



# The Personnel Needed for Tomorrow's Main Libraries

ERVIN J. GAINES

IT IS THE BASIC ASSUMPTION of this paper that I am talking about a large central public library with varied collections and subject departments, together with a well developed branch library system administered from the central library and dependent upon it for services. This assumption suggests that I ought to discuss organizational structure as well as the kinds of people required. Like almost everything else in librarianship, the opinions about organization and staffing have been uttered and contested many times. There are no novelties. It is probably fair to say that there is no best way to staff a library; among the many possible ways, each institution evolves its own in harmony with staff temperaments, library traditions, prevailing politics, and local folkways. Even though American homogenization proceeds at a rapid rate, Boston is still distinguishable from Los Angeles and Birmingham from Newark. A strong librarian with positive and aggressively bold opinions and a long tenure can probably imprint his own personality upon a library, but it is probably also true that opportunities for such idiosyncratic library development are diminishing because long tenures are giving way to mobility, and standardization is the current style. With minimal opportunity for innovation, the librarian is less the creative artist and more the oiler of the machine.

What follows is not an attempt to search the literature and compile evidence from the past; each reader can do that for himself. The special characteristics of certain library systems are already sufficiently well known or are so readily accessible as to need no detailing here. The librarian acutely conscious of systematized, low-cost processing can turn to Wayne County Public Library for more information; one perplexed about the comparative virtues of popularization of the collections (Chicago) as compared with the building of great research li-

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Ervin J. Gaines is Director, Minneapolis Public Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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braries (Boston or New York), can investigate them on their home ground.

Enoch Pratt Free Library (Baltimore) and Detroit Public Library have been regarded as suitable models for libraries that aspire to hold middle ground; these two have been dignified without excessive snobbery and have served the common reader without accumulating graveyards of dead books. American city libraries now tend to resemble Enoch Pratt Free Library and Detroit Public Library more than they resemble either Boston Public Library or Chicago Public Library, and these latter libraries are both ameliorating their excesses. Under the spur of standardization, all city libraries are rapidly moving to a uniformity which makes them nearly interchangeable. With the leveling process hard at work, the differences among libraries in the future are likely to rest on their skill and effectiveness in execution rather than in basic philosophy. Big league baseball teams are all alike, except that some play the game better because they have more talented players. And, I might add, American, rather than, let us say, German, public library philosophy is certainly going to be the mode in other parts of the world.

If what is left beyond these examples is reducible to managerial skill, useful discussion may be confined to technique. The allocation of the budget will be arranged in such a way as to achieve the commercial dream of maximum productivity. Acute disagreement will be centered on such things as the number of professionals in a library and the needed proportion of books to people. Just now, but probably only for a short time, the responsibility of the library toward non-users is an issue; the debate over outreach will end when it can be determined that outreach programs really work. If they do, all libraries will adopt them; if they do not, the matter will fade from discussion. In short, most debates about library management are confined to marginal issues of taste; the main job is already done.

Since it is difficult to divorce oneself from his own particular views and since there seems to be no particular reason to do so except on some tendentious theory of objectivity, I will proceed to outline some of the variables that enter into discussions and decision-making from the vantage point of the Minneapolis Public Library.

First, one should be acutely conscious of the rapidly rising cost of personnel; this is good because fair pay for work performed eliminates the old shibboleth that the clean, pious atmosphere of a library is its own reward, and that money should not sully a librarian's virtue. Good

professionals should be well paid, and if that strains the budget, then so be it. In return, a well paid professional should be a productive human being, not given to excessive preoccupation with the trivia of the job. The professional should not have to spend large segments of his time in repetitive work. Unfortunately this acknowledged truth usually leads us to apply the Peter principle by promoting able people to positions such as coordinators and then filling the vacated job with another, but junior professional. This in turn initiates pressure to enlarge the professional staff. This tendency must be resisted because by slow increments it compounds the budgetary problem without improving library service.

