STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR RURAL LIBRARIES:
A CALIFORNIA CASE

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Abstract

This paper describes the initiation of a strategic planning process used by the Yolo County (California) Library system. The planning was triggered by a variety of external factors, including new technologies and increased community demands for services, and internal factors, including static budgets and staff turnover. Four different research techniques involving community volunteers were used to gather data and information on the seven communities served and expectations of patrons and non-patrons and of community leaders. This case is instructive for other librarians in rural settings and suggests the need for examining roles of librarians and libraries through an ongoing strategic planning process.

Introduction

American public libraries face unprecedented crises. Continuing governmental budget deficits, accelerating demographic changes, and the availability of new, costly information technologies, create a mix of challenges for librarians responsible for the stewardship of these important community resources. The goodwill traditionally associated with libraries no longer is automatically

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extended by the public or sufficient to ensure their survival. Rural libraries and rural librarians may be the most vulnerable to such threats. Fiscal disaster has struck some small libraries, crippling them, even leading to closures.[1] Low salaries, all too common in rural libraries, often lead to high staff turnover. An inadequately trained staff may limit the services many clients expect. Rural libraries, no less than their urban counterparts, need librarians capable of creatively confronting new situations. Librarians must not only work harder, but smarter.

This paper describes how one small library system in rural California, faced with fiscal constraints and a rapidly changing environment, actively began to plan its future. Detailed are certain procedures used as part of a strategic planning process that involved local residents and decision makers. The process used an action research approach with methods for assessing the local communities' support and expectations of the local branch libraries. Lessons gained from this case should be useful to other library systems, particularly small systems, faced with difficult times.

The Yolo County Library System

Yolo County is a 1,000 square mile county located between San Francisco and Sacramento. The Yolo County Free Public Library System serves a population of 90,300 (of a total of 130,000) through seven branch libraries, a central administrative office, and a staff of 42 (representing 28.125 FTE). Libraries are located in three incorporated communities (ranging in population from 4,500 to 50,000) and three unincorporated areas (ranging in population from 600 to 3,700). A fourth incorporated city of 40,000 is served by an independent city library. The 1987 annual budget was slightly more than $1 million, relatively unchanged since 1970. This level of funding is in contrast to the increases in population (Figure 1) and circulation in the same time period (Table 1). The 1985-86 actual per capita expenditure for library operations (salaries/benefits, books, periodicals, services, and supplies) was $11.00.
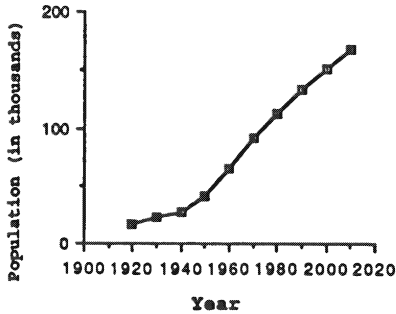
Figure 1.

Yolo County Population: 1920-2010

Table 1: Book circulation for Yolo County Library System (County-wide)			
1970	1975 (5 year % increase)	1980 (5 year % increase)	1985 (5 year % increase)
279,548	372,220 (25%)	405,088 (9%)	460,361 (13%)

Constructing a New Perspective Through Strategic Planning

The effort in Yolo County used a strategic planning process coupled with action research. Strategic planning was viewed as a process of decision making and implementation. Key components of that process were the steps to collect information to be used by librarians to construct new ways of viewing roles and relationships for the libraries with the communities served. In strategic planning processes, distinct specific steps (e.g., values audit, mission formulation, strategic modeling, performance audit, gap analysis, contingency planning, and environmental scanning) precede implementation (Nolan 1987). In this study, efforts were aimed at environmental scanning, performance audit, and gap

