

RURAL LIBRARIES AND THE STATE LIBRARY AGENCIES

A SURVEY FROM THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF RURAL LIBRARIANSHIP

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In the spring of 1983 the Center distributed a survey to the fifty state library agencies, the District of Columbia, and five possessions and territories of the United States.

The survey covered two topics of major interest for rural libraries: education and technology. Earlier studies had indicated that rural libraries were often lacking in professionally educated staff and trained staff generally. Rural libraries were also found to be limited in technology to essentially the level of the typewriter, the telephone, and the photocopier.¹

Another study had indicated that, after the local library district, the state library agency was the most important agency for rural librarians.² Thus we thought it particularly important to find out what state libraries were doing.

We asked state librarians about their own attitudes and the activities of the state libraries. We also asked them for their assessment of what was happening in relation to both education and technology in their rural libraries.

The first mailing of the survey was on March 9, 1983. A follow-up mailing was made on April 26, 1983 to those

state libraries which had not yet responded. The return date requested on the survey was May 30, 1983. As stated earlier, the survey was sent to the fifty states and the District of Columbia, and five possessions or territories (American Samoa, Guam, the Marianas Islands, St. Thomas, and Puerto Rico).

By the end of May 1983 forty-four replies were received, while an additional four responses arrived during the summer of 1983. Thus, a total of 48 responses were received out of the 56 surveys distributed or nearly 86 percent.

We will deal first with the responses from the fifty states. The District of Columbia responded that it did not have any rural libraries. Of the fifty states, forty-three provided responses.

EDUCATION

Our first question on education asked if the state had "a plan or program underway for upgrading the education of rural librarians." Twenty states responded that they had such a plan and five additional states said that they had education plans but not specifically for rural libraries. Seventeen states indicated that they had neither a plan or a program in place, while one state did not respond on this question. Thus the total of states with a plan or program for (or including) rural library education was twenty-five of the forty-two responding on this question or about fifty-eight percent affirmative responses.

Our second question asked for a brief comment on the nature of such a plan if one existed.

Some typical replies follow: 1. "The Alabama Public Library Service sponsors continuing education for all public librarians throughout the state. Many of these are planned for the specific needs of librarians in small rural libraries. We strive to improve the technical skills in library science, skills in management, and skills in representing the library in the community." 2. "We have employed a consultant to write a state plan." 3. "Programs in this area are funded and administered through the Indiana Cooperative Library Services Authority (INCOLSA). They include: a processing center, information retrieval and training, microcomputer application and training, participation in OCLC database, automated circulation clusters (in development stage--ready to implement next year)."

Our next question asked whether the educational effort attempted to cover "training in the use of modern communications and information systems." Sixteen responses were affirmative, while two states gave qualified affirmative answers. Thirteen responded that they did not and twelve did not respond. "Yes" and qualified "yes" answers thus totalled eighteen of the thirty-one responding or fifty-eight percent.

Our fourth question asked if there were any agencies other than the state library and library schools (covered separately in the fifth question) which provided training directed toward rural librarians. Sixteen states responded that there was some such agency and an additional three

states gave a qualified affirmative response. Only nineteen of the thirty-six responding states gave affirmative or qualified affirmative responses for a percentage of approximately fifty-two.

The fifth question dealt with colleges and universities, including library schools, offering programs aimed especially toward rural librarians. Nineteen states responded with a "yes," fourteen with a "no," and five gave affirmative but qualified responses. Five states did not respond to this question. Of the thirty-eight responding, twenty-four responded with a "yes" or qualified "yes," placing affirmative responses at about sixty three percent.

The final entry on the education part of the questionnaire simply provided an opportunity for comments. Here is a representative sample of those comments: 1. "We have a very challenging time providing training to our rural librarians. Through the LSCA grant process, the two regional coordinators (located in Reno and Las Vegas) provide some training activities, usually of a workshop nature to rural library employees." 2. "Occasionally LSCA demonstration projects in a rural area will include training for staff as one objective." 3. "I would be interested in knowing of any workshops or institutes being offered in this area." 4. "The State of Hawaii runs a state-wide, state funded public library system. All librarians are treated alike and given equal training opportunities. Funds are provided to bring employees in to Honolulu for training and funds are sometimes provided to bring trainers to rural areas."

5. "Nothing specifically for rural libraries." 6. "There is a very active Continuing Education Committee advising the state library agency on development of activities and programs for personnel in all types and sizes of libraries. We are trying to acquire self-instructional materials, both print and AV, that can be used by personnel who are geographically isolated. Library systems in Minnesota are strong. We have seven consolidated multi-county public library systems, six federated public library systems, and seven multi-type systems. All are very much involved in providing educational opportunities for personnel in their branch and member libraries.

TECHNOLOGY

It is obvious that the use of modern technology presents a major opportunity for relatively isolated rural libraries to greatly improve their information services. At the same time rural libraries may be prevented from using such technology. They may lack sufficient staff or the required financial resources to exploit the technology available. Even if they have enough staff and enough funds they may not have staff with sufficient expertise. And, assuming they had all of these resources, they might find that they do not have enough sophisticated users so that the new services would be requested very often. Educating the community to the capabilities and value of the new information technology could prove to be a major problem even if high quality services could be offered.