Central libraries tend to be overstaffed with professionals in subject departments. The training of paraprofessionals, clerks, aides—call them what you will—should be encouraged. Every department head should find ways to reduce the complement of professionals, and to delegate downward the functions usually deemed to be the prerogative of the professional. It is costly to retain professionals on tap at reference desks at all times. A small model will illustrate this point:

Assume eight departments in a main library are open sixty hours a week and assume a forty-hour work week. Allowing for no schedule overlaps, no down time, lunches, vacations or illness, it takes twelve professionals to staff those eight desks. At a salary of \$10,000 annually, the cost for direct salaries (without fringe benefits) is \$120,000. A fairly busy library will generate 500,000 reference questions—(for easy arithmetic make it 480,000). That comes to twenty-five cents per question answered. It also averages out to fewer than fifteen questions per hour.

These are extremely conservative figures, and they add up to a relatively costly operation, especially when we reflect on the average quality of the questions, and the probability that most of them can be answered by less highly educated personnel. The cost would not matter if society were willing to underwrite it; however, libraries are not usually the favored darlings of the civic budget, and such costly service erodes the book budget, a fact which has been noted many times in comparing British and American libraries.

Aside from cost there is a human waste. A steady daily diet of reference work has a tendency to dull the initiative and flexibility of a librarian. It takes a particularly able and resilient person to remain fresh and creative on such assignments over long spans of time. The built-in capabilities of well-trained and intelligent librarians warrant better utili-

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zation of their time and talents, for their own, as well as the library's good. It is a luxury—and not a very good one—to maintain professional talent at public service desks as a routine matter. Selective assignments to handle peak load periods should be made, but for most purposes the librarian who can be called from another activity or location will ordinarily meet the service need as it arises. Supermarket librarianship may sound harsh on the delicate professional ear, but it does provide a way out of the budgetary dilemma. We already know from Bundy<sup>1</sup> and Berelson<sup>2</sup> that library users tend to be well educated, but public library desks are staffed as though patrons are innocent. Put another way, libraries tend to staff for the least able patron.

There is also an inclination toward fragmented library service in main buildings. Library architecture reflects the tendency and tells us much about how librarians have conceived their institutions in the past. The unified library with one major point of inquiry would aid in making better use of librarians' talents, and to the degree possible within the limitations of existing spatial arrangements, it would seem desirable to try to combine public service elements. Librarians freed from the shackles of routines could be better utilized in the planning for new services and for enrichment of traditional ones.

Book selection absorbs substantially more personnel investment than it should. In 1971 Minneapolis will add about 20,000 titles to its collections. While it is true that much labor must go into the acquisitions effort to achieve such a number, the utilization of commercial enterprises to supply the major part of this acquisitions program should be considered. By using a commercial supplier like Abel, a library may make errors in choice, but these probably will be of no greater significance than the errors made currently. A primary duty of a library is to create a sound, sensible book selection policy that will be reviewed periodically both to test its effectiveness and to measure the capabilities of the librarians doing the selecting. With a good selection policy a wrongly acquired book is no great burden, and the omitted acquisition can be picked up as the need arises through the discovery of its absence during review periods. Reader demand will normally call attention to any gap in the collections, if librarians are willing to listen to the signals. Staff feedback should provide the stimulus to lead to the acquisition of overlooked items.

Book selection, however, must not be performed without recourse to the outside world. There must be a continuing consciousness by the librarian of what the sophisticated library user wants as compared with

what the collection holds. Book selection policies must be flexible and must be made to grow and change with the society. Collecting must be aggressive for a central library because the library's utility will depend not only on what publishers offer for sale, but what the librarians perceive to be wanted or needed within the city. The Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh saw long ago that the genius of the community lay in science and technology, with the result that a superb collection in this area was accumulated. Los Angeles did not perceive that the motion picture was vital, hence the best collection on the motion picture industry is elsewhere—in Washington, D.C. One can conclude from such observations that librarians should strive to be more than good technicians. They must develop an awareness of their environment that runs deep and touches the fundamental springs of the community. Why does one's city exist? What really goes on inside it to make it live? It is certainly not only the superficial events recorded in the daily newspapers. One must develop an inner ear to hear the subtler rhythms and pulses.

