serve an area large enough to provide a circulation of 100,000 to 200,000 in order to justify the expenditure necessary to maintain special professional services.

Another consideration is the distance a patron must travel. The consensus seems to be that the branch serves an area of from one and one-half miles to two miles radius from the library. This distance seems to be expanding with the increase in ownership of automobiles and the general mobility of the population. The Pennsylvania plan proposes to provide local service within fifteen to twenty minutes of each citizen of the state and major reference service within one day. 5

Other considerations will be the density of population and the type of housing being developed. The movement of the population within
the city will determine the need for branches according to the development of suburban areas and annexations to the city. In the suburban areas single family houses and small apartment buildings predominate, while in the core city high-rise apartments or apartment complexes are the prominent trends. The administration must work closely with city or county planning boards on long-range population forecasts in order to determine the trend of these developments.

The third factor to consider in the overall pattern is that of physical barriers. Within recent years, the limited access highways which cut through a city have isolated certain sections. Rivers, also, tend to isolate segments of the population. Large parks act as major barriers to the movement of the population within a city. If two of these barriers cross the city and, therefore, cut the city into quadrants, then it may be necessary to establish four branches, one in each of these areas. Depending on the way in which barriers lie, more or fewer branches may be required.

In a growing county or regional system, the trading areas of the county must be considered. The presence and location of shopping centers also will influence the normal pattern of movement of people within a city or county, and should be considered in planning an extension system. In some cases, a bookmobile will provide adequate basic service. For larger concentrations of population, some other type of extension outlet must be considered.

The fourth major consideration will be those socio-economic factors which are present in the particular community. Library services and the book collection must be adjusted to the needs of the community in which the branch is located. Ethnic background plus the economic and educational status of the population of the area will determine not only what is offered but what is used, and the necessary amount of effort on the part of the staff to encourage such use. Because of the reluctance of residents of the city to travel outside their own geographical area, it may be wise—or even essential—to place a branch in such an area even though cost per circulation may be high. Constant community analysis must be a part of the library staff’s work because of the rapid changes within a given area.

In the development of library service, public libraries have passed through three general areas of development. Before 1930, most patterns for the organization of branch systems were concerned with the development of many small branches. Each of these branches attempted to provide a complete library program, and with limited resources and
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staff, it proved to be almost impossible to develop this type of service. There are arguments in favor of many small, closely-spaced library service agencies. The advantages of such a service have been set out thus:

"1. Easy public relations. Public is not aware of shortcomings of small branch.
2. Lower immediate capital investment.
3. Readers would be closer to a fixed library service."

The disadvantages are:

"1. Mounting maintenance, payroll and operational costs.
2. Inadequate book collections; higher book costs.
3. Little opportunity for staff to do promotional work.
4. Readers would have to go further to use a good branch library.
5. Extension service would still look dowdy, especially in certain areas.
6. Long-term capital investment higher, because of number of units in system and obsolescence of buildings.
7. Some of the branches are hidden and therefore less effective.
8. It is hard to deny claims of any neighborhood area for a fixed agency."

In the late 1930's and 1940's, opinions began to change and the provision of quality professional services came to be the primary factor in considering the establishment of a branch. At this point, libraries began to develop fewer branches. In these branches they began to concentrate the book stock and the professional staff so that better services could be rendered. A large branch has more advantages than a smaller agency. These advantages are:

"1. Everyone would be within reasonable distance of a good branch library.
2. Staff would be better concentrated, able to do promotional work, especially with children in schools, and able to absorb emergencies without substitutes.
4. Book fund would go further.
5. The extension service would have a new modern look; parking would be available. . . .
6. Long-term safety for central since strong branches would make it less necessary to go to central.
7. Branches would all be busy and therefore return the value of the investment."

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The disadvantages are:

"1. Public relations job would be difficult in the beginning, but as new-type branches appear in various sections of the city, the pressure would be for acceleration of the program rather than resistance to it.

2. Some readers would have to go farther to use a library agency. Some bookmobile time would need to be available for some areas."

