Introduction

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The concept of "group services" on which the articles in this issue of Library Trends are based is not original, but was formulated out of years of observation, discussion and practice. Formulated in late 1965, it is the same as that stated by Robert E. Lee in his Continuing Education for Adults Through the American Public Library, which was published in 1966. Lee says, "What is often called 'group work' in public libraries may be divided into two main types: (1) services to adult educational agencies and to community groups and (2) library-sponsored group programs."¹

The educational function of the public library was agreed upon from the beginning. It was expressed in the purposes of the first libraries established in this country and has continued to find such expression, though its practice may have faltered, to the present day as evidenced in Minimum Standards for Public Library Systems, 1966.² It has appeared under different guises, from "reader's advisor" through "adult education" to the now more commonly used term "continuing education." Regardless of the term used to describe this continuing function its objective has remained the same—to teach the individual "of every age, education, philosophy, occupation, economic level, ethnic origin, and human condition . . . regardless of where he lives."³ This is a grand ambition indeed, and no public library has ever completely realized it, but as in the case of our national ambitions, it constitutes that "standard to which the wise . . . can repair."⁴ This issue of Library Trends is devoted to some of the methods being used today to attain that standard. The recently adopted Minimum Standards for Public Library Systems, 1966⁵ has been used as a basis for the advocacy of group services. Each chapter used as its text either a guiding principle or an appropriate standard from this volume, and several authors have included these quotations

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in their chapters. Eleanor Phinney compiled a questionnaire, based partly on an article in *North Carolina Libraries*, which was sent to seventy-two libraries representative in size, geographic distribution and type of governmental structure. Each of the chapter authors was given the opportunity to include a question in the questionnaire if he so wished and the results were made available to authors. The questionnaire was designed to elicit information on trends in public library services to adult individuals and groups since the publication in 1954 of *Adult Education Activities in Public Libraries*.

Historically, group services have been a point of controversy, as many will recall. Not longer than ten to fifteen years ago prominent librarians were debating the merits of service to the individual versus service to groups, and cries of "the book is basic" and "the library is the last stronghold of service to the individual" were heard across the land. Now some of these same librarians are attempting to reach even the unorganized socio-economic groups through methods that would have been thought unorthodox in the forties and fifties, not only through the then often derided audio-visual media, but through unusual physical facilities, mobile and otherwise, even through street corner story-telling, block parties, rock bands, guitar music and beards. And more power to them—if they do reach the people.

The point is—to reach "the individual where he lives." If we can only reach him through an organized group to which he belongs, or through an unorganized, social grouping of which he is, not necessarily by choice, a member, then it is through this avenue that the approach must be made. This is not in conflict with the library’s time-honored responsibility to the individual. It is only finding ways to extend that responsibility to individuals other than those whose use of the library is self-motivated.

Is this responsibility too great for the American public library to assume today? Social and economic factors have greatly increased the numbers of the two groups at opposite extremes of educational level—the illiterate or functionally illiterate who must be made productive if they are to contribute to the country’s well-being and enjoy its benefits; and the highly educated, highly skilled professional, technical and managerial group whose sophisticated demands must be met. In between is that "general reader" as mentioned in Mary Lee Bundy’s recent enlightening article on public library use. Unintentionally perhaps, this article seems to regard the needs of the general reader as of less importance than those of the student or professional seeking
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factual information. Undoubtedly some of these general readers are continuing to pursue their own self-education, at whatever level, and sometimes on a broad basis.

Can today’s public library serve all of these groups adequately? If not, where should its emphasis be placed? This issue addresses itself to what is being done today to give library service to groups in our population, with some attention to how these services have developed. In the opinion of some of the authors, libraries are not addressing themselves sufficiently to the most difficult problems facing our time, thereby scanting their educational responsibilities. Mary Lee Bundy has pleaded that “public libraries reconsider and reassess their basic commitments and sort out carefully the alternatives before them.” 9 If these articles help us to assess more accurately where we are now, so that we may consider more intelligently where we should be, they will have served a purpose.

References

3. Ibid., p. 27.
4. George Washington’s speech to the Constitutional Convention, 1787.
9. Ibid., p. 382.