

Assessing the Information Needs of Rural People: The Development of an Action Strategy for Rural Librarians

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THE COMMUNITY INFORMATION NEEDS/Library Services (CIN/LS) project was undertaken primarily to address what the study team observed as a series of problems related to the public library's role in the delivery of information to rural citizens. The major problem or issue was acknowledged as a familiar one—one which was much easier to identify than to tackle. Stated briefly, people require information and the mission of libraries is to acquire and disseminate information to meet the needs of people in their service areas. The question becomes, therefore, "How can libraries best accomplish this mission?"

Background

If the problem were as easy to solve as it is to state, it would have been solved ages ago. This project has not produced the ultimate solution to the problem of how public libraries should respond to their environments, but the *CIN/LS Guide* is seen as supplying some direction for librarians who are interested in achieving a match between community needs and library programs.

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The team set out to construct a step-by-step procedure for librarians to use in relating their materials acquisition and program development activities to community information needs. Researchers who attempt in the laboratory to fashion a credible instrument for use by practitioners in the real world must quickly identify and deal with several major problems. Very early in their work, the team noted three problem areas: (1) tolerable levels of abstraction, (2) systems considerations, and (3) communicability.

Abstraction

Descriptive and prescriptive components of a model are easily pieced together. Libraries, like other public service agencies, should exist to meet the needs of their communities, and librarians should find ways to discover these needs and then acquire materials and provide services which address those needs (see Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. COMMUNITY NEEDS/LIBRARY RESPONSE

The large circle represents the community. The smaller circle in its center represents the library. The community has needs which library personnel should identify and match with appropriate acquisition, delivery, and program activities—very simple.

But the ease with which such simple models are conceived may prompt planners to construct models which, though they appear simple, are in reality so abstract that they defy implementation in the real world. Such models may provide some help in establishing goals for public service agencies, but they merely describe a small portion of an

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issue. They can only serve to provide partial graphic representation of deceptively complex relationships. Where they omit attention to managerial components and financial constraints, they are deficient. Such models ignore the system and are impossible to effectuate.¹

Systems Considerations

The superimposition of an abstract and simplistic model upon an environment with unresolved problems related to the interconnectedness and interdependency of social forces, human yearnings, decision-making environments, and fiscal machinations dooms the model. The study team observed that if the *CIN/LS Guide* were ever to become operational, its developers would have to acknowledge that a grasp of traditional library science was necessary, perhaps, but certainly not sufficient for dealing with problems faced by rural librarians; and that the penalties of geographical isolation, compounded by the rather low level of visibility of many rural libraries, would have to be addressed by a credible, convincing, and communicative plan.

Communicability

The demands of communicating with numbers of people in rural library service, people who may have limited opportunities for formal library training—of the preservice, in-service, or continuing education type—prompted the study team to aim at producing a guide which was as jargon-free as possible. So, a balance between sophistication and communicability was sought—one which might be achieved by including the credible findings and observations of other persons who had investigated problems of rural library service in a guide that could be interpreted and implemented by library clerks and systems directors alike.

Preliminary Considerations

In attempting to produce a guide which would help rural librarians achieve a match between community needs and library services, the team faced the issue of defining *rural*. The designation of rural areas was based upon two components: numbers and geography. Choosing the areas for study was aided by identifying states in the Southeast which contained numerous political subdivisions having 2500 or fewer people, and by the identification of conditions of geographical isolation. It could be claimed that this dodges the responsibility to define *rural* precisely. As imprecise as the “definition” may be, librarians in rural

service have little trouble observing that their communities are more sparsely populated and spread over larger land masses than those of their counterparts in urban service. The study team generally observed that the rural librarians did not require a definition; they lived one.

The survey of the literature (reviewed here, but cited more fully in the accompanying bibliography) revealed that others had explored the problems of rural libraries in some detail. Penalties of isolation, existing information needs, and methods for dealing with problems related to the delivery of information in rural areas were all topics which had received considerable attention.² So the task of the study team became concerned with consolidating the landmark findings into one guide—one unabashed hybrid, a “cookbook” approach to problem-solving. How they would explain and defend their project in the research community became a subordinate concern. They saw as their major goal the communication of a doable set of instructions, the execution of which might result in better library service, increased visibility for the library, and more convincing data for presentation to funders.

