

Standards for State Libraries

F. WILLIAM SUMMERS

FOR MUCH OF THEIR history, American state libraries have followed a rather unplanned and unguided process of development. The movement for state library development began about the turn of the century, and by 1909 thirty-four states had established an agency to promote the development of public library services.¹

From the beginning these agencies were very diverse, founded for differing reasons and offering a wide variety of services. This pattern has persisted to the present. In most states, the term *State Library* has a specific meaning to that state alone. Some state libraries are concerned with public library development, others are not. In recent years it has become the pattern to refer to the agency concerned with the development of public library services across the state as the "state library agency" regardless of the official title of the organization, and whether or not that title includes the phrase "state library."

The movement to establish state library agencies in every state developed slowly through this century. It received significant impetus in the 1930s through a project operated by ALA, and funded by the Rosenwald Foundation, which placed a "library worker" in the South to spur library development. The first systematic effort to define and make quantitative statements about these agencies occurred in the 1930s when ALA began issuing a series of leaflets entitled "The Role of the State Library." These leaflets may be seen as the precursors of standards, because they attempted to spell out the services which a state library

F. William Summers is Dean, College of Librarianship, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

should provide, the kinds of personnel it should have, and the legal basis upon which good public library development should rest.

The depression years were difficult ones for public libraries in general, and were especially critical periods for state libraries. It was exceedingly difficult to make progress while the nation was in severe economic difficulty. One major thrust of this era was a rather widespread effort to obtain state money for local libraries—a priority, no doubt, dictated by the financial difficulties which cities were having in providing essential services during this period. Many state libraries also cooperated extensively with state-level WPA (Work Projects Administration) projects, especially those relating to state and local history and bibliographic work. The years of World War II were also a period of slow development in state libraries. Not only was there a shortage of personnel and money, but perhaps equally important, there was a shortage of gasoline, which made it very difficult for state library extension workers to travel about the state engaging in efforts to establish and improve libraries.

What might be called the heyday of state libraries began in the postwar years. First, there was general recognition that library development in the states had to proceed on a planned basis with state leadership and support. Second, there was a realization that effective library service across the states was going to require the creation of larger units of library service (systems), and that the effective agency for bringing about cooperation among the various levels of government involved was the state. Third, there was recognition that large numbers of American citizens lacked access to public library service. This latter point became the rallying cry for efforts for federal support of public library service, which succeeded in 1955 with the passage of the Library Services Act (LSA). The decision to place responsibility for administering the federal funds with the states was a major stimulus to the development of state agencies. The few remaining states which had not accepted or implemented responsibility for public library development at the state level were quick to do so. In many states the new personnel necessary to administer the funds were added to the agency staffs. In all too many cases, these new positions were funded from federal rather than state funds, a problem which has continued to plague some state agencies.

Federal funds also brought the necessity, opportunity and the wherewithal for the states to engage in systematic planning of their library services, and also dollars to support the implementation of those plans. Regardless of one's philosophy about the role of the federal government in supporting state and local services, the success of LSA

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and its successor, the Library Services and Construction Act, is a clear incidence of federal dollars producing rather dramatic results in a relatively short time.

The rapid development in state-level programs brought on by the federal activity resulted in a need for the states to know more about their own library structures, and this need was recognized by the American Association of State Libraries (AASL), which in 1957 appointed a Survey and Standards Committee chaired by Carma Leigh.²

The work of this committee led to a grant from the Carnegie Corporation to fund a research project to obtain basic information on all state agencies providing library services and to establish standards for state libraries.³ The study team was initially headed by Robert D. Leigh, and upon his death in 1961, Dr. Phillip Monypenny assumed responsibility for the study. As is all too often the case, publication of the study occurred long after its completion, but the members of the AASL Survey and Standards Committee were in close contact with the study, and used data gathered by the study so that the first state library standards were issued by ALA in 1963, with the commentary of the study appearing three years later.