The coordination function in a library ought to be brought into question, although the subject is delicate. The very title, coordinator, suggests the ambiguity of the job. What are librarians doing that they need to have their work coordinated by one of their own number? Are the collection-service links within an institution so broken and bent that they require the full-time attention of a librarian to mend them? If so, then the weakness may lie either in the administrator or the librarian on the firing line. Undoubtedly coordinators keep busy; although I suspect, perhaps naively, that what coordinators do is either the work of the agency and department heads or of the administrators.

In spite of any brave talk about the advantages of one or another model of organization, most libraries tend to resemble each other in their service delivery. There are roles to be played in city libraries which require "unattached" librarians not pinned down to a desk schedule—positions which require multiple skills and activities, but a job title like coordinator does not describe it. Instead, "coordinator" tends to define too rigidly the acceptable fields of activity. Can an adult coordinator do what a young adult coordinator does, or are the activities mutually exclusive? Names transform activities, and I suggest that coordinator be dropped not only because it is not very flattering, but because it is library shop jargon, unknown to the outside world. Librarians who are inward-looking often forget the effect of what they do on the outside world. Besides, coordinators are "staff" people and

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get into the hair of the "line" people. The military establishment, which is somewhat larger than a library, can develop line and staff functions. A library imitates that model badly. More properly, when a supervisor needs help, the administrator should supply it, but without playing games with organizational charts; he should be able to tuck the added staff into the existing hierarchy, and the fewer crossed lines the better. Simplicity of organization is a desirable goal and, if charted, should resemble a series of integrated triangles (as in fig. 1) rather than a chain-like fence.

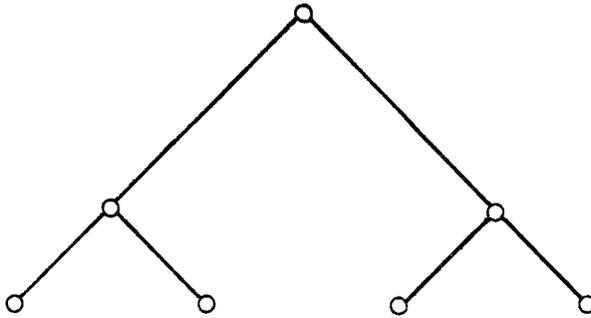


Fig. 1. Desirable Organizational Model

The only true library coordinator is the library director. His is the only position in the library that affords the perspective requisite for the proper assigning of priorities. If that perspective is not used to managerial advantage, then lopsided proliferations of personnel may occur.

Every professional supervisor in a library should have some budgetary accountability. If one supervisor manages better than another, training and instruction are readily available in the person of the successful supervisor. It is endemic in public librarianship to let the boss worry about the money. Cost-consciousness ought to be part of every librarian's mental and emotional equipment, although this is not generally prevailing practice.

Librarians, to the extent possible, should be relieved of the tyranny of schedules. Librarians can do more productive work if they can be given flexibility in setting the times and places of work. The clerical staff can keep the shop surprisingly well, if only they are both trained and trusted. The fear of error by clerks is exaggerated. The social consequences of error are small and the cost of forestalling error by profes-

sional intervention is large. We should not forget that librarians, as well as clerks, have been known to err, and sometimes their errors have more grievous effects on the library's operation because they are sanctified by the professional imprimatur. A central library's insistence on continuous in-house presence of professionals—especially department heads—inhibits the building of important community contacts. Art librarians who do not know the local museum directors, music librarians who never visit with the conductors of the symphony orchestra, business librarians who never sit down in a corporate office or at the local chamber of commerce, and literature librarians who have never met the book-page editor or talked to the head of the English department at a local university cannot seriously be said to be effective at their jobs. Fault, however, lies with the library director, not with them, for espousing the narrowest view of their function. Librarians would do well to interact with the knowledgeable professionals in their fields of responsibility, for only by so interacting can they come to know their "markets" and the interests of their clients, actual and potential.