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analysis. An action research approach (Sommer and Amick 1984) was used in conjunction with four data collection techniques to gather quantitative and qualitative data used in the scanning and audit steps. The action research approach was aimed at improving the organizational effectiveness of the library while involving participants in the change (i.e., library staff, community volunteers, students, and others) in the research. The assessment of the library's seven community environments was a collaboration between the librarian, the library staff, community volunteers, and members of the community development staff and students of the University of California Cooperative Extension. Although project documents were produced (see Grieshop and Stephens 1987; Grieshop, Fretz, and Faletti 1987)[2], emphasis was more on the process of planning. Those documents served as tools to facilitate discussion, to aid in the design of alternative futures, and to improve decision making by a county wide Citizen's Library Advisory Committee composed of representatives of the 7 areas and of elected officials. This Committee, in addition to the County Librarian, constituted the responsible planning body. These planning and research processes helped to create the vision of the future for the Yolo County Library System. These processes, however, did not serve to implement the vision.

The four community assessment methods selected were a telephone survey, a paper and pencil in-library survey, key informant interviews, and focus group interviews (Chart 1). The aim was through 'triangularization' or taking measurements from at least three angles while using surveys and interviews to create reliable, accurate, and complete portraits of each community in reference to its library. Methods chosen were to be practical and readily usable by library professionals and, with proper guidance and supervision, by volunteers. Another method selection consideration was whether the method would contribute to the building or, at least, the reinforcement of a community-library partnership. For the librarians, community research led to an assessment of the public's views, their needs, and possibilities for future development. For the public, the contact, especially through the telephone, key informant, and focus group interviews, offered a view of the possibilities and limits within which the library had to work.

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Chart 1: Summary of Community Assessment Methods

	Telephone Survey	Patron Survey	Key Leader Interview	Focus Group Interview
Primary Characteristics	A structured interview conducted by telephone with narrowly focused and open-ended questions.	A paper and pencil questionnaire with focused questions to be completed on site in the library.	In-person interview of individuals with open-ended questions and many question probes.	An interview of a group with emphasis on generating discussion among members on general questions.
Target Audience	Both library users and non-users, selected on a random basis.	Library users. Self-selected.	Individuals representing business, government, schools, and community-identified as leaders.	Individuals representative of local communities. Both users and non-users.
Types of Information Generated	Emphasis on awareness, knowledge of and support for library. Data on use, services, shortcomings, changes needed, plus demographic information.	Emphasis on use patterns of library, support, and preferred changes as well as demographic information.	Emphasis on perceived mission, roles, and services of library and on how groups use the library.	Emphasis on perceptions of library, individuals, interaction with library and relationship of the library to local community.
Types of Results	Primarily quantitative: frequencies, percentages, rankings.	Primarily quantitative: frequencies, percentages, rankings.	Qualitative: Summaries of ideas, opinions, suggestions, but categorized by respondent groups and communities.	Qualitative: Summaries of groups' views, suggestions.
Special Requirements	Need to organize a system to randomly select persons to be called.	Decisions on when the surveys will be available to the public.	Skills in listening and asking probe questions. Selection of "Key Leaders."	Skills in facilitating a group discussion.
Resources Needed	Skilled individuals to do phoning, with patience and time to complete phone calls. Persons to do coding and tabulating of data. Phones. Computer, computer operator. Money for printing costs.	Person(s) to code and tabulate data. Computer for data entry and analysis; money for printing costs.	Person skilled in conducting in-depth interviews and with time to schedule interviews.	Skilled person for leading discussions. Persons to organize and host focus groups.
Strengths of Method	Get results from both users and non-users.	Can be done periodically throughout the year to monitor use, satisfaction, needed changes.	Can yield in-depth information on library and its relationship to community. Can be used to monitor key leaders' views.	Can yield important information on short and long range changes and depth of support.
Limitations	Individuals interviewed may not be random. Persons without phones, or with unlisted numbers not included. May eliminate non-English speakers.	Self-selected group of respondents; not random. May leave out non-English readers, less literate, and sight impaired.	Time consuming. Respondents may be coy. "Leaders" may be neither representative nor leaders.	Always a question of representativeness of group.

Among the question categories used to focus the data gathering phase of the project were:

1) What is the level of support for the library in the community?

2) What are appropriate roles and mission for librarians and the library in the community?

3) What changes or additions are needed in the library?

