Library Objectives and Community Needs

RUTH WARNCKE

The many statements of public library objectives, of a general nature or related to a specific library, are variations or extensions of Leigh's statement in The Public Library in the United States, that the objective of public library development is "to serve the community as a general center of reliable information and to provide opportunity and encouragement for people of all ages to educate themselves continuously." Margaret Monroe, studying three library systems that had long maintained vigorous programs of library adult education, found that the "thread of philosophy which ran through the thinking about library adult education for this period of thirty-five years [1920-1955] was that public librarianship had a responsibility to stimulate and guide the community to use of the library's materials for the best growth of the individual in terms of his needs and interests and for the well-being of society as a whole." "Stimulate and guide" is only another way of expressing Leigh's "provide opportunity and encouragement," but Monroe states two ideas that Leigh at best implies, that of individual growth concerned with individual needs and interests, and that of the welfare of society, both being seen as purposes for the use of library materials. Such bold concepts involving value judgments (in the case of the second one presumably made by the librarian) might have been expected to rouse controversy, but they have been little questioned. Those members of the profession who look with suspicion on such goals have rarely objected in print.

Librarians have interpreted these purposes differently through the years, however. Robert E. Lee has noted that "The most common educational services provided by public libraries between 1850 and 1964 were directed toward five specific educational goals. Two of these goals, civic enlightenment and personal development, remain
Library Objectives and Community Needs

constant throughout this period. Moral betterment was a goal from around 1850 to 1890, vocational improvement a major goal during the years between 1930 and 1950, and community development of major concern from 1957 to 1964.

Determining the needs and interests of individual library users in order to guide and stimulate them to their “best growth” is an inherent function of every situation in which the librarian deals with the patron. Lee points out, however, that concern for the potential user developed before the turn of the century. To determine the needs and interests of people unknown to the librarian, and to select materials and plan services with community development as the goal, clearly require community study.

A guide to such community study as the basis for the development of adult education activities in public libraries was developed as part of the American Library Association’s Library-Community Project, 1955–60. In response to an inquiry sent in 1967 to seventy-two public libraries, to which fifty-one responded, the majority of the respondents, from libraries of varying sizes and wide geographic distribution, indicated the existence since 1954 of a trend in their libraries from “sketchy knowledge of the community to systematic study of the library’s relationship to the community.” An explanatory note defined this as “the need to know more precisely what the educational needs of the community are. There is a trend toward making a systematic study of the community to find out needs, interests, and resources.”

In order to determine the validity of the assumption that public librarians accept the responsibilities stated in the goals and purposes quoted above, and base their materials selection and services on a knowledge of their communities, it would be necessary to study every aspect of their services, especially services to adults whose needs and interests are so varied and difficult to determine. An examination, admittedly limited, of services to groups can indicate only the degree to which these activities seem to be based on generally accepted library objectives.

An overwhelming majority of librarians who responded to the questionnaire sent out by several authors of papers in this issue of Library Trends (see Phinney, “Trends and Needs,” below) reported that they identified and planned to meet the needs of community groups through assistance in program planning, library representation on coordinating councils, contacts with community coordinators, and staff membership in organizations. A smaller but significant number reported seek-
RUTH WARNCKE

ing advice of representatives of various socio-economic groups, and using direct mailings.

The most frequently reported services regularly provided for community agencies and organizations were compilation of booklists, provision of meeting room facilities, assistance in program planning, and exhibition of materials. Also reported by well over half of the respondents were compilation of a directory of clubs and organizations, co-sponsorship of programs with community organizations, and provision for film previewing.

The most frequently reported activity offered as part of the library's own programming was the presentation of book reviews and book talks, followed by instruction in use of the library, discussion groups on special subjects or issues, film discussion groups, and listening groups (music, poetry, drama, etc.).

Many of the respondents accompanied their replies with brochures, announcements, programs, evaluative reports and materials lists prepared for use in group activities. Although material covering the last five years was asked for, most of that sent was dated 1966-67. Without question such materials reflect only a portion of each library's service to groups.