Selling the main library to the community is not merely hobnobbing with garden clubs, nor is it only preparing handouts and indulging in publicity games. It is deploying the full professional resources into all the communities. In this connection it is important to understand that the community is not simply a geographical entity, but also a cultural and economic one. For the purposes of the main library, the community must be seen not as the downtown area, but as many layers of specialized interest and knowledge. "Culture bugs," who often consume librarians' time, are not necessarily the most important people for librarians to know. Too much effort expended on the promotion of or education for "culture" (often based on vague or elusive concepts) squanders resources on dilettantism, and ultimately gives libraries that aura of triviality which makes them expendable in times of crisis. Learning is important, but libraries often reduce it to the level of entertainment. Learning cannot be sugarcoated without losing its nutritive power. Who really is going to come to the rescue of a beleaguered library if it is remembered chiefly for its nice travel films? The gut issues are solid information and responsible, respected librarian-specialists to dig it out and put it into the hands of patrons.

Main libraries, then, ought to be staffed with able, versatile outgoing people, who are encouraged to believe that they are able to manage their areas of responsibility, and who can become a fraternity of professionals. Colleges develop faculties which meet the obligations of the

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curriculum but are otherwise let alone. Libraries should develop professional cadres which can be made responsible for meeting the routine requirements of their public service, and then be let free to make their expertise penetrate the community. Interaction is not only desirable—it is vital to the proper functioning of a library. No good children's librarian would think of working without school inputs. But every area of a library's public service effort has its complementary experts outside the library whose viewpoints and service needs should find expression in the library professional. Librarians need to do more than react to the demands placed upon them—they need to understand and anticipate them.

Libraries are soft touches for salesmen. If somebody produces something, libraries buy it when they should be finding out what is needed and then either producing it themselves or pressing somebody to produce it for them. When the Minneapolis Public Library negotiated with Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company to develop its Tattle-Tape installation, it insisted that it be done their way, not the producer's way. When the Minneapolis Public Library detected a need for a newspaper index, they produced it themselves and sold it to other libraries; a possibility to do literature searches for business on a fee basis went to the chamber of commerce and won its backing; and anticipating the explosion in environmental science, the library mustered public support for a state bill to finance the project. Such activities are not the run-of-the-mill concerns of librarians, but they are the concerns of libraries. Only alert professional staff members can see that these things are done. Let a clerk look up the population of Katmandu; it is not difficult to learn how, and one certainly does not need to waste extravagantly the talent of a college graduate with a master's degree in library science to do it.

The city library of the future must be the information center of the community. It will take every scrap of talent and energy to accomplish this purpose. Even now, across the nation, every city is spending untold thousands, indeed millions, of dollars gathering information about itself. Let us just consider one aspect of the problem: demographic and property information. Utility companies—gas, power, telephone—must keep extensive records on the location of every installation, including underground and overhead lines. In addition, anticipated needs must be developed, which require close contacts with census figures, public works projects, real estate promotions, city planning and tax assessments. Much of this information is duplicated in both the private and

the public sectors. But does much of it exist in the public library? Probably not. Someone needing this kind of information may have recourse to any of a dozen places, at incalculable cost for the whole ramshackle enterprise. How economical it would be to bring it all together in one place, replicating the currently useful information for institutional use elsewhere, but maintaining a single central resource which everyone can tap as the need arises.

In a recent report prepared for the Minnesota State Planning Agency on land use and settlement, the researchers' concluding remark was:

The main needs . . . will continue to be the different, special management purposes of each type of information. These agencies are dispersed among various state offices and many county and municipal office buildings across the state. . . .

Hence a final *policy question*: To what extent should collection, processing, storage and analysis of data continue to be decentralized? To what extent is a single, central data bank called for?<sup>3</sup>

One might add "in the library" and still have a pertinent question.

It is possible to inventory other deficiencies that plague many, if not most, city libraries. For example, there is a vast reservoir of ephemeral material that floats about in our cities, most of which seldom comes to rest in the library. Local public documents are one example of such material. Few cities insist that the kinds of reports that go into civic decision-making ever come to rest in the public library. They are used once and then stacked away in departmental file drawers, forever inaccessible to the public that paid for them in the first place, and then they are eventually discarded. The only things that a library normally obtains are the glossy publicity handouts that promote the good image of a department or of the political officeholders who happen at the moment to occupy the seats of power. The material deemed appropriate for the library is so old as to be quaint and hence presumed to be of historical value only.