Training and involvement of local volunteers were integral pieces of the research and educational process. Some of the 40 volunteers had worked with the local libraries before--many had not. Each helped to bridge gaps between the library and the larger community. Volunteers were trained as interviewers, collaborated on the design of survey questions, and reviewed and interpreted results. For example, to conduct telephone interviews, a volunteer not only had to be capable of conducting interviews but also had to be well informed about the library. As they interviewed residents by phone, they were able to "teach" by asking and answering questions and by explaining the needs of the library.

Results

The assessments carried out from late January to early April, 1987 included nearly 500 telephone interviews, almost 600 pen and pencil surveys, 16 focus group interviews, and 49 key leader interviews. These activities involved volunteers from the seven communities, students, and library staff. Care was taken to plan what and how many questions were to be asked and how many interviews were to be completed. Furthermore, the human resources needed to manage the collection and analyses of the information were also determined available and trained. Consequently, a large, but nevertheless manageable, quantity of information and data were gathered from the perspective of the seven communities and from patrons and non-patrons alike. Analyses of the data were performed by the University personnel, although results were analyzed and interpreted by the library and advisory board personnel. The findings presented are combinations of responses from the quantitative telephone and paper and

pencil surveys, along with trends, summaries, and general conclusions based on the qualitative focus group and in-depth interviews. Sources are indicated.

Community Support for the Library

Questions related to community support for the library were central to all the surveys and interviews. Support, or the lack of it, was a definer of the environments in which the library functioned. Support was understood in relation to financial issues, including bond issues to expand and build new facilities, special taxes, and continuing level of financial and volunteer support.

In Yolo County a gap was found between the number of local citizens who viewed the library favorably and those who would support it financially (Table 2). While 89% of the general population polled in the telephone interview and 85% of the patrons indicated feeling "favorable" about the library, only 57% of the general population and 66% of the patrons would vote for a tax increase for the library. This truth mirrors recent election results on library bond measures in nearby counties, i.e., while bond measures receive a majority of voter's support, they do not receive the required two-thirds support to pass. The general population agreed the library is a vital part of their community, but that agreement was weaker when personal finances are to be assessed. The public viewed the library as one of many tax supported services, e.g., fire, police, road, that competes for support. In order to gain the necessary support, libraries must continually and creatively demonstrate their importance to the community.

Table 2: Percent levels of support county-wide of the Library

	Very favor	Somewhat favor	Not sure	Somewhat unfavor	Very unfav
General population's feelings about the local branch of the library	53	36	7	3	0
Patron's feelings about the local branch of the library	51	34	7	2	6

	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Do not know
General population that would support a tax increase for the library	57	20	6	7
Patrons who would support a tax increase for the library	66	26	9	10
General population that would volunteer at the library	27	21	42	10
General population that would join the "Friends of the Library"	30	26	36	7

In Yolo County 37% of the population indicated they "rarely heard" of the library. This finding suggests that librarians must move beyond the walls of the library into the community with their services. Increased public relations and community education work are suggested by these findings. Both new and existing programs and services must be packaged for patrons and used to attract non-patrons.

Another indicator of community support is the activities of volunteers. Volunteers, as individuals or groups, can be extensions of the staff, and organizations such as the "Friends of the Library" can be separate support groups. Both types of volunteers can and must play active roles to foster the positive, supportive relationships between community and library.

At the time of the study, the county system did not have any organized volunteer program or staff person responsible for such a program. Several branches did have incorporated "Friends of the Library" organizations. In the telephone survey 27% of county residents interviewed indicated they would volunteer at the library, while 30% indicated they would join the "Friends". These

figures imply a core community commitment exists to provide support through volunteering. An underutilized and unmobilized potential source of human energy to assist in the fiscally constrained library system lies in the communities. Volunteer's participation in this study serves as further verification. Success in tapping that resource depends on the system's willingness and ability to organize to develop and manage it.

