Standards for Public Libraries

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OVER THE PAST FIFTY YEARS a large number of public librarians and many public library trustees have been preoccupied with the development of and/or need for public library standards. The first standards issued for public libraries were published by the American Library Association in 1934. In 1944 the Public Library Association (PLA) issued another set of standards for public libraries, and additional publications came forth in 1956 and again in 1966. It is interesting to note that it took more than fifty years of association existence before the first standards were issued by the American Library Association, but in a period of only thirty-six years, three more revised standards came forth; and in only another four years, the Public Library Association appointed a new standards committee to modify and revise the 1966 standards. What was happening was that the need for some kind of objective measurement—objective, whether qualitative or quantitative—was accelerating. The problem had been observed by most of the people involved in approving those 1966 standards—they really had to be updated more frequently than they had been in the past, society was simply changing so quickly.

For readers who wish to review the activities which led to the publications of the standards prior to 1970, Lowell Martin in an October 1972 *Library Trends* article[1] deals with the early history of public library standards development and needs in this country. Martin believes that the Public Library Association made a mistake in the 1960s

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when it decided simply to revise the 1956 standards document without adopting an entirely different approach to public library standards. Martin does point out, however, that the 1956 statement *Public Library Service: A Guide to Evaluation, with Minimum Standards* was redirected in the 1966 standards by the emphasis on systems. In fact, the very title of the 1966 standards reflects this: *Minimum Standards for Public Library Systems.*

One problem with public library standards that continues to plague the profession is that standards were never used in the sense that other professions have used them. For example, suppose hospitals were being considered here instead of libraries; if the hospitals do not meet state hospital standards, the hospitals are closed. But if libraries do not meet state library standards, people say, "Isn't that too bad." In some states, of course, certain state standards must be met to receive minimum amounts of state aid, but more often than not, while the standards might be in the regulations, they are not uniformly enforced. Therefore, in the sense of so many other professions, our standards are not really *standards*, even when we use the word *minimum*, which many people overlook. There are many who believe that the use of the word *norm* is more appropriate than the use of the word *standards*.

Another problem that has been persistent throughout the application of public library standards has been what Lowell Martin refers to as the question of the laggards versus the leaders. The leaders were always trying to rise above the standards and, in some cases, not even informing their budget people about them; and the laggards were always using the standards as an excuse to get either more money or more authority or more resources from whoever was doing the allocating. We therefore have had leaders in the very awkward position of trying to live standards down, and laggards trying to use them as a crtuch to elevate their libraries to where they think they should be. This has not been a very satisfactory arrangement. Lowell Martin also pointed out in the article he wrote about library trustees:

> People in general have no ready basis for judging library service as they do for some other facilities. A highway, they know, should be smooth and straight and fast. The standards are self-evident and they are relatively high. If proper standards are not achieved—when traffic backs up or the roadway has pot holes, for example—the motorist knows that something is wrong and he has no hesitation in voicing his opinion.
> But how fast and smooth and straight should his library be—that is, how many books should it have, of what quality, backed by what skills in the library staff? The average library user has little basis for judgment. If he gets what he wants he is grateful. If not, he often feels

that he can't really expect the agency to suit his individual needs.
Public library service is patently weak in many localities—it is re-
markable how little public criticism one hears of these faltering
agencies.[2]

The question of accreditation of public libraries also has been an
issue on several occasions in the recent past, and the problem of stan-
dards or lack of standards became a real impediment to any discussion of
the possibility of actually accrediting public libraries. In a proposal to
develop criteria for judging quality of service, the PLA Committee to
Study Accreditation of Public Libraries in 1967 stated "the problem":
"Accreditation to be effective must be based on statistical measures
closely related to quality. It follows that accreditation of a service-
oriented operation such as a public library must be based on measure-
ment of the quality of its service, i.e., the satisfaction of its users, or at
least its capacity to satisfy their needs."[3] A major concern was the
obvious problem of traditional statistics which were almost entirely
quantitative and dealt with measuring the numerical level of activity or
resources, and not necessarily with the effectiveness (or certainly, the
quality) of activity or resources. In addition, a high level of suspicion
existed even in regard to the accuracy of many reported statistics.