A survey of the literature from 1955 to 1965 yields very little description of public library service to groups to use as an indication of possible changes or trends in the goals such activities serve. World affairs discussion groups, program planning institutes, a few programs based on labor materials, and a large (in 1955) but diminishing number of activities for or concerned with the aging constitute the bulk of the roster. Therefore, the materials available for this paper are as useful a source of information as is available.

Examination of them indicates that libraries are concerned with excellence. The selection of materials used in these activities is clearly based on high standards of quality. The day of the noon-day review of the latest joke-studded autobiography or action-packed romance seems to be over. The travel films of the "into-the-sunset" variety have been superseded by more significant materials. Librarians are taking seriously their responsibility for value, as they see it.

Three different bases for developing group activities are discernible. One is the material itself, another national or world-wide concerns, and the third the special needs and interests of the individual community.

The use of material as a base is the most prevalent. From one end
Library Objectives and Community Needs

of the country to the other the same titles of books and films appear. In library after library a group has toured the Louvre with Charles Boyer and shared the problems of people of Latin America in Child of Darkness, Child of Light. Bishop Pike's You and the New Morality has appeared on lists, been reviewed, and been discussed by a group in the library, at an organization meeting, or on radio or TV. Fiction rarely seems to be considered an adequate base for such programming.

Usually where these current materials are used in a series of talks or discussions, no connecting thread among the sessions is evident. Obviously, the series is based on available materials that the librarian considers important. The goal, evidently, is to acquaint people with the best of the current output, and in some cases may simply be to entertain, or to bring people to the library. One library labels its film showings "Informative Film Entertainment."

To guide and stimulate people to consider matters of national or world-wide significance is a goal that is reflected in a somewhat smaller number of activities. Lists of materials, prepared for general distribution or often for the use of a community organization, are on such topics as peace, the United Nations, Latin America, Africa, the presidential election, modern art, and conservation. Conspicuous by their rarity are lists on Vietnam or other aspects of foreign policy; on such aspects of civil liberties as race riots, black power, illegal detention and wire tapping; on drug addiction; on the continuing Near East crises; or on religion and Federal aid to schools. No doubt many more such lists than were available for examination have been prepared and activities developed around them, but the available evidence indicates that the grittier topics do not constitute a major source of activity development, except when a current book or film happens to deal with one or another of them. Continuing world affairs and Great Books discussion programs, so well-entrenched that they are seldom reported any more, do, of course, deal with such topics, and without question, library materials collections include them.

Activities based on specific community needs are reported frequently by a few libraries, and rarely, or not at all, by most of the libraries. Some such activities are related to needs that are inevitable in any community. Family finances, including stocks, estates, real estate and income tax, are the subjects of lecture series in some libraries, illustrated occasionally by films, and accompanied by materials lists. Family living and parent education, mental health, community beautifi-

JULY, 1968
cation, the arts, problems of the mature woman, preparation for retirement, and problems of the aging are the subjects of a variety of activities.

The program activities geared to the aging require some explanation. They are prevalent, usually as a once-in-two-weeks or once-a-month group meeting. Some of them are materials-based, with reviews and showings of a variety of materials with no discernible relation to each other or to any particular audience. Others are geared to some of the interests that are generally ascribed to older people, such as travel, history, hobbies, and books on holidays. A few are designed to deal with the problems of the aging, such as health and nutrition, living with relatives, developing interests, and managing limited funds. These latter programs are usually related to the specific community, since representatives of community agencies serving the aging are often involved.

A second group of community-inspired program activities is determined by geography. Films, recordings, and books on a city, state, or region are presented to groups. Definitely community-based, these programs deal largely with the history, ecology, recreational facilities and, occasionally, the economy of the area. Although they may be designed to give information to the newcomer, or, as in the case of the nine-year summer series in the library in one of the most beautiful states of the union, to the tourist, they are no doubt enjoyed as nostalgic entertainment by many other citizens.

