Bookmobile Survey

by
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FOCUS OF THIS SURVEY

Since so much time has passed since the last survey concerning bookmobile services was conducted by the CSRL, it seemed appropriate that another be conducted in an attempt to shed light on the recent status of bookmobile services in the United States. This survey had a different focus than that of the one conducted in the mid-1980's. Admittedly, it was largely modeled after its predecessor, but sought to measure accurately bookmobile services in the United States. In some ways this survey can be seen as a   barometer of bookmobile services as the Twenty-first century approaches.

The focus of this survey was rather broad in nature, seeking a view of services as a whole. Gaining information concerning long-term planning, numbers of patrons served, numbers of books circulated, significant problems, specific materials offered, budgets, service cycles, and staff development was the intent. Additionally, special effort was made to put reference services and the state of automation onboard the bookmobile into perspective. Since the bookmobile is viewed by many to be an extension of the library, it seemed rather important to see how the function of reference personnel is conducted. Also, since the state of automation within libraries has advanced so significantly during the last decade, it seemed necessary to determine how the bookmobile has been effected.

"TECHNIQUE" APPLIED

- To assist the reader in reading the results of this survey the researchers decided to explain the technique and format used in presenting the information.
- All percentages expressed are that of the total number of surveys returned.
- All percentages are expressed in whole numbers.
  Percentages in the range of x.5-x.9 were rounded up; those in the range of x.1-x.4 were rounded down.
- Numbers in parentheses following percentage figures represent the actual number of those surveyed that responded to that particular question.

THE RAW DATA

Out of nine hundred ninety-six possible addresses for bookmobile programs, two hundred forty-six, or twenty-five percent, were selected. Every fourth address from the list was chosen. To each address was mailed on survey complete with return envelope. Of the two hundred forty-six mailed, ninety were included in this analysis. That is thirty-seven percent of the total surveys mailed. Of the ninety surveys analyzed, sixty-six yielded tangible information. That is, twenty-four surveys provided no answers to any of the survey questions. These twenty-four surveys were of some value, however, identifying many libraries that have ceased offering bookmobile services.

Seventy-two percent (65) of those surveyed responded to Q-1 about whether their library has a long term plan. Twenty-eight percent (25) of survey respondents indicated that they have a long term plan relating to bookmobile services, while forty-four percent (40) indicated that they do not have a long-term plan relating to bookmobile services.

Seven percent (5) plan on replacing or pu...sing a new bookmobile. Three percent (2) plan to provide on-line services to their patrons, including access to the "WWWeb", in one case. Seven percent (5) plan on increasing services for the elderly, homebound, and patrons with disabilities, while seven percent (5) have the same plans for services to children.

When asked whether they had ever formally surveyed bookmobile patrons as to what might increase their satisfaction with the bookmobile service thirty