With increasing concern over the need for valid standards or for
some other method of measuring effective library service, the Public
Library Association Standards Committee in 1971 was reassigned the
formidable task of developing a revised set of standards for public
library services. PLA reported that because of financial constraints
within the American Library Association, an ad hoc volunteer
approach would be used, counting on active membership involvement
within PLA and other ALA groups. The device used was the appoint-
ment of three task forces to be coordinated by the PLA Standards
Committee, and each task force was given a one-year assignment to
produce a working paper for the committee's internal use and guidance.
The task forces were formed by age levels served (children, young adult
and adult), and the task force papers were published in the *School
Library Journal* in September 1973 in an attempt to achieve even more
membership participation and involvement in the ongoing dialogue.
In connection with publication of the working papers, the committee
stated: "A constant frustration of all members, Committee and Task
Force was the lack of a current, official glossary of library terminol-
ogy."[4] What did the word *information* mean? Did it mean only data or
only traditional reference function? For that matter, what did reference
statistics include? At this time concern was also rising over how to deal

with standards in regard to growing network development, increased
interlibrary planning, and onrushing technology linking more and
more libraries together. With these concerns, the PLA Standards Com-
mittee determined to take a new approach to achieve agreement on goals
for purposes and functions, and to publish papers for comment and
debate. The committee reported that, "Given the wide variations in our
nation's public libraries, the profession may well want to develop
diversity by design, so that communities may have the choice of alterna-
tive patterns of library service."[5]

The complexities that the committee had to deal with, and the
varying approaches that emerge when given such a free-form dialogue,
were apparent in the published working papers: even their formats were
different, let alone their approaches to the problem. These results could
have been anticipated, and the papers and the apparent change of
direction by the committee caused significant furor in the library press
and in both committee and division meetings.

In a significant paper prepared for the Public Library Association
in 1974, Ralph Blasingame and Mary Jo Lynch developed not only a
theme of where standards had been going, but a possible redirection of
what should take the place of standards in the future: "The present PLA
Standards Committee...wanted to free themselves from traditional ways
of thinking about public library service and open their minds to what-
ever new ideas might be useful in planning for the future. They knew
that they wanted to consider not public libraries alone, but total com-
munity library service."[6] Blasingame and Lynch argued persuasively
that an entirely different approach was needed from something even
resembling the old type of national blueprint or standard, but that areas
were different, communities were unique, and that a process rather than
a formula was perhaps necessary. They went on to say, "[Public librar-
ians] cannot use standards but they do need instruments, more sophisti-
cated and sensitive than any currently available, which will enable them
to 1) understand the particular community they are serving; 2) choose
objectives in the light of that understanding; and 3) measure the degree
to which these objectives are being met."[7] Blasingame and Lynch
understood that some would object to this approach and would still
want easy-to-follow formulas, but they argued that such an approach
was too simplistic, that obviously communities vary greatly, that we
need instruments which help us understand ourselves and which also
leave us room to measure our service needs differently. They strongly
supported the committee's approach to "the beginning of a design for
diversity."[8]

The Blasingame and Lynch paper generated even more discussion and consideration of alternatives to standards. Some of the concern and confusion can perhaps be reflected in the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) publishing a *National Inventory of Library Needs, 1975.*[9] The NCLIS publication attempted to compare what it described as "indicators of need" with available resources, and while it was done with the use of library general information surveys administered by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and working with an advisory committee, the publication still relied on guidelines established by professional groups and associations and not by anything approaching public needs or perceptions. In a 1976 article, Meredith Bloss, then chairperson of the newly renamed Goals, Guidelines and Standards (GGS) for Public Libraries Committee of PLA, commented that one of the additional problems of standards was:

> National standards for public library services are predicated solely on system services. Standards for school libraries are based on the theory that each school library or media center will meet the total needs of the school population. Standards for various kinds of library and informational services have been arrived at by committee deliberation and reflect desires of librarians about what ought to be done. Published standards show no evidence of liaison among libraries of different types. Standards are for libraries, not for library and informational service to people. It is not certain whether, if all libraries were brought up to standard, adequate total service would result.[10]