Community Roles for Librarians and Libraries

Every library and librarian play a number of roles in relation to the external community (McClure, et al., 1987). External and internal demands are signals that a change in roles may be necessary. While librarians will continue performing many tasks as in the past, new roles and functions will have to be assumed if the system is to meet expectations of the public and other public institutions. New technologies present challenges. Resources, or their lack, will require librarians to work more efficiently and more intelligently. In addition to carrying out old roles, new skills will have to be mastered.

This study, in each of the four research methods, sought to identify demands and expectations from various perspectives. Results indicate local librarians in Yolo County may have to become more adept in working with and in the communities. The roles of community educator and community developer will require them to more actively and regularly assess communities, to work with and train volunteers, and to educate the public. Four general roles merit attention: offering popular materials, supporting the formal education system, furnishing materials for lifelong learning, and providing community oriented services. These four provide a workable scheme to consider the dynamics between the library's traditional roles and new ones.

Role 1: Offering popular materials: The provision of current, high interest, high demand materials was repeatedly stressed as a need, expectation, and right by the constituencies surveyed. Over one half of library patrons felt that the popular materials were the most important service provided. The general population ranked "pleasure reading and browsing" a close second to "looking for

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information and materials on particular questions." These preferences were supported by the actual use patterns by patrons--not surprisingly; the general public used the library for reading, browsing, and researching.

In contrast, government and community leaders reflected different role expectations. Similarly, the focus group interviews with citizens knowledgeable about the community and library led to different expectations. Those individuals more involved with their community and/or the library (or at least those with the opportunity to talk of their expectations) saw it for its variety of services, and not just for a single service. In their eyes it was more a multiple service institution. They believed the library has to support the local schools, have more outreach, support literacy efforts, and, in general, be more of a service to the community. Planning to respond to diverse perceptions is a great challenge facing this system.

Role 2: Supporting the public education system: The role of the Yolo County libraries vis-a-vis schools was reflected in the high usage by school related populations. In all, over 50% of the patrons as queried by phone or the paper survey were part of a school age family unit. Nineteen percent of those patrons felt that the library's primary purpose was to provide information or materials related to school and/or a place to study. Relevant suggestions from governmental and civic leaders varied from the need for simply more communication between teachers and librarians to assist in student research to the development of contractual arrangements through which public libraries become responsible for school site libraries. This expectation indicated a concern for library related education at a time when California's school libraries are disappearing. From 1981 to 1985, there was a 23% decrease in total school librarians employed in California, leaving 68% of the schools without a certified librarian (Brandes, 1987). Recognizing the problem, one Yolo County branch created, with the help of public funds, a mechanism to bring local elementary students to the library. The results indicate that much more of the same is expected by leaders in all the communities. Can and should the county library endeavor to fill these performance gaps? Gaps provide opportunities to expand services and interactions with their community. But, responding to gaps also requires resources.

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Role 3: Furnishing materials for lifelong learning: Patrons and non-patrons, community leaders and residents all believed the library must provide support for individuals of all ages who wish to pursue a sustained program of learning. Libraries were clearly associated with the issue of literacy. In Yolo County the general population felt a literacy program was needed as one of the top five most important additions to the library programming. Beyond this preference, little uniformity in preferences emerged and expressed needs of patrons varied widely. For some, reference materials were important. For others, special services for the home bound or incarcerated are of high priority. Overall, however, 79% of all residents surveyed stated the most important reason for the library was to help in acquiring information and materials on specific questions. The challenge is to acknowledge this expectation but to focus responses on a limited number of areas. Planning and decision making should lead to needed and acceptable areas. With such a wide variety of services possible, the libraries will need to balance allocation of resources among clearly defined and agreed upon services and materials.

Role 4: Providing community oriented services: Can the libraries serve as clearinghouses for rural community organizations and issues? One demand is that they should. Again, patrons and non-patrons, leaders and residents all expressed the need for a 'community center' role. Some libraries have resources to fulfill that expectation (e.g., meeting rooms, bulletin boards, and special locations for community programming about services). In several of the most rural communities and areas, the library is the only community wide organization available. In others, the library and the school constitute the sole community wide resources. Playing the role of a community focal point will place the library in the center of community activities. Decisions to actually pursue this role can bring many non-library users in contact with its services. But a decision to do so also portends change for the librarians. They not only answer questions and direct people to books, but must serve as facilitators, catalysts, and developers in their local institutions.