There is an even vaster literature that circulates within the business community. The nation's security and banking houses turn out reports on commerce and industry that constantly elude the librarian's grasp, yet if collected would enrich society's awareness of itself. But for some reason most libraries do not even try to move into these fields.

One possible explanation for this neglect is in the mental model we have made of the library. We have conceived of the library primarily in terms of popular education through widely disseminated trade books that move in well-defined channels developed by publishers. There is a

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symbiotic relationship between the publishers' economic welfare and the libraries' holdings. Put another way, publishers print what will sell, regardless of the social needs of the reader. It is this publishing limitation that provokes a phenomenon like the underground press. Libraries must reach farther than the trade publications. The flow of most library materials is fairly well standardized, and librarians are trained like assembly line workers to handle this material within prescribed doctrines that have grown up from the past. Locked in as librarians are, they have little time to do much more than keep the flow orderly. Their book supply is predictable, their clientele is predictable, and their days are spent keeping things moving. If they satisfy the thirst for bestsellers, their clients purr in appreciation, their circulation figures are respectable and all goes well. But most of this service is routinized and librarians fall easily into the velvet rut.

Another explanation for librarians' sluggishness about new kinds of collecting may lie in the recent explosive meetings of the American Library Association where there have been forcefully reiterated appeals to librarians to become militant activists in reforming society along new lines. I have failed to respond to this bugle call mainly because I see such activities as a diversion from the true vocation of librarianship which is not to stimulate the appetite, but to feed it. I have become wary of the promotional activities which try to place the public library in a competitive position with respect to communications systems, and I emphatically object to the role of the library as social advocate. What I feel the library should do instead is understand the tides of opinion, synthesize them, and channel them through the library by every available means.

The greatest task before the city library is to collect what is increasingly elusive and ephemeral and to arrange what is collected in ways that will accelerate the transmission of information from source to consumer. If libraries dilute their energies by moving into futile competition with media, or if they perceive themselves as missionaries to draw the unsaved closer to their bosoms, they will not build great libraries nor serve their present clients well.

The clients of the library are more than individual readers in pursuit of pleasure; they are more than the children entering the world of knowledge; they are more than the students learning to search out material in a systematic way. They are, above all, people on a hunt for information either with respect to projects they have conceived for themselves or for the larger cooperative enterprises on which they are

engaged. It is this little group which the library has only partially responded to, and yet in today's complex society they may be the largest and most significant of all.

What then does this tell us about the kinds of librarians the city library must seek? In addition to the traits that have been suggested—versatility, extroversion, responsibility-seeking—libraries must accede to the further pressures of specialization, even though to do so will make lateral communications within the library more difficult. I make no demur to the desirability of cultivating subject specialists of the kinds libraries have long accepted. There is no substitute for technical knowledge of music in a music librarian, or history in a history librarian, but there must be other specialists as well. No large library can continue to operate without knowledgeable people who can discuss intelligently computer capabilities and their use in libraries, even though much of what is being advocated for computerization in libraries may have questionable value at present.

Libraries must be able to develop links to transfer information from one place to another and from one form to another and to do so at acceptable cost levels. While Ellsworth Mason's put-down of computers may be a kind of burlesque or satire, he is fundamentally sound in calling attention to the neglect of cost-effectiveness.<sup>4</sup> As I have stated in another context, libraries are perhaps over-zealous in pursuing the newer gadgets of communication when they are still not altogether comfortable with the telephone.<sup>5</sup>

Librarians who have more than a generalized and diffused sense of service are extremely valuable. Librarians generally are good at counting things, but not at measuring things. Developing this habit of mind and evaluating it in job applicants is an extremely difficult task. This sense of constant quantitative measurement is best cultivated on the job by constant reiteration of the theme in staff meetings, by insisting that the undertaking of any new project must be preceded by an evaluation of the variables and the contingencies that may occur, and by establishing measures of success or failure against which the enterprise can be judged. The practice of measurement will cultivate both the skill and the attitude requisite for its extension. Keyes Metcalf is a librarian with this type of skill, but he is rather out of the ordinary, and his most important work is related to the physical environment of the library rather than to the services performed. Nevertheless his example deserves emulation.