Bloss's review pointed up several interesting problems which PLA had yet to grapple with or, certainly, to solve. One of them was the statement that "the Association has long recognized...that the Standards are based on informed professional opinion rather than empirical research, and have thus had limited credibility.[11] In his review of the current problems facing the committee, Bloss reemphasized the advice the committee had received from Blasingame and Lynch and quoted them, saying:

> "What public librarians need now are...tools which will help them analyze a situation, set objectives, make decisions and evaluate achievements...." They suggested some rules of thumb to follow in this process: Think about "planning for the future rather than reporting on the past." Think about "management of a library rather than in comparison of one library with another....be concerned with outputs, i.e., what the user gets from a library," rather than inputs, i.e., staff, materials, equipment.[12]

As these reports and articles indicate, never in the history of the American Library Association had there been such open comment,

debate and questioning of the directions that public libraries should go toward developing standards, or whether even the development of such standards was desirable, let alone necessary. Many other activities were taking place in connection with this search either for new standards or for new processes by which to measure public library effectiveness. The Public Library Association cosponsored a study with the U.S. Office of Education to investigate alternative and additional methods of measuring library services focusing on outputs rather than inputs. (That focus goes on today at an even higher level, but this will be discussed more later.) Bloss concluded his article by stating: "A new approach to the development of standards is long overdue. It is a major undertaking, and the GGS committee is committed to the view that it must be done properly, with a sound evidential base, in order for it to be a creditable and useful product."[13]

In 1977 the Board of Directors of the Public Library Association adopted a draft statement at the 1977 ALA Annual Conference. The statement was entitled "A Mission Statement for Public Libraries— Guidelines for Public Library Service: Part 1." The statement was prefaced with the comment: "the results of a current PLA project—to design a process of standards development—should give lay and professional library leaders the tools to develop an entirely new approach to library standards. When these guidelines are complete they will replace the 1966 public library standards and will serve as the profession's guide to public library development until the publication of new standards in the mid-1980s."[14] In releasing the "Mission Statement," PLA publicly acknowledged that the approach to standards was being turned around and future emphasis would be on needs and services for people—not for institutions. PLA also announced that no new standards would be issued prior to 1980, and that perhaps a new process was needed to develop other than standards as historically understood.

A concise review of both the development of the process and its hopes for the future was presented in an article by Mary Jo Lynch.[15] She stated that essentially the study consisted of a step-by-step approach to planning, together with methods, instructions and sample instruments which had been tested at three different library sites in the country. These sites had been chosen to represent various types and sizes of public libraries with the hope that some uniform approach to the process could be developed even if measurements might vary greatly at the end of the process. The planning process as developed by the contractor went through a series of reviews with a steering committee, and by independent consultants who seved as critics. After a second draft of the manual

was ready, a group of public library leaders not previously involved in the project spent four days at a workshop and evaluation seminar simulating the planning process. The actual *A Planning Process* was published in spring 1980.[16]

Meanwhile, the never-ending search for standards within the American Library Association continued, even though large segments of ALA were insisting that standardization days were over. The ALA Standards Committee issued a report to ALA Council at the 1981 Midwinter Meeting in which it distinguished four types of standards: (1) service or performance standards, (2) technical standards, (3) procedural standards, and (4) educational standards. The committee report stated that: "The ALA Standards Committee recommends to Council that the establishment of service or performance standards should remain the responsibility solely of type of library divisions, that standards for library education remain the responsibility of a committee on accreditation, and that the ALA By-Laws be revised to permit type of activity divisions to establish technical and procedural standards."[17] This document indicated not only a continuing concern with measurable criteria, but another splintering of who would be responsible for establishing standards. One is reminded of Meredith Bloss's concern in 1975 that our standards did not interconnect.

