Introduction

The Allerton Park Conference on "Applying Research to Practice" marked the anniversary of the founding of the Library Research Center 30 years earlier. The Library Research Center (LRC) was established in 1961 by Robert Downs with an LSCA grant from the Illinois State Library for the purpose of establishing an experimental center for research related to public library development. That early grant helped shape the LRC's ongoing concern for conducting research that can be applied directly to solving problems of practice.

In this age of declining resources with constant demands for accountability and productivity, an increasing number of librarians have become researchers and use research in their work. As a result, the LRC has assumed a larger teaching role. On behalf of the Illinois State Library and other professional associations, its staff have led workshops for practicing librarians on such topics as data collection, community analysis, and statistical methods. This Allerton Conference was developed as part of that teaching mission. Papers were focused on topics that could help participants become better consumers of research, understand new ways in which research can help their libraries, and be more informed collaborators in the research process. Participants in the conference also had the opportunity to meet informally to discuss research problems in their individual libraries. Unfortunately, we have no way to represent the important content of these discussions in this printed volume.
Glenn Holt, Director of the St. Louis Public Library, offered an impassioned keynote presentation in which he argued that research is a policy-making imperative for public library practitioners. Too often, he states, staff make assumptions about their public that are not true. For example, contrary to staff assumptions, there was a broad base of support for a library tax increase among St. Louis residents who then voted for a significant increase in the Library's tax base.

Holt notes the relatively small number of researchers within schools of library and information science at the same time the need for such research is increasing. Research has become an important part of the operations of St. Louis Public Library, and the paper summarizes some of its recent projects. Holt concludes his paper with a call for greater collaboration among public library researchers and for a second Public Library Inquiry as a way of inspiring new commitment to research within the practitioner community.

The paper by Keith Lance and Katy Sherlock provides an example of one area in which librarians have collaborated for many years—collection and distribution of library statistics. The National Center for Educational Statistics, state libraries, and others are a rich source of data about communities, collection, services, and other factual information. Lance and Sherlock summarize the basic types of information available and then address the types of issues that might be addressed by different types of data and the important question of how these data can be used by managers.

Nancy Van House addresses one of the key areas for which data are collected and for which librarians are held accountable: evaluation. She suggests that libraries use evaluation for internal decision making and communication with the external environment. Among the important issues she raises is the way in which library values come into play in evaluation, either explicitly or implicitly. What is valued by a library may differ from what is valued by any one of its constituent groups. What a library chooses to evaluate (types of users, fill rate, response time) indicates what it deems important. Van House outlines the data or objective evidence on which libraries can evaluate themselves. She concludes with a brief discussion of the use of evaluation.

Joe Spaeth, a sociologist affiliated with the University of Illinois' Survey Research Laboratory, presents a practical and detailed discussion of perils and pitfalls of survey research. Community and user surveys are the most common forms of original research employed in libraries. Spaeth covers the stages involved in surveys from research designs through sampling, questionnaire construction, data collection, processing, analysis, and reporting. He also examines advantages and disadvantages of mail, face-to-face, and telephone surveys.
An important theme of Jane B. Robbins’ paper is the value of communication between researchers and practitioners. Noting the bifurcation of the research and practitioner communities in many fields, Robbins addresses ways in which they may be brought together within librarianship. Among her recommendations are (a) educating practitioners to become knowledgeable consumers of research/knowledge production and (b) encouraging researchers to make their findings more accessible by publishing in journals read by practitioners and writing in clear, direct language.

Robbins is concerned also with research carried out by practitioners, much of which is never published. Noting the importance of making research findings available to a larger audience, she provides suggestions that help practitioners communicate their findings more effectively.

Drawing on her own research focus, Margaret Kimmel directs her comments to issues in research on youth services in libraries. She cites encouraging new efforts to collect data about young library users, but notes the lack of a theoretical framework for analysis or critical mass of researchers concerned with this area. Kimmel points to important research by Schorr and Heath—both from other disciplines—which can provide important insights to librarians. At the same time, Kimmel provides discouraging examples of ways in which libraries have not used the findings of research or been willing to conduct further research to improve their quality of service.

Beginning with a question about the difference between “ordinary knowledge” and research, J. R. Bradley asks her audience to consider how members can translate their observations of and questions about the physical world into a focus for research. Bradley is concerned with the complexity of the issues librarians wish to understand and the difficulties in collecting and analyzing data in ways that do not bias or oversimplify our understanding of those issues. The questions she raises are indeed complicated but nonetheless important; and they underlie many of the points raised in other papers, particularly those by Van House, Spaeth, and Cronin.

A complement to Bradley’s, Blaise Cronin’s paper suggests that problems become research problems when individuals become curious about unanswered questions that can be subjected to systematic investigation and verification by reputable and credible individuals. Cronin presents a brief summary of research in a Fortune 500 company and suggests how individuals might structure their research. He then summarizes common pitfalls of researchers. Cronin concludes with personal reflection that good researchers will have curiosity, passion, and a deep knowledge of their field.
Debra Johnson, who worked for several years with the Library Research Center, presented the final paper of the conference: an exploration of the various roles in the research process. Actors in the research process include not only individual practitioners and researchers, but also state library agencies, consultants, professional associations, research firms, and users. Johnson provides examples of ways in which members of each of these groups can be important in idea generating, data collecting, and producing and consuming research.

The conference concluded with a panel discussion by three individuals knowledgeable about funding for research. A summary of the comments by Dwight Burlingame, W. David Penniman, and Gail McClure conclude this volume.

LEIGH STEWART ESTABROOK

Editor