In selecting librarians for employment, there is no exact formula for

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success. The traditional methods of interview and assessment of prior achievement are probably not to be supplanted by other techniques, such as testing. The human element is so infinitely complex as to make it not worth the effort that would be required to achieve errorless personnel selection. One finally comes to make a judgment about an applicant based on an intuition about how he or she will fit into the organization. An employer can hardly go poking around into an applicant's personal life without creating deep hostility. Nevertheless the applicant's personal life may have a crucial bearing on job performance. The employer merely prays that the decision to hire will be a good one.

Once on the job, however, the librarian can be observed. It is his day-in-day-out actions that will, over the span of months or years, make the determination. But this is a slow process. At the Minneapolis Public Library, after some protest, the probationary period both for new employees and for promotions was lengthened from six months to a year. It was found that success in one position did not necessarily carry over into a new position, even when we were well acquainted with the staff member involved. Periodic review and counseling during probation help to cement the final evaluation which locks the person to the job.

Because public employment is, except when extreme behavior problems arise, permanent, the probationary period is critical. Once that has passed the employer simply makes do with the result which is normally quite acceptable. If human society is for human beings, then the organizational objectives cannot be permitted to preempt the rights of the man or woman to have in his job a climate of security and comfort. Commercial enterprises have been notoriously callous about their employees—hiring, firing and transferring to suit the managers. In a public library the law, and rightly so, precludes the use of people as commodities. Although there is the danger that job security may foster indifference and dull the competitive edge, it need not be so, any more than in a family. It is the ambience created within the organization that makes the difference as to how the librarian behaves. Even as there are good and bad families, so there are good and bad libraries. A fiercely authoritarian climate will set up patterns of behavior quite different from those in an egalitarian library. My bias is in favor of a loosely knit organization that provides maximum trust and responsibility to the staff members, where minor errors are treated negligibly and positive incentives are encouraged. A good spirit and mutual respect among all the members is worth far more than arbitrary compliance with rules and regulations. Peer approval is a more effective control than tight super-

vision. The local culture that prevails will operate to determine the norms of behavior and performance.

Formal training as a routine and mechanical enterprise is probably worth less than the effort required to maintain it. Some libraries feel obliged to have training programs, and it is some mark of distinction to display a panoply of training paraphernalia. Training is probably a hangover from World War II when there was an urgent demand for rapid conversion of undifferentiated masses of men into disciplined operating forces. This is not an appropriate stance for a library. Training evolves rather naturally from perceived shortcomings. Such awareness may arise from within the librarian as a challenge to his own self-fulfillment, or it may come from a group recognition that a library should haul up its socks because it is getting sloppy or because it needs to embark on a new enterprise. In such eventualities, training is ad hoc and tailored to the particular situation. I find myself in sympathy with radical educators who incline to the opinion that people learn because of their own inner drives, not because of schooling.

In any event, a library is responsive to its leadership, and it performs well or badly as it falls into harmony with its conductor. If anybody needs constant training it is the library director. Because he must simultaneously look at the community and the staff, his interpretation of his observations will be the measure of success. His training then is to cultivate his sense of what is appropriate and to translate his opinion into action. An ongoing institution does not need to and should not have to move radically in any direction. A library is rather like a delicate mechanism that needs constant minor tinkering to keep it running well. A steady procession of small adjustments will keep the library abreast of its society and will serve to keep the staff from the somnolent apathy that is the mark of a stagnant institution. For the rest, we live with what we have.

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"Work in America," *Atlantic*, 228:62-104, Oct. 1971. This issue contains several articles which place work within the perspective of the entire social structure. The implications for libraries are important. Much work on personnel has been developed in profit-making enterprises. The reader should be conscious of the fact that a library exists to provide service. The difference in purpose causes librarians to behave in ways that are not comparable to the behavior patterns in business. The commercial model of personnel management may not be suitable for libraries.