In the late 1930's, Chicago began an experiment which led the way to a third philosophy which gained in popularity during the 1950's and 1960's and is now perhaps the main philosophy guiding the organization of a system of branch libraries, especially in the larger cities. Chicago began to develop regional libraries, each of which was considerably larger than the usual branch and provided more equitable and efficient distribution of library facilities. These regional libraries were also developed to ease the administrative functioning of the entire system. This has led to the development of graded levels of extension service. These levels are usually the regional branch, the community branch, the sub-branch and the bookmobile. The graded levels of service seem to have the virtue of combining the advantages of the small, closely-spaced agency, and of the large branch. Philadelphia is now developing this type of graded level of service with its plan which envisages regional libraries of 200,000 volumes or more. Los Angeles, which started with small regional libraries, recently has constructed regional libraries similar to those of Philadelphia.

In the graded levels of service pattern, library agencies would be defined as follows:

Regional branch—[A] large comprehensive service branch... used... to provide unusual strength and [which includes] in its staff administrative responsibility for smaller nearby extension agencies. Individual services include many aspects of those at the main library....

Community branch—... a major library unit containing an adequate, well-organized collection of books, 48 to 66 hours of service a week, and professional and clerical staff....

Sub-Branch—... a smaller circulating agency with a minimum book collection with emphasis on popular reading. It should be open some part of five days a week, the hours and days to be selected upon a basis of maximum potential use....

Bookmobile—A library on wheels that services a scattered population and districts remote from schools. Visits may be infrequent but
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should be regular and well timed in order to offer service that will
approach, as nearly as possible, that of a small branch. Bookmobiles
are often used to determine locations for future branches.9

The San Francisco pattern defines these levels of service somewhat
differently, as follows:

Major branch: serves a population of at least 50,000 in a radius of
one and one-half miles; an annual circulation of at least 200,000.
Neighborhood branch: serves a population of 35,000 in a one-mile
radius; provides a broad general adult collection, basic reference
services and a children's specialist; open for service 48 hours per
week; has an annual circulation of at least 100,000.
Stations: serves a population of at least 10,000 not within the service
area of an existing branch; provides basic children's and current
adult collections.10

The San Francisco definition of "stations" corresponds to the previ-
ous definition of sub-branch and does not mean a deposit station. A
deposit station may be defined as a limited collection of books placed
in a business office, community center, or hospital, and operated by
persons not members of the library staff. Deposit stations are expen-
sive to operate in terms of books and the salaries of staff to select the
collection, in view of the limited circulation achieved. There is also a
complete lack of any library services. The authors do not recommend
the establishment of such deposit stations. This is one of the many
cases where no service is preferable to inadequate service.

In 1962, Toronto established a new branch especially for children
and indications are that this is the first of several. The library's justifi-
cation for this action is that it sees a trend toward large regional li-
braries for adults. In such a development it has become "increasingly
important to establish special children's branches which can be easily
reached on foot." 11 The addition of children's specialists to Brooklyn's
Reading Centers may be in response to similar pressures.

A small library system will begin with a central library. The organ-
ization will typically contain four divisions (reference, circulation,
children's services, and catalog), each being directly responsible to
the head of the library. As branches develop, typically we find each
branch treated as an individual unit and also responsible to the head
of the library, as in Figure 1.

In a medium-size system, the library begins to add departments in
the main building in order to serve the expanding needs of its patrons.
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These departments will differ from library to library depending on the particular community, although the usual ones will be business and fine arts. By this time, more branches have developed. Since the

\[ \text{Board} \]
\[ \text{Librarian} \]
\[ \text{Reference} \quad \text{Circulation} \quad \text{Children's} \quad \text{Catalog} \quad \text{Branch} \quad \text{Branch} \]

*Figure 1. Organization Chart of a Typical Small Public Library System*

span of control has become too large for one person to handle, an extension department is usually added between the librarian and the heads of the branches with a supervisor in charge of the branch system (see Figure 2).

\[ \text{Board} \]
\[ \text{Librarian} \]
\[ \text{(Main Building)} \quad \text{Technical Services} \quad \text{Extension Department} \]
\[ \text{Circulation} \quad \text{Children's} \quad \text{Business} \quad \text{Bookmobile} \quad \text{Branch} \quad \text{Branch} \quad \text{Branch} \]
\[ \text{Reference} \quad \text{Fine Arts} \quad \text{Branch} \quad \text{Branch} \]

*Figure 2. Organization Chart of a Typical Medium-Sized Public Library System*

As the city continues to develop in area and in the complexity of its needs, additional branches are added. Demands on the main library grow and it is necessary to reduce some of the uses of this building. At this time, usually, regional libraries will develop which will function as supervisory agencies, as well as carrying to various areas of the city more of the specialized services normally found only in the main library. The Denver Public Library development has been typical of this type of decentralization of functions. Denver has developed "neighborhood libraries" or book circulation agencies and is now in the process of changing from an extension department to the broader scope of regional libraries. The Denver Public Library is organized as shown in Figure 3.