What did the publication of the new process manual do to the chances of issuing new standards in 1980? First, the new planning process breaks tradition. It reviews existing service programs, establishes priorities, and goes on to consider modifications and alternatives in the program. Carried out thoroughly, it constitutes a fresh hard look that may result in significiant change. The basic questions in the process do not involve comparing yourself in a particular library situation to a so-called standard (in terms of square feet of physical facilities, number of volumes in collections, number of titles in collections, number of staff per so many thousand population); rather, it asks five basic questions. These questions are:

> Does our library service, as it has developed to this time, represent the best possible pattern for the future?
> Does it meet the most pressing needs of our community, and reflect changes occurring in the area?
> Does it consider other sources of information available to our people?
> Do the library's priorities for service and for those to be served match the characteristics of the community population and their library needs?
> Given the constraints on time and money that we face, are we providing the most effective library services possible?[18]

The new planning process is not a simple training manual, nor is it a quick fix. Neither is it something someone else should do for you, such as comparing standards—numerical, qualitative, or otherwise. It is a guideline for you to do something. On the other hand, unlike previous standards, the planning manual, which should result in specific standards for a specific community, is not a chemistry handbook; it is more like a cookbook. One only has to use those parts of the process which apply to his/her own community. One does not have to use all of the process, nor compare the library in every aspect with any other library. The new process does rely on measurement and evaluation, as the previous standards have done, but it requires usable objectives which reflect the basic functions of a particular library, and not numbers or standards of some other library, in perhaps some other part of the country or even some other part of the same state.

The question of state standards also has continually arisen during this whole debate over new national standards. State standards continue to be developed and applied in many states. One fundamental difference in the application of standards within states has often been that, with the advent of federal Library Services and Construction Act monies intermingled with state aid monies, the state often has a financial carrot with which to cajole the use or application of state standards. States are often in a position to require a library to maintain certain minimum standards in order for it to qualify for state aid. The standards have been applied irregularly throughout the country and, in many cases, irregularly within one state. They nevertheless can be applied with the threat of withholding state aid if local libraries do not meet certain statewide standards. On the positive side, state standards are probably more uniformly applicable than are national standards. On the other hand, there are enormous ranges of difference within virtually every state in the country in the economic and social characteristics of communities. An obvious example would be the difference between the Chicago Public Library and its needs, and the Cairo, Illinois, Public Library and its needs. Are the same per capita standards applicable as they may relate to volumes, expenditures, staff members, square feet of building, etc.? Similar to ALA's experience with national standards, many states are finding statewide standards difficult first to develop, and second to use as instruments of state policy. Nevertheless, there is an increase in the development of state standards—even when those standards, as mentioned above, are not applied in the sense of other professions, such as health-applied standards. Relatively recently developed state standards exist in New Mexico, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Minne-

sota, and North Dakota. Also, many other states are in the process of either upgrading existing state standards, or developing new ones where none previously existed.

How do the states respond to the new public library planning process in lieu of national standards? David McKay, North Carolina State Librarian, writes:

> Traditionally, the state library's planning and justification for state aid for public libraries were based on a comparison of North Carolina public library statistics with national and state standards. The short-falls (mainly for materials, personnel, and plant) were noted, and an appropriation was requested to close the gap and thus bring the public libraries up to standard. In the fall of 1976, however, the incoming administration and legislature requested information on public library services of such breadth and depth that a completely new approach to planning had to be found.
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> What the legislature and administration were demanding was more accountability for state-funded programs, as well as more precision in evaluating these programs. And while they did not reject out of hand the justification for higher funding levels based on attaining stan-dards, or the conclusions of the *National Inventory of Library Needs* that North Carolina's public libraries require approximately twice the staff, twice the materials, and twice the square footage of current conditions to provide good library service, they wanted more informa-tion on programs and how these programs were meeting demon-strated community needs.
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> The challenge for the state library, then, was immediately to develop a statewide needs assessment from which an analysis of services could be made. Following the needs assessment, a long-range plan was essential at the local level if the state's plan was to reflect the real library world in North Carolina.[19]

In investigating how North Carolina could meet these questions and requirements, the state library staff considered the decades-old com-munity analysis process, and the updatings, revisions and strengthen-ings of that process that have occurred in recent years, particularly through the work at Syracuse University, and now at the University of Southern California. Combining this process with the procedures set forth in the new planning process manual, with emphasis on the fact that the planning process both uses a planning committee and is cycli-cal (rather than static) in nature, the state staff concluded that the application of the planning process to North Carolina public libraries was not only desirable but essential. McKay stated further that: "With-out doubt, the major contribution of PLA's manual is to move away from the old limited quantitative standards toward the assessment of the whole library operation, including the assessment of programs and

services. If communities differ, and they surely do, *A Planning Process* will aid the library manager in tailoring the institution and its services to meet the particular needs of the community."[20]

