

TEACHING LIBRARY STUDENTS ABOUT MOBILE LIBRARY SERVICES

Michael Charton
Extension Services Librarian
Walter Cecil Rawls Library
Courtland, Virginia

The purpose of this article is the discussion of bookmobiles and other outreach services in library schools. First, I will discuss personal experiences, then a survey will be introduced. The purpose of the survey was to determine the extent of bookmobile and outreach training in library schools.

Because some of this is personal, the experiences mentioned here will not be true in all cases. Hopefully, this article will also be able to show that you can learn to deliver quality bookmobile service without the benefit of background in a library in a library science program.

Until accepting the position of Extension Services Librarian at the Walter Cecil Rawls Library, I had dealt with a bookmobile only once. That was at the age of five in Brooklyn, NY, where I received my first library card. After growing up in Brooklyn and spending four years in Boston, MA (acquiring my M.L.S.), I arrived in rural Virginia to accept a position working with bookmobiles.

I was enrolled in Public Libraries class in library school; however, the subject of bookmobiles never arose. (This is interesting, since bookmobiles are an integral part of

many public libraries). Our class visited a prison Library, but we did not see a bookmobile.

This lack of information in class provided me with no feelings about or experience with bookmobiles at all. It never occurred to me that as a professional librarian, working with bookmobiles would be desirable at all.

Practically speaking, how does one learn to work with a bookmobile? In my case, the staff taught the day to day workings, while the Director and Assistant Director gave me the opportunity to go out and learn.

One learns by doing. I learned to drive the bookmobile when my assistant threw me the keys one day and said "drive it." Having never driven anything larger than a U-Haul truck, I was scared, but overcame all fears and completed the drive without trouble.

The staff took me out on runs, while I met the patrons and listened a great deal. This was my version of reality orientation.

I was curious to see if other library schools had some sort of bookmobile and outreach training. Not having had such training in bookmobiles myself, I wanted to see if training was offered elsewhere.

The survey was sent to 50 library schools. Twenty-eight responded (a 56% response rate). Geographically, five were from the Northeast, nine from the Southeast, six from the Midwest, four from the Southwest, and three from the West. Six respondents are from major cities.

Six questions were asked in the survey. They are as follows:

1. Does your library science program offer a course in Public Libraries?
2. What % of your graduates accept positions in Public Libraries and how many of your graduates take positions in extension work?
3. Do you offer any training in bookmobile/outreach work? If not, would you consider offering it?
4. Do you have any student interest in bookmobile/outreach service at your institution?
5. Would you teach courses in extension work as part of a continuing education program?
6. If you teach extension services, what do you cover?

The results showed that most schools, while they might teach about some sort of outreach program, they do not necessarily cover bookmobiles. Some schools do teach about bookmobiles. In one case, a bookmobile manufacturer visited the school, others offered training in collection development. Separate courses on Extension Services are taught in some schools, but in others, the topic is covered in different courses (Public Libraries, Adult Services, etc.). Much of the emphasis in the schools teaching Extension Services deals with various programs. Programs covered might be Service to the Elderly, Disadvantaged Populations, and Books by Mail. Few schools keep statistics on how many students enter Extension work. In many cases, there was lack of interest in Extension Services. Some schools said that the topic would be covered if a need arose. Much of what the school covered depended on what libraries in the region offered in the way of services. Of

the 28 schools in the survey, 18 offer some sort of training in Extension Services. Seventeen of the 28 schools indicated at least some student interest in Extension work. Again, this seemed to depend on the region.

The results seemed somewhat encouraging, because I was not sure if any library schools dealt with the topic. Hopefully, it is possible to have at least an introduction to bookmobile service taught everywhere. Experience in many circumstances is still a good teacher, and no classroom program can completely duplicate hands on experience. Since there are also many differences in how libraries run their bookmobiles, no school can teach about all that is done with them. Hopefully, the following suggestions will help library schools do a better job preparing librarians to run a bookmobile.

1. Basic Relationships: Teach students about the special relationship between bookmobile workers and patrons. Bookmobile librarians often see the same patrons on a regular basis (in the case of the Rawls Library, once every two weeks). They know what these patrons like, want, and need and the workers get to know the patrons and their needs extremely well. The workers provide a Reader's Advisory service for their patrons. Reference interviewing is easier on the bookmobile, because there is no reference desk to intimidate. The bookmobile worker should serve these patrons well, because in many cases, they will never set foot inside the main library. For these people, the bookmobile is the library!

2. Collection Development: It is important to know what patrons need and enjoy. By getting to know individuals, the

bookmobile librarian meets the patrons expressed needs. In the Rawls system, the bookmobile service uses the same core collection as the central library, so that its patrons are able to read the same books as their neighbors.

Some systems use a separate collection for the bookmobile and this should be discussed in library training along with the reasons why this is done.

3. Maintenance and Driving: At first glance, these sound like items a professional librarian need not be concerned with. Remember though, that the librarian may have to drive the bookmobile and keep track of maintenance. A session on bookmobiles should discuss the fundamentals of how to buy and maintain a bookmobile.

While one cannot expect library schools to buy a practice bookmobile (after all, they aren't cheap), the bookmobile operator must be aware not only that the vehicle has oil, but that the oil must occasionally be changed.

4. Staff Development: The professional librarian operating a bookmobile has an excellent opportunity to impart techniques to the bookmobile staff. For example, the staff taught me the basics of bookmobile service and I was able to teach the staff professional topics, such as conducting reference interviews.

5. Professional Development: The library school session on bookmobiles should discuss the latest in professional knowledge, such as conference topics, journal articles, new technology and other new ideas. Classes should see samples of bookmobile standards. In this way, graduates from an

M.L.S. program will have some idea of what is going on with bookmobiles.

Internships with area libraries using bookmobiles would be beneficial. In this manner, the student could combine what was learned in the class with the necessary on the job experience.

To conclude, I would like to state that the purpose was not to attack the training in any library school. I was curious to see if my experience was similar to those that other librarians may have had.

Everything I learned about bookmobiles in the beginning was on the job. (Later, by attending conferences, I saw what colleagues were doing.) From the survey results, I hoped to pinpoint what sort of training was out there.

Library schools base their training on what is in the area. This is reasonable, but my argument is; if nothing is mentioned about bookmobiles at all, students will have no way of making a well grounded decision about working with them. It is obvious that a full course on Extension Services may not be feasible in many schools, but there should be at least a class session on it. Classroom training will not replace the hands on experience, but an introduction would make it much easier for the student, who will deal with these areas. The difference from library to library is great enough, so much of the learning must be done on the job. Better trained professionals will also serve the staff and the patrons better. The bookmobile and Extension Services should not be

treated as poor stepchildren, but as integral parts of public libraries.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues, who took the time to fill out the survey, and the staff of the Rawls Library, who taught me what bookmobile service is all about.