Change Considerations

Patrons and general public alike agreed the greatest changes necessary included more books and more hours or days open. This gap between what the library offers and what the public wants is neither new nor surprising. It seems to be a constant facing all libraries and librarians. Ranked next in importance for Yolo County by the general population was the need for a literacy program and more children's programs. This finding highlights the public's perception of the library as an educational institution. The public also indicated a demand for the enhancement of bookmobile services, computer reference service, and information and community information services. These additions focus on services outside the realm of books and magazines.

Whether offering popular materials, supporting the public education system, furnishing materials for lifelong learning and/or providing community services, the Yolo County Library system must make decisions on its future and policies. The message from the Yolo County public is: more of the same but with diversification and new services and roles. To accomplish one requires commitment. To do both requires an immense commitment by librarians and staffs, along with new skills and resources, including those related to ongoing strategic planning and management.

Implications

The mission of today's public library remains as before: in a democracy the library supports the people's government by providing public access to information and knowledge (Mason, 1985). However, change is all about. What has changed are the roles the library must play to fulfill this mission. New technologies, changing perceptions, and new demands are driving these changes, while fiscal constraints and traditional library philosophies and concerns inhibit them. For the librarian caught in the middle, the new and the old, the thesis and the antithesis, must be actively synthesized to create today's library. Librarians must become proactive in the planning, research, and action. Books will continue to be used and populations will continue to grow, and there will be a continued shortage in

professional staff (Crismond, 1986). Every library system must actively plan for, create, and manage change.

The results of this study are instructive, especially for small, rural based library systems. Yolo County is not that different from many other rural counties. The county's population is growing while its budget in general, and for the library in particular, has not grown. The local population is increasingly better educated and exhibits more diverse expectations for the local libraries. New technologies are available and needed for the efficient functioning of the system. The library staff is overextended and underpaid. All the ingredients required for institutional stress exist. In order to break out of the stress cycle, an intervention process had to be instituted.

The process of initiating change begins with a commitment to change. This commitment, combined with an understanding of the library's internal and external environment and its role in the community, sets the stage for actively creating a library supported by and fully servicing the population that utilizes it. In this process, the effect of new technologies and services must be evaluated to determine the roles that librarians are to assume. New, strengthened support must be secured to maintain these changes. Not only the role of the librarians, but also the role of the library in general must be decided. In striving to provide more and better services, the library must consider educating the public and increasing their voluntarism. The Yolo County Library, with its diversity of roles, reaches out and provides services and materials for many subgroups and individuals. Best-sellers are always in demand. School children use it for reference materials, resting, and for a safe harbor. The bookmobile reaches out into the more isolated areas of the county. Can the library initiate and maintain a dialogue with all these groups? Its very existence in the years to come may depend upon the grassroots education of the public, particularly the underserved groups, about the resources it can provide.

According to the county-wide telephone survey, 70% of the respondents claimed to have a library card and to have used the library in the past 12 months. But, 30% also indicated they did not use the library for reasons of not

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having time or reason to use it, for reasons of inconvenience, and for reasons of not hearing about it. The future of the Yolo County system, and no doubt many other rural libraries, may depend on whether these reasons are considered.

In this paper we have attempted to describe a practical approach to initiating change in a rural library. This approach proved to be relatively inexpensive, although not without dollar and human costs. Those costs were well within the means of the Yolo County system, especially since the commitment from the top to institute institutional change was made. If such a commitment were not made, the planning and assessment process would be a waste.

This paper is also a call for change. Librarians must change their institutions if they, are to survive. The research and assessment process incorporated as part of the strategic planning process is an integral part of that change, but only a beginning.

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NOTES

[1]In Northern California during 1987-88 several counties severely reduced library services, closing branches, and laying off personnel due to fiscal constraints. In Shasta County, the county library system was closed.

[2]A copy of the manual "A Librarian's Guide for Conducting Community Analyses," is available by writing the senior author.