When the standards appeared in 1963, AASL appointed a Standard Evaluation Committee which reported annually, and which recommended needed changes in 1967. In January 1968 a Standards Revision Committee was appointed, and the revised standards appeared in 1970. The revised standards are not radically different from the 1963 version. In 1977 the Association of State Library Agencies (ASLA) appointed a Standards Review Committee to revise the 1970 standards.⁴

In discussing the work of revising the standards, Eberhart in his article cited earlier raised a number of conceptual and practical problems, including the following:

1. Whether or not there can be standards for organizations as diverse and complex as the state libraries across the nation.
2. Another conceptual difficulty is that the activity of state library agencies involves areas where other library groups already have standards or interests, e.g., state institutions, public libraries.
3. Differences in the development of systems and networking capability including the fact that there may be several networks operating in some states and none in others.⁵

Obviously these were substantial and difficult questions, because the committee was disbanded in 1980 and the efforts to revise the 1970 standards ceased. At present, the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA), successor to ASLA, has an ad hoc

subcommittee on Standards for the Library Functions at the State Level, which is attempting to ascertain the need, and necessary content, for standards.⁶

There appear, then, to be two significant questions: Do state library agencies need new standards? If so, can these be written? These questions will be addressed later.

The Present State Library Standards

While the 1970 standards rest upon the research project carried out by Monypenny, it must be pointed out that this foundation is not as strong as might be desired. First, the study was largely descriptive in nature. It identified the characteristics of state libraries and discussed the range of services provided, but the study was neither evaluative nor predictive. It did not identify the elements which assured strength in a program, or those which were associated with weaknesses. In fact, given the importance which has been ascribed to them, state library programs have been the subject of relatively little substantive research.

St. Angelo, Hartsfield and Goldstein attempted to explain the variations in state legislative support for the state library agency and public library program. Their findings indicated some significant differences with previous perceptions of state libraries which are worth restating:

1. Every state library agency is free to develop a strong program. Library programs are not limited or encouraged by the level of a state's economy, social development, educational programs, political conditions, or administrative structure....
2. Past expenditure and program practices do not limit the ability of agencies to develop strong programs....
3. Federal aid has been going more heavily to state agencies which are underfunded, but have been innovative in programming and high in their attainment of professional standards.
4. Quality programs that do not require much funding appear to be a matter of internal agency leadership....
5. On the other hand, combined success in attaining quality programs and sizable appropriation support requires an active political program designed to influence policy members....
6. Library development is not tied to educational development. It is just as possible for strong library programs to develop in states with weak educational programs as not. Conversely, strong educational programs are not consistently coupled with strong library programs.⁷

Overall, these findings suggest that the quality of a state library program is not economically or socially determined and results from the

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free will decisions in the state. Further, the study suggests that two leadership traits are necessary for success—innovation and professionalization must be coupled with political activity on behalf of the state library program by the state library agency.⁸

It is not surprising that the standards lay great stress on the leadership role of the state library agency, charging it with a variety of leadership tasks, including the following major responsibilities:

1. leadership in the development of state-wide plans involving all types of libraries at all levels within the state;
2. encouraging and facilitating cooperation across state lines;
3. developing a state-wide coordinated library system;
4. setting minimal standards to qualify for state financial grants;
5. exercise leadership in maintaining the freedom to read;
6. exert leadership to effect exchange of information and materials through networks.⁹

There is no research to indicate how well state library agencies have discharged these broad leadership responsibilities. Observationally, it could be suggested that this leadership has been in direct proportion to the dollars available to spend on various kinds of development—stronger, therefore, in the case of public library systems, and weaker in the case of interlibrary cooperation. This hypothesis would suggest that declining federal support and stasis or retrenchment at the state level would serve to diminish the state library's leadership.

The literature does not indicate any research efforts to measure the impact of the standards. Nor is there the usual anecdotal literature about successes achieved through the use of standards. Yet absence of literature does not of itself indicate absence of impact. For the most part, the standards are sufficiently broad that few people could quarrel with them. Many of them are more self-evident truths or statements of common good practice, for example: "An architect should be commissioned who combines the abilities to plan for functional needs and to design an aesthetically satisfying structure compatible with other state buildings."¹⁰

What then are the weaknesses of the present standards?

1. Like most library standards, they are based upon a very limited research base, and it is difficult if not impossible to establish a relationship between achievement of the standard and the quality of the library services which will be produced.
2. The standards are almost completely nonquantified. Therefore, it is difficult to make statements about the levels of achievement of the standards, or to know what level of activity is required to meet them.

3. In the final analysis, the standards rest upon a pooling of professional opinion. However, sincere or even valid such an opinion is, it is always open to a charge of being self-serving.