While the *Planning Process* manual in its first edition certainly needs much improvement before any further results can be achieved on a national level, it has obviously been accepted as a necessary step toward a new definition of service and quality for public libraries. The PLA Board of Directors acknowledged the continuing emphasis on evaluation and measurement based on performance in lieu of static standards in a statement adopted at the 1981 ALA Annual Conference in San Francisco:

> ...there have been substantial changes in the approach to guidelines and standards preparation for the needs of public libraries....
>
> *The Public Library Mission Statement and its Imperatives for Service* pointed out that future standards for public libraries must flow from the needs of institutions. This meant that goals and specific quantifiable, measurable objectives should be determined by each library and library system in terms of local community concerns and needs.[21]

A manual on performance measurements for public libraries has been completed by the PLA Goals, Guidelines and Standards for Public Libraries Committee.[22] The manual brings together examples of existing methods of performance measurements and provides specific examples, charts, tables, and procedures for measuring specific library performance.

Where are we going from here? Is the Public Library Association now content to sit back and say that there will no longer be any national standards or even national norms promulgated or promoted by PLA or ALA? No! The Public Library Association is continuing to work on the creation of statistical information both of a qualitative and quantitative measure that can help libraries assess the role they are playing in their communities and their individual weaknesses and needs. The current Goals, Guidelines and Standards Committee of PLA has developed a series of output measures that can assist libraries in evaluating their effectiveness, not only a local but also on a national level. These twelve criteria are: (1) title fill rate; (2) browsing fill rate; (3) subject information fill rate; (4) response time; (5) reference and information service; (6) circulation per capita; (7) in-library use; (8) collection turnover; (9) registration as a percentage of the population; (10) program attendance; (11) number of people who use library services, categorized three ways—(a) traffic in a building, (b) phone and mail use, (c) contacts out-

side library; and (12) workload measures. In discussing which measure
to be used, the committee cited the following important points:

> 1. It is very important that these measures be easy to use and
> appropriate for small libraries as well as large systems.
> 2. Widespread use of the measures could eventually lead to the
> development of norms for categories of service in libraries of different
> sizes.
> 3. The potential for comparison of statistics with other libraries
> will in itself encourage libraries to use the measures.
> 4. The measurement manual should complement the planning
> process assisting libraries in the integration of planning and everyday
> work.
> 5. Any future manuals should include caveats about where mea-
> sures may be invalid....
> 7. Measurements will be limited to output measures, not efficiency
> and not impact measures. The terms "output measures," "perfor-
> mance measures" and "measures of effectiveness" were used.[23]

The goal of the steering committee working through the Baltimore
County Public Library, which has a contract with a research firm, is to
develop a manual that will introduce each measure, define it, detail the
procedures and forms for collecting and reporting it, and discuss how
performance and the measure might be improved. Test libraries will be
involved. It is hoped that after the end of the test, a series of output
measurements and definitions will be developed by the PLA Goals,
Guidelines and Standards Committee for the PLA Board of Directors.
Given the present timetable, such approval is possible at the 1982 ALA
Annual Conference.

None of this activity precludes the possible issuance of new
national standards by the Public Library Association in the future, but
this activity does indicate that, in all probability, any new standards
which are issued, even to the extent of being termed *norms*, will be
significantly different in their approach and application than the var-
ious standards issued in the past fifty years. It is very probable that any
new standards or measurements or norms of any kind which are devel-
oped or promulgated by PLA or ALA in the future will be very close to
those criteria offered by Ralph Blasingame and Mary Jo Lynch when
they suggested that any new criteria should: "1) 'be directed mainly
toward planning for the future rather than on reporting the past,'
2)'be useful in the management of a particular library rather than in
comparison of one library with another,' and 3) 'be concerned with
outputs—what the user gets from a library,' rather than inputs—
that is, what the funds enable a library to acquire in the way of staff,

materials and equipment."[24] There is little doubt that in the future, libraries will be forced primarily to measure what services they are providing, not what resources they have.

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