Activities geared specifically to current, pressing community needs are usually characterized by library cooperation with one or more agencies or organizations in the community. An urban affairs forum at the library may be co-sponsored by a Citizens Advisory Committee; a three-meeting series on the school drop-out co-sponsored by the Better Schools Committee; a session on emergency psychological services by the Family Service Association and the Mental Health Association; a program on the water resources of the area by the League of Women Voters; or a continuing series on local issues co-sponsored by the Community Association and a branch library of a large city. Whether the library initiates the process that determines the need or whether the lead is taken by another group is not indicated, and is not important as long as the library maintains sufficient awareness of the community to judge whether the areas dealt with are of true significance and that no gaps are left.

In the field of service to the disadvantaged, cooperation with other
agencies and organizations continues to be the rule. Working with
the city’s Anti-poverty Action Committee, one library sponsors a con-
sumer education series, covering food stamps, credit buying, what
food to buy and how to prepare it; another prepares lists for volunteer
aides for study centers, in cooperation with the Community Leader-
ship School; another cooperates with the YWCA on training volunteers
to man a career referral office, stressing the use of materials; another
develops a parents’ program with the Head Start staff. Activities in
support of community literacy programs are prevalent.

A traditional way of determining major community problems and
extending the library’s ability to contribute to their solution is the
program planners’ institute for representatives of clubs and organiza-
tions. Several libraries reported that such an institute is an annual
event; one library holds a number of such institutes in its branches.
Where the emphasis is on program techniques and problems, and
sources of material and information, a constructive but rather limited
goal may be achieved. Only two libraries reported that planning was
done with a citizen’s group, and that community issues were identified
as suggested program content. Program methodology and the use of
materials were demonstrated and introduced in the context of the
subject areas identified. Such an institute is designed to meet the
highest objectives of the library, and is based on a legitimate analysis
of community needs.

An overview of all the activities indicates that most of the libraries
reporting probably subscribe to the objective of continuing education,
but in such a limited way that their commitment to the objective may
be questioned. A series of unrelated film showings, or book reviews,
or materials-based discussions does not meet the definition of library
adult education agreed upon in 1954 at the Allerton Park conference
on training needs of librarians doing adult education work in libraries.
Lester Asheim reported that the consensus of the group assembled
was that adult education, for the purposes of the conference, could
be defined as

those library activities for adult individuals and groups which form
a part of the total educational process and which are marked by a
defined goal, derived from an analysis of needs or interests. These
activities aim at a continuing cumulative educational experience
for those who participate, require special planning and organization,
and may be originated by the library or by a request from the indi-
viduals or groups concerned.10
RUTH WARNCKE

The great bulk of the activities reported is neither purposeful nor continuing and cumulative. At best it is a cafeteria offering of materials characterized, fortunately, by excellence, but contributing only incidentally to the continuing education of those who form a passive audience, or even take part in a question or discussion period.

The topic-based programs developed to meet the needs of specific segments of the community meet the objectives of continuing education. The activities that are based on a knowledge of the specific community and developed in cooperation with other community organizations and agencies fulfill the objectives at the highest level. The staffs of a relatively small proportion of libraries seem to accept the objectives fully, or to understand how to develop activities to achieve them.

In letters accompanying some of the responses, the reasons given for a limited program of services to groups were the familiar and legitimate ones of lack of staff and time. In some instances, however, the number of random activities was large. The staff needed to develop and carry out these activities could have spent their time on activities that would more specifically serve the generally accepted educational objectives of the library.

Lee points out that the educational work of the library is based for the most part on unexamined assumptions, and recommends analytical study of the ideas upon which the provision of educational services and programs of public libraries is based. The apparent tenuousness of the relationship between accepted objectives and many of the activities intended to carry them out supports his recommendation, and suggests that the matter is one of some urgency, deserving of a high priority in programs of library research.

References

4. Ibid., p. 18.

[12]
Library Objectives and Community Needs