Toward a New View of State Library Standards

It is not difficult to suggest a need for revision of the state library standards. Enormous changes have occurred in society and in libraries since 1970, and the standards are either silent or address weakly many of these issues. Primary targets for the revisions would appear to be the following:

1. The standards lay great stress upon the role of the state library in arranging or, if necessary, providing service to unserved populations. This battle has been won for the most part, and need not receive the same emphasis in the future. Far greater emphasis needs to be placed upon the state's responsibility to ensure the quality of access which citizens have to library services.
2. The standards attempt to deal with the diverse organizational characteristics of library services at the state level. Monypenny described an idealized model called a "comprehensive state library" which, it was noted, existed in only a few states.¹¹

There is probably a need for the standards to deal more decisively with the "fractionating" of library functions at the state level, certainly at least in the areas of system development, interlibrary cooperation and networking. It is probably far too late for the standards (or any other mechanism) to bring about the kind of unified agency modeled. The standards should address the issue of how effective coordination and action can occur with academic, public and school library interests in separate administrative units, as is frequently the case.

3. The standards project the state library agency in the principal leadership and activity role with respect to the development of all types of libraries. These standards need to be made stronger and to indicate some process for gaining acceptance in this wider role. In too many states the state library agency is seen as a public library agency only, and it vies with a number of other organizations for the leadership role, among them major state universities and the large metropolitan library systems.

Despite frequent cries for a strong state library agency, very little actual support is demonstrated in the professional community for proposals which would strengthen state libraries.

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4. The standards call for shared financial support from social, state and federal sources. Over the years there have been various discussions about and proposals to define the proportion of total cost which each level should bear, a task which thus far has been frustrating and fruitless. The standards would perhaps identify the role or level of responsibility which each should assume in the total program. In the field of education, for example, the roles have been for the state to assure a minimum level of education available to all (in many instances a very minimal level), for the localities to fund programs beyond this level which they considered important, and for the federal government to support activities in which there was a national priority—e.g., better nutrition, science, math, foreign-language education, and the like.

The proper proportion of support for each level would then be a factor of the roles and functions assigned to that level, rather than a fixed proportion which is difficult to establish and to maintain as conditions change over time.

5. The present standards lay great stress upon defining the quality of state library personnel, upon assessing their freedom from political control. The standards also indicate that all employees should be under a well-developed classification and pay plan, and comparable to other professional workers in state service. A major problem for state library agencies is that state salaries frequently do not keep pace with other levels of government. Consequently, many public, university and school libraries offer more attractive salaries than state library agencies. This problem is especially critical at the top levels. It is safe to say that there are relatively few state library agencies in which the salaries of the state librarian and top assistants compare favorably with those paid to top administrators in major academic and public libraries in the state. If the state library is to play the leadership role envisioned by the standards, it must have top-quality personnel and be enabled to compete with leading libraries for them. The revised standards must lay a clear rationale for separating the salary levels in state library agencies from the general state salary schedule, and linking them to those paid in the state's academic and health agencies, which tend to be exceptions to the general salary structure in most states.

Eberhart questioned whether standards could be written for agencies as diverse as the state libraries, and suggested that perhaps "guidelines" to indicate qualitative aspects of programs might be more

feasible.¹² His suggestion has merit, but such statements are likely to have lesser impact.

Another approach might be to seek to define the services which state libraries should provide, and whenever possible, specify levels of performance which should be expected. If the state has a responsibility for interlibrary loan, how responsive should that service be? If it has a responsibility to provide consultant service to libraries, how frequent should that service be? Without greater efforts at quantification and specificity, it will be difficult to prepare a document which is more than an idealized and general description of a state library.

References

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3. Ibid.
4. Eberhart, W. Lyle. "Standards for State Library Agencies." *Library Trends* 27(Fall 1978):209-12.
5. Ibid., p. 211.
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7. St. Angelo, et al., *State Library Policy*, pp. 63-64.
8. Ibid., p. 42.
9. American Association of State Libraries. Standards Revision Committee. *Standards for Library Functions at the State Level*. Chicago: ALA, 1970.
10. Ibid., p. 32.
11. Monypenny, *Library Functions*, p. 47.
12. Eberhart, "Standards for State Library Agencies," p. 209.