As with our section on education, our first question on technology asked whether the state library has "a plan or program underway for increasing the use of modern technology by rural librarians." We defined such technology as including "computers, telecommunications, the bibliographic utilities, interactive search systems, etc." Responses on this question included twenty-five "yes" responses and one qualified "yes." There were fourteen "no" responses and three non-responses on this question. The affirmative responses (including one qualified) thus totalled twenty-six on the forty states responding on this question (about sixty-five percent affirmative). This is slightly greater than the affirmative response rate for an educational plan or program (which was about sixty percent).

The next question also paralleled the education portion of the survey; it asked if there were any other agencies besides the state library "promoting the use of technology by rural libraries." However, in this case, we did not exclude library schools from "other agencies." Fourteen states responded that there were other agencies; nineteen responded that there were none; ten states did not respond to this question. Affirmative responses came from only approximately forty-two percent of the states responding on this question, while the parallel question for education produced approximately a forty-four percent response even though it excluded library schools.

Next we sought to identify rural libraries or library systems making "substantial use of modern technology."

Twenty-five state libraries indicated that they were aware of the existence of such uses. Eleven indicated that they knew of no such rural libraries, and seven did not respond. Of those responding nearly seventy percent were aware of some rural libraries making substantial use of modern technology.

The first part of the fifth question dealt with the importance of technology, while the second part asked for an opinion on the danger of obsolescence for rural libraries should they not adopt available technology. The answers to the first part of the question were analyzed by dividing the responses into three categories (plus non-response). Here is a summary of the responses in tabular form:

Importance of Technology to Rural Libraries

RESPONSE	Low	Medium	High	No response
NUMBER	6	10	20	7

Despite the problems of moving rural libraries into the use of high technology only six states gave this a low priority.

On the portion of the question dealing with the danger of obsolescence, thirty-one states responded, with seventeen seeing this as a clear or at least substantial danger. Fourteen states did not see this as a danger; twelve states did not respond on this issue.

We got some of our most interesting comments on the importance of technology and the dangers of not adopting it quickly. Following is a sample of the responses: 1. "Automation

is a tool to help libraries meet their goals. Some rural libraries have limited goals and will not see the need for automation. Limited goals does not necessarily mean obsolescence." 2. "As needed and as available. Not yet and often use by a larger library to help meet rural needs may be all that's needed." 3. "I think modern technology could be very helpful in rural libraries for cataloging and possibly for circulation. Unfortunately, most systems are still too costly for rural libraries at this point."

Next we will comment briefly on the responses from the territories. Three of the five territories mailed survey forms responded. Of these one reported a general plan for education, one indicated that a plan for territory-wide automation was under consideration, and one commented, "Modern technology doesn't exist here." All three responding territories indicated major problems with lack of funds topping the list. Of course, this response was not unique to the territories.

CONCLUSION

As one might expect, we found great diversity in the responses from the state library agencies. Some states appear to be strongly committed to upgrading rural libraries through education or technology or both. Other states reported that not much was being done in one or both of these areas. The need to upgrade rural librarians' education seems clear both from previous studies and from the conventional wisdom of the profession. The best means and adequate resources

for doing this are respectively not clear and absent. The state library agencies do not have the staff or funds (at least in most states) to bring about rapid and dramatic change in the educational levels of rural librarians.

Technology presents even more of a puzzle. The potential benefits seem great, but technology is expensive and it requires trained staff to use it properly. There is also the question of "Which technology?" Microcomputers, remote databases (DIALOG, etc.), the bibliographic utilities (OCLC, etc.), and more recently CD-ROM applications are all possibilities. Better packaged (turn-key) automation systems for small libraries are also becoming available.

The choice depends on what we want the small or medium sized rural library to be. Do we want primarily a popular reading collection? If this is what we want then our main concern might be automated acquisitions or perhaps not even automated acquisitions but just high speed ordering (available with small vendor supplied units which transmit orders over telephone lines). We might also try to expedite interlibrary loan within local systems as a back-up to our individual collections, possibly with something as simple as a system-wide, main entry, union card catalog.

Do we want our small libraries to move much more toward being information service agencies? If we do, then we may want stonger reference collections and access to CD-ROM and online databases. Of course, this will require more education and training.

If any one conclusion seems to stand out is that no one

agency or group of persons has both the clear responsibility and the required resources to move rural libraries on either the problem of lack of adequate training or the problem of how to move these libraries into the late twentieth century in terms of technology. It is, of course, comforting to know that some state library agencies are working both vigorously and intelligently on these concerns as well as on other fronts.

NOTES

1. "The National Rural Library Reference Survey," RQ, 23 (Spring 1984) 316-321.
2. "How Rural Librarians Fight Professional Isolation: A Survey," Public Libraries, 22 (Fall 1983) 86-89.