As the regional libraries begin to develop and the decentralization
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Figure 3. Organization Chart of the Denver Public Library

of functions proceeds, it is well to determine what functions can and cannot be centralized. Activities can be centralized in order to take advantage of economy and efficiency in handling quantities of materials: "In general whatever can be done as well or better and in less time at a central location should be so handled, in order to release the branch personnel to serve patrons." 12 However, centralization of functions should not mold each library into a uniform pattern. Each branch should be allowed and encouraged to develop those particular services which can best serve its own patrons. Such decentralization will result in a better program of services for the citizens of the community. Some of the items which can and should be centralized, and some which can and should be decentralized, are as follows:

**Centralized**
- Policy and final decisions
- Public relations
- Catalog services
- Book ordering
- Personnel policies and employment
- Purchasing of equipment and supplies
- Circulation rules

**Decentralized**
- Advice on policy, carrying out and explanation of policy
- Community involvement
- Book selection
- Reader services
- Scheduling of personnel
- Supervision of personnel
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In the medium-size library, the head of the extension department is a line officer and carries the responsibility for supervision of the agencies reporting to the department. As the library develops in complexity of services and agencies, the administration of the library tries to coordinate activities and thus provide a more workable relationship between them. Administrators have turned to a new type of job, and the term "coordinator" has been used for this activity. The tendency has been to overuse the term and to have it denote any type of responsibility which the administration sees fit to assign it. In its true library sense, the term "coordinator" applies to the age level groups of children's, young adult and adult services, and designates an advisory officer to all agencies of the library system. A coordinator should be that person who is in charge of maintaining standards of service throughout all agencies of the entire library system. A staff officer, the coordinator should provide advisory or consultant services to the personnel who actually operate the branch library.

In its description of the work of the Coordinator of Children's Services, the Akron, Ohio, Public Library explains this relationship in explicit terms: "In the Children's Department, the Coordinator of Work with Children has, as her primary responsibility, the integration of children's work throughout the system. She has a line responsibility toward the Main Children's Room but a staff or functional relationship to the children's rooms in branches. In general, she is charged with the maintenance of high standards of children's work; the juvenile book budget, the book collection, staff performance, program and public relations. In obtaining her objective through the agency of the Main Children's Room, she exercises direct control; regarding the work in branches, her influence is indirect, advisory." 18

There are variations in patterns of the coordinator roles. In some cases, the coordinator exercises a supervisory function over all persons in the library system working with a particular age group. This becomes difficult, for then the children's librarian, for example, is responsible to the branch librarian for certain activities and to the Coordinator of Children's Work for others. In order for a coordinator to be most effective, there needs to be clear delineation of duty and responsibility for the coordinator and the members of the line staff. There must be a close working relationship between the coordinator, the branch librarian and the children's librarian. The success of such a plan depends on the sympathetic understanding of problems encountered in each of the areas.

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The central library subject departments generally have little responsibility for branch activities. However, every branch librarian needs access to the technical skills of the subject departments, and the department heads usually act in an advisory capacity. This advisory work will normally concern the selection of subject materials to be added to the collections and the follow-up of difficult requests from patrons. There is much need for coordination with the branch services. Common meetings with subject department heads and branches on a regularly scheduled basis, for discussion of mutual problems, will do much to develop harmonious personal and professional relationships.

In developing an organizational pattern for extension services, it is necessary to look at the organization of the total library. In many cases it is possible to adapt and expand certain elements of the existing organization. However, it may also be necessary to look for new concepts. Within the past several years, we in Denver have found that the concept of the public services as one integrated unit of the organization works to our advantage. The professional staff is freed from many of the burdensome details of everyday operation and can devote its time to reader services. The rapport between the main building and the extension units has increased. The coordinator positions have improved the quality of services offered and the book collections. The flexibility of the staff has increased because of the training programs it has been possible to develop.

Only by a complete new look at organization has it been possible to accomplish these things in Denver. The organization is constantly changing and adapting to new circumstances. With the future development of a metropolitan-wide library system, other changes undoubtedly will take place. However, the present indications are that such an organizational change can be effected relatively easily within the present framework.

References

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7. Ibid., pp. 442-443.


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