Armed with already-established conceptual frameworks, modified for communication, the study team embarked on fact-finding missions that took them to the state library agencies in nine southeastern states, and to TVA, NEA, Rural America, Inc., the National Rural Center, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and USOE Regional Planning Offices. The team acknowledged that one does not “know the community” simply by living in it, and participated in the Community Analysis program sponsored by Community Analysis Associates because they wanted the guide to have a strong “how to know the community” component. Conferences with George Eyster of the Appalachian Adult Education Center (AAEC) at Morehead State University and with the staff at the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship at Clarion State College (Pennsylvania) helped give dimension to the task at hand. Most importantly, talking with concerned people at the local levels—librarians in rural service—helped the team see problem areas which a review of the literature alone could not have provided.

The Guide

The *Guide* developed by the study team is an eight-part action strategy which requires library personnel to observe the local community actively, compare local library service programs with the particular needs of that community, develop specific service plans to address those needs, and publicize and promote these services among the people who can benefit from them.

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Specifically, the guide involves eight areas to be observed in sequence:

1. Getting Started (rationale for making the effort)
2. Your Community
3. Community Information Needs
4. Community Service Agencies
5. Library Programs
6. Library Materials
7. Plans
8. Spreading the Word

In essence, the *Guide* provides a “cookbook” approach to matching collections and programs to actual information needs and for publicizing these efforts in a way that would make the librarian and the library visible in the community.

The study team strove for simplicity and communicability, and the guide is an unabashed reinvention of the wheel insofar as “discovery” is concerned. The worth of the product lies in its doability and its potential for helping to weave the library more fully into the fabric of community existence. Librarians in rural service who participated in field tests liked the *Guide* and indicated that it could be used to advantage in their systems.

Findings Resulting from Field Tests and Implications for Planners

The solution to a puzzle requires the creative application of relevant clues. Useful statements about social puzzles may be provided by people who know and ask relevant questions about their environment. If librarians in rural service are to address substantially the problems of serving rural populations, they and all participants in the decision-making environment must understand the specific nature of the problems. As a result of the study team’s construction and field testing of the *Guide*, there are clear indications that these participants need help.

There are some preconditions that must be met if help is to be forthcoming. First, the myths of ruralness must be abandoned. Second, the “rural crisis” must be understood. Third, the penalties of rural isolation—penalties suffered not only by citizens, but also by librarians who serve them—must be considered. Fourth, librarians must discover ways to achieve a match between community information needs and library services. Fifth, cooperation must be more broadly conceptualized and implemented.

These understandings are minimum prerequisites. The study team is convinced that any efforts to address the problems of rural library service must be based upon a thorough understanding of the five points listed above. They are necessary and fundamental concerns which must underpin any serious plan for developing library services in rural America.

Rural Mythology

Planners must de-mythologize their notions about rural regions. The vast majority of rural Americans are not farmers. The *Commodity Year Book 1979* presents data showing that while farm production is rising, the number of people involved in that production is declining.³ The study team's observations in ten predominantly rural states give these data experiential amplification. At the national level, the decline in the number of farm workers has been clearly demonstrated.⁴ In South Carolina, a rural state by any standard, the number of farms and acres farmed show steady and substantial decline, while the number of textile mills and persons employed in them indicate trends in the opposite direction.⁵

Mythological notions about rural conditions provide a fertile field for dated concepts of library service, such as those built upon the mistaken belief that the rural agricultural extension services can provide all the survival information that rural citizens need, or concepts built upon pious legends of the past as reported in *Rural America Reads*.⁶ It is essential that librarians conceive more broadly based service responses to meet the information needs of a rural society. The needs list, adopted from the work of Drennan and Shelby and of Dervin⁷ and developed in the *Guide*, therefore, consists of twenty-six categories, only one of which relates directly to agricultural concerns.

Rural librarians will pay an awful price if they use yesterday's ideas and tools to address today's problems. Nature and society impose a severe penalty on creatures and institutions which do not continue to evolve. They are condemned to a scavenger's existence. Rural public libraries which do not evolve face a similar fate and will find their existence dependent upon droppings.

Rural Crisis

Much has been written about the urban and suburban crisis. Rural geographers add findings which clearly point to the "systems" nature of societal ills. While observers of the urban crisis describe increased demands for urban services in the face of shrinking tax support for those

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services, rural researchers show that the migration of rural citizens to urban and suburban areas is one of the causes of those increased demands for services.

The out-migration is a function of declining employment opportunities for rural persons in their most productive years. This depopulation and the related problem of limited opportunities to gain job skills through education in some rural areas are two of the conditions which discourage human service professionals and industries requiring skilled labor from locating in some rural areas, despite Sun Belt tax breaks. The cyclic aspects of the rural/urban crisis create an economic and educational "catch 22" for rural citizens. Maslovian theory suggests that hungry, unemployed, or indigent adults are not likely to beat a path to rural libraries and demand *Johnny Tremain*—not even the paperback edition. Traditionally, librarians have plugged into Maslow's hierarchy closer to the top, collecting materials and offering programs which tend to relate more to persons seeking self-actualization rather than to persons who are uncertain of a living wage. Shiny new books alone are no more the answer to the rural library crisis than they are to the urban library crisis.

Isolation

The most important factors that planners of rural library services must take into account are those associated with the penalties of geographical isolation. The energy crunch and the fact that the chief method of transportation in rural areas is the private automobile combine to exacerbate isolation problems. Drennan and Shelby have pinpointed the main problems associated with isolation. The next essential step must be to understand more fully the information-seeking behavior of persons who suffer the penalties of that isolation. Such persons tend to rely upon personal rather than institutional contact (with the exception of the church) for information. They are media-oriented, but the media they use to become informed and entertained are the telephone and the television. Librarians and planners who seek to weave the library into the fabric of rural existence must learn to deal with isolation—not only their patrons', but also their own. The same isolation which keeps rural citizens remote from "what's happening at your public library" keeps the librarians isolated from preservice and continuing education opportunities.

Matching Needs with Services

There are deceptively complex properties of this matching require-

ment. One of librarianship's current bandwagon terms is *needs assessment*, and the continuing educationists appear to hold the franchise and distributorship rights. Needs assessment instruments and methodologies are often directed at librarians, and the supposition is that librarians can know and report what their needs are. In truth, many librarians in rural service do not know what their needs are, and they express their problems in terms which clearly indicate that they see them as money-related or as related to the need for acquiring better management skills. Indeed, many are, but an equal number of problems faced by librarians in rural areas relate to their frustration over the public's nonuse of library materials and services. As a matter of fact, urban librarians suffer the same frustrations. As long as librarians continue to remain book- and thing-oriented, instead of information- and people-oriented, citizens will continue to ignore the library. Citizens may see the book as neither crucial to their survival needs nor important to their entertainment needs. Librarians who sit and wait for such rural citizens to present their demands to the system will have a long wait, for sitting and waiting will never raise the citizens' levels of expectations for library service. Citizens conditioned to think of the library as a place which stores irrelevant items will regard the librarian as the custodian of those irrelevancies rather than as an individual who has something real and important to offer them. An alternative to the sitting and waiting is to engage in the kinds of community analysis approaches developed by Roger Greer and available at the many workshops he and his associates conduct throughout the country.⁸

Compounding these problems is the fact that the question "What are my information needs today?" is not one which the average citizen, rural or urban, asks himself each day. This does not mean that citizens do not *have* information needs, but that survival, educational, and entertainment issues just do not find expression in the same terms that occur to some information scientists, library educators, and librarians who, while their thoughts on matching needs with services are crystal clear to them, do not communicate well with citizens and do not provide adequate mechanisms for the citizens to communicate with the librarians. Add to these considerations the fact that many rural librarians choose to remain outside the mainstream of political decision-making activity, and the complexity of the matching problem comes more clearly into view. When rural politicians question why the local public library *and* the school library in the same community each need a projector or the *same* encyclopedia title (and they do ask⁹), it becomes

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obvious that librarians and holders of pursestrings are not communicating effectively.

Cooperation

Throughout the region studied, the team observed that communication among agencies with related missions was often poor or nonexistent. Although there have been significant attempts to improve this condition—for example, the Appalachian Adult Education Center projects, the attempts to regionalize public libraries, and some efforts related to the White House conference—there is still considerable need to improve communication among those institutions whose function it is to help people obtain the information they need. At this time it seems especially critical that improved communication exist between and among school libraries, existing agencies in the community, and the public library. The rationale and benefits of such cooperation have been listed and described by others, but the study team was constantly reminded of the absence of this communication. To outside observers with a commitment to view the various communities visited objectively and to listen to the agency personnel interviewed, it became obvious that such improved communication could be critical to agencies interested in providing service without wasteful duplication and in expanding currently available responses with minimal additional support.

The idea of a cooperative approach to solving information and library service problems in rural areas extends beyond the sharing of resources by types of libraries and agencies. Librarians and decision-makers in agencies whose missions include the stimulation of library service development must also carefully consider their interrelatedness and effect remedies where communication is lacking. In addition, library educators, professional associations, and practitioners at all levels must actively seek and establish firmer lines of communication among themselves.

The penalties of isolation affecting the librarian have been considered earlier in this article, but they are especially severe when they interfere with cooperation and communication and the needs for library education, both preservice and in-service. The study team was told time and time again that those with little or no formal library education could not travel to the nearest library education program, the question of accreditation notwithstanding. Family responsibilities, lack of financial assistance, time constraints, the almost total dependence in rural areas upon personal transportation, and the increasing costs of fuel

prescribe the need for more educational programs at the local level. This does not imply that individuals should not be encouraged to participate in existing, on-campus library education programs which lead to a degree or to certification. The fact is that the educational needs of librarians now serving in rural areas are substantial. These persons, with or without educational provisions, are likely to continue in rural service for some time. It is hoped that certification requirements and individual motivation will stimulate some local library personnel to seek further education. This could be engineered by a cooperative venture of educators and state associations. Failure to take advantage of such a cooperative effort at this time seems unthinkable. Communications technology innovations and educational progress in the area of adult learning provide a solid basis for assisting rural librarians. Again, it must be emphasized that library educators should not be expected to take on the full responsibility; it must be a shared function if success is to be expected.

Some Procedural Implications

If any plan for library service adjustment is to succeed, the consent and support of persons of influence must be won. State library agency personnel, systems directors, trustees, local librarians, and patrons all play important roles—which will vary in different political environments—in the implementation of an instrument like the *Guide*. The utility of the plan, the reason for doing what is to be done, and the “so what?” have to be understood by those concerned with execution and outcomes.

Regardless of the apparent success or failure of the various acronymed approaches to it, systematic program planning is essential for all types of libraries if they are to compete for scarce discretionary funds. The approach must be conceptually sound, yet take into account the fact that many small library operations cannot afford the luxury of large expenditures of personnel or of time to deal with jargon-riddled instructions, and then complete a complex and sophisticated planning process. At the same time, however, librarians who serve in rural areas, even those who serve part-time, must be convinced that careful planning for services and resource allocation is not “busy work” or merely a bureaucratic chore, but a way to achieve optimum utilization of limited resources and a method by which they may communicate the need for additional resources to their funding agencies.

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No planning system is intended to be more than a basis on which effective library programs may be built. Sometimes those who attempt to promulgate or implement such plans lose sight of that purpose and become entranced with the process, thus committing more resources to planning than are necessary. When they do, many librarians begin to doubt the credibility of any planning process, and they insist that they already have more to do than they can get done in the time they have.

During the study team's field work and testing, it became obvious that practically all of those serving in rural libraries wanted to do the best job they could and were sincerely concerned for the communities in which they worked. No amount of caring or concern can replace needed library skills; likewise, skills acquisition by the indifferent will not produce desirable outcomes. The point to be made is that there is a group of persons serving others who need answers to complex questions.

Personnel who sponsor a plan or who give instructions in its implementation must sell softly and convincingly, but not abrasively. The personal dimension of the planning process must be taken into account. The study team talked with a number of local librarians and systems personnel who had been exposed to excellent plans introduced by people who were arrogant, impatient with understandings perceived to be inferior to their own, and just poor teachers. That dooms a plan, especially in rural areas where fierce local pride must never be challenged by insensitive and naïve outsiders.

Persons interested in improving rural library service must understand that appraising the needs of *anyone* and developing a strategy for addressing them is not just a library problem that requires a grasp of the traditional techniques of the trade. The issue has economic, educational, social and political aspects as well. The complexities of the task could easily overwhelm those who are unprepared for the constraints and roadblocks that spring from so many sources.

Conditions of competition among some public agencies for the same job and lack of coordination among some agencies with similar or related responsibilities compound the problems of would-be change agents. Planners must find a way to catalyze and coordinate efforts to meet rural information needs.

When asked about needs and problems, most rural library personnel respond with references to lack of money, lack of staff, lack of time, poor transportation, and isolation. Planners who would work with people who voice those kinds of concerns had better be prepared to demonstrate how their plans are going to address those specific prob-

lems. Librarians in rural service must be convinced that community analysis, needs identification, program development, and evaluation are going to lead to increased public awareness and *support* for the library, and, most importantly, to determination on the part of funders to *support* the library adequately.

Unfortunately, too many of us mistakenly believe we know what the problems are. Too many of us really believe we know a community simply because we live and work in it and, through osmosis, learn the needs of its people. We fantasize that all small communities are about the same, just as we are sure that all big cities are about the same and share the same basic characteristics and problems. It is important to repeat that we must de-mythologize views of rural conditions and replace intuitive and impressionistic views with an understanding of real conditions. Librarians and educators are going to have to do some unlearning, some unfreezing of assumptions, if they are even to *understand* rural problems. And understanding is just the first step.

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