The Changing Environment and Changing Institution: The Urban Library

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The scope of this paper was defined by the issue editor to include the urban library system generally, with specific emphasis on administration and on "programs and services for a changing society and new clientele . . . community relationships . . . [and] financing of programs." In an effort to carry out this assignment, the author shall use the terms "library," "librarian," and "library materials" in their broadest connotation as components of the total educational communications enterprise, both private and public.

In connection with the theme of this issue, it should be noted that concepts and practices of formal education at all levels are undergoing rapid and radical change, sometimes with eagerness, but more often with reluctance, and occasionally with truculence or frightened hostility. No school today can afford the luxury or comfort of complacency. Almost without exception, these changes, properly understood, have direct implications for libraries and the practice of librarianship.

Many of these changes are, or will prove to be, healthy and productive. However, as an example, one notable position currently being taken by the traditional public education establishment is clearly wrong-headed, unrealistic, and shortsighted. This position is based on the concept that our conventional system of public education can and should expand to embrace any and all recognized, new or modified educational needs, including those applicable to adults. Such a concept, in attempting to foreclose a variety of educational alternatives, perpetuates an error dating at least from the passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958.

This concept, as it relates to library services, is revealed by some major recommendations of the New York State Commissioner of Educa-

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tion's Committee on Library Development. These recommendations were expressed, in part, as follows:

The elementary school media center should have the responsibility and the capacity to meet all the library needs of all children except those in health, welfare, and correctional institutions. (The term "children" in this context is defined as that group of users now served by children's rooms in public libraries—usually preschool through grade six.)

The State should subsidize school libraries to cover costs of "nonaffiliated" student users, e.g., children from private and parochial schools and preschool children. Hours of school libraries should be extended through evenings, weekends, and vacation periods.

Advisory service to parents and other adults concerned with individualized reading, viewing, and listening guidance for children should be a function of the school media center.¹

The rationale and justification for these conclusions would, in the absence of the establishment bias noted above, have supported a diametrically opposite series of recommendations. Instead, we are faced with a retrograde notion which attempts to preserve, by ever larger expansion, a bureaucratic monolith which is itself the major obstacle to educational reform.

Viewed objectively, current concepts and practices in education are diversifying in ways which are increasingly compatible with the diversity, both existing and potential, of the good public library. Some of the more significant changes, all with direct implications for librarianship and library materials, are: open admissions programs for higher education, particularly at the community college level; external degree and equivalency credit programs; informal classroom learning and the immediate possibility of individually prescribed multi-media instructional environments; changes in archaic and arcane certification requirements, and in the increasingly enlightened use of paraprofessionals; the multitude of literacy programs for the educationally disadvantaged at all age levels; and possibly the most important, the growing opportunities in informal education through street academies, free schools, anti-poverty programs, and consumer education activities by public and private organizations and agencies, including churches.

The latter trend becomes more highly visible in the following comparison: in 1960 the education core (elementary, secondary, undergraduate, and graduate, private and public, educational institutions) had an enrollment of 48.4 million or 63 percent of those engaged in...
education. In 1970 the enrollment rose to 63.8 million, but the proportion of the total dropped to 51 percent. Comparable data for the education periphery (industrial, organizational, and other adult described above) show a 1960 enrollment of 28.3 million, 37 percent of the total, increasing by 1970 to an enrollment of 80.3 million or 49 percent of the total.2

It is, therefore, probable that sometime between now and 1975 the number of people undertaking learning in an organized way outside the conventional school structure will, for the first time in our history, exceed the number of those within the traditional school system. Thus the approaching shadow of life-long learning in the real and practical sense is cast upon this new decade. As Charles Reich sees it:

The first major theme of this new way of life must be education—education not in the limited sense of training in school, but in its largest and most humanistic meaning. . . . We have vastly underestimated the amount of education and consciousness that is required to meet the demands of organization and technology.

We have also greatly underestimated the amount and kind of education needed to keep any given individual from being unable to adapt to change. The individual whose education stops at eighteen or twenty-one is a pathetic sight in our society. Increasingly he is obsolete in his work. . . . He is unable to understand his society, unable to vote in a responsible way, unable to communicate with his own children or to understand their culture.

What we urgently need is not training but education, not indoctrination but the expansion of each individual—a process continuing throughout life.8

Although I have been associated with the public library on the federal, state, and local levels, I am still not simply claiming that it is a better institution than the school library. Many of us who see so clearly the vital role of libraries in our times fail to recognize the almost total inadequacy of our present, actual performance. The price to libraries of doing business as usual will be a richly deserved oblivion. Down payments are now being made by many of our urban libraries whose luster wears the patina of yesteryear. However, those who use this situation to predict the demise, later or sooner, of the public library are staring too long into McLuhan’s rear-view mirror.

Library materials and librarians’ skills will continue to increase in value as components of the social fabric and the educational enterprise—but the library must change. Both “business as usual” and “more of
the same" are prescriptions for purgatory. Planning for libraries must shift toward a much broader and more flexible concept of the nature of education, the uses and users of information, and the appropriate role of communications media in achieving the goals of the individual and of society.

It is this goal-oriented, performance-related approach which will be most productive in bringing about those institutional changes which will be required to enhance and extend the usefulness of libraries. In this light, library planning can be said to start with what might be called institutional behavioral objectives. The next step is to manage library operations and allocate library resources in ways which will most efficiently achieve the objectives. In addition to helping shape program concept and design, this view also has promising implications for library finances.

A basic purpose of the library function, including its role with respect to information and recreation, is to influence, in positive and productive directions, the total quality of life as expressed in the philosophy and behavior of the individual and the community. The largest part of the work of the world during the remainder of the twentieth century will be coping effectively with our personal, social, natural, and economic environments.

The tasks within this framework form clusters ranging from the individual and his struggles with personal identity, self-esteem, family and career decisions and the like to such massive concerns as international understanding, environmental deterioration, over-population, data processing and control, and maldistribution of wealth.

An illustration of a segment of the problem at the atomistic level is provided in a report by James Coleman: "In the third grade, for example, the average Negro in the metropolitan northeast is one year behind the average white in reading ability; by grade six, he is more than a year and a half behind; by grade nine, he is more than two and a half years behind; and by the twelfth grade, he is nearly three years behind the average white."

In a study commissioned by the National Reading Council, Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., used new concepts of "survival literacy" based on the respondents' ability to read, comprehend and fill out such application forms as those for a social security number, public welfare assistance, Medicaid, a personal bank loan, and a driver's license. Evaluation of respondent performance was based solely on reading ability and results were analyzed in four functional literacy groups: low survival threshold, questionable survival threshold, marginal, and finally,
likely survival threshold. Converting the sample to the total population over sixteen years of age, 4.3 million Americans fall into the low group, 7.1 million into the questionable group and 18.5 million into the marginal category. Thus nearly 30 million out-of-school Americans now have serious reading difficulties.

These two studies of reading, one within and one without the educational system, are ample justification for the high priority being given to the right to read program by the U.S. Office of Education and for the activities being undertaken by the National Reading Council. Obviously, the problems identified by these and other supporting research sources should become an immediate concern for libraries and librarians.

An extension of these data on print literacy would suggest the existence of problems in what might be called communications literacy in application to non-print media. Television, the still slumbering giant of educational technology, and radio, despite the mediocre median of their programming, may, nevertheless, be used on several different levels. Librarians could occupy a highly strategic role as advisors and advocates on behalf of the consumers of communication. The whole concept of literacy has not been examined in sufficient depth. Much of our understanding of the motivation to read and of the results of reading still lies well beyond either an arbitrary standard such as sixth grade level or the more imaginative four thresholds of Harris. The increasing complexities of social and technological organization require more competence in the comprehension of all media than ever before.

The Phase I report of the Educational Media Selection Centers program clearly shows our current deficiencies in providing teachers and other adults working with children and students with adequate access to available media and in giving sufficient training in their use. A high priority commitment in materials selection and use, in programming, and in library education and research would make libraries potent partners in achieving the goals of the right to read effort.

Thus far the author has dwelt on literacy as an example of goal orientation by libraries because of the direct stake which library materials and services have in the issue. That most other issues may be once removed from the library as an institution does not mean that library facilities and resources cannot be of substantial aid in their solution. Three other national priorities receiving widespread current attention have direct relevance to the design and delivery of good library services: early childhood education, including the programming of day care facilities; education on dangerous and addictive drugs and the re-
habilitation of users; and environmental pollution and the conservation of natural resources.

We now know a great deal about the crucial importance of the pre-school years in a child's acquiring a sense of self, building relationships with others, and developing perceptions of his world. Approximately one-half of all growth in human intelligence takes place between birth and four years of age. Two-thirds of one's intellectual development occurs before traditional formal education begins. No day care facility should be without books and other library materials. Libraries should reach out more effectively to help parents, teachers, and other adults enrich and diversify the early childhood experience.

An estimated 30,000 to 40,000 U.S. military personnel in Southeast Asia are now believed to be addicted to drugs, primarily to heroin. As they come home, they join a civilian addict population estimated to be 250,000. Accurate and complete information on drugs in all media, as an aid in prevention, should be provided to all. Rehabilitation facilities and drug addiction treatment centers should have a full range of recreational, vocational, and educational media.

Environmental pollution and the conservation of natural resources also relate directly to a continuous flow of up-to-date information on research and technological development. These problems, like all others, are proving to be more complex, more interrelated, and more persistent than we like to think. Single, quick, or simple remedies do not exist.

Library extension facilities, designed to provide maximum ease of access, also lend themselves to tasks at the neighborhood and community levels. Zoning and other local legislation, neighborhood planning and renewal, and effective referrals for legal, educational and social services should all be provided in accordance with local area needs.

Whatever the task, the goal, or the problem, an effective response will be dependent on responsible citizen action. Such action must be fully informed, correctly directed and well organized. Those librarians who are themselves well informed and socially conscious can and should provide both personal leadership and leadership training in those situations where it does not exist.

Some specific elements of institutional change which are needed in creating a goal- or task-oriented library are:

1. Our resources should be put to work in place of our rhetoric. The library's materials and the librarian's skills should be injected into...
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the affairs of communities and individuals. Outreach should be conceived as a change in the nature of the library itself and not a mere breach in the Carnegie cocoon. Librarianship should be practiced without regard to physical settings and should be evident in all the places where people work, live, play or congregate.

2. Decisions on such library questions as materials selection, scope of collections, hours of service, library programs, and staffing requirements should be made at levels closest to those served by each facility. This may be accomplished by the establishment of community policy boards or through close and continuous staff contact with groups and individuals within the area served. The policies, procedures, and program activities of each library unit should reflect the special characteristics of its neighborhood.

3. People should be recruited, either paid or volunteer, who are enthusiastic about books and other library materials, whose lives have been changed by their use, and who are concerned about our problems and issues.

4. Professional librarians should be used only for the practice of librarianship: acquisition, cataloging, reference, and, above all, training of non-professional staff in community relations, reader guidance, storytelling, etc. Librarians should not be made responsible for agency management: scheduling, maintenance, routine supervision or security. A notable failure of our profession is that we have not developed, or even applied, sound management practices to library service. Our misuse of staff, our lack of efficient differentiation of assignments, our Neanderthal education and certification requirements deserve to be treated as the scandal they are. Unless we put our libraries on a well managed basis with tight and competitive performance standards, those responsible for budget decisions will not provide adequate funds.

5. Another conspicuous failure of the library profession is the almost total lack of research, development and evaluation efforts in operational library settings. All library programs, activities, and services should be subject to continuous review and evaluation so that the allocation of all resources may be made annually or more often in the most enlightened ways.

6. In moving a library toward a goal orientation, it is essential to be as specific as possible. Every effort should be made to quantify both the goal and the program. In the case of reading deficiencies, for example, each library should know the types and extent of the problems in its service area. Then a specific proportion of the target group should be reached with the appropriate services and materials in a scheduled sequence. Successes and failures should be measured.
7. Whatever the goals to reach, or tasks to perform, the library must become the community bastion of intellectual freedom. No criteria, other than their usefulness for the task at hand, should be applied to the library's collections. Creative indigenous materials, fugitive and ephemeral publications may have special value in local situations. Because of both their frailty and their vulnerability, the freedoms of the first amendment require the vigilance and protection which the library is in a unique position to provide.

The U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography might almost have had a charter for libraries in mind when it said, "We live in a free pluralistic society which places its trust in the competition of ideas in a free market place. Persuasion is a preferred technique. Coercion, repression and censorship in order to promote a given set of views are not tolerable in our society. . . . The Commission believes that there is no warrant for continued governmental interference with the full freedom of adults to read, obtain or view whatever such material they wish."

8. Librarians should stop regarding their institutions as barques of righteousness beleaguered upon a sea of indifference. Every cause has its champions and libraries must find and forge new alliances which will lend increased strength and support to the larger common cause. Targeted funds from the federal government are available for many purposes: urban development and renewal exemplified by the model cities program; employment and training through the Labor Department and the Office of Economic Opportunity; consolidated efforts to mount effective programs of volunteer services in and through such local agencies as schools and libraries; the right to read program of the U.S. Office of Education and its other major priority programs; funds available for special services, including education for minority and ethnic groups—the American Indians, veterans, and migrants and other agricultural workers; and, grants to promising programs in the arts and humanities.

Whatever form the various revenue-sharing proposals may ultimately take, it seems clear that there will continue to be a legislative interest at all levels in the results of expenditures of public funds. Wherever appropriate, the library must take the initiative in identifying its role in accomplishing the desired results and then demonstrate delivery on this promise. The benefits to libraries are twofold and cumulative. First, libraries will find non-library sources of funding for library programs. Second, and of greater long range importance, libraries will build broader and deeper bases of support in myriad agencies and organizations in the public and quasi-public arena, as well as in the pri-
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vate sector. The trend toward public financing by function rather than by institution or category is already under way. The goal-oriented library ready and able to move with this trend will not only survive, it will prevail and prosper.

References

5. Data from "Survival Literacy Study Conducted for the National Reading Council." Survey conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., Sept. 1970 (Study no. 2036). The staff arm of the Council is the National Reading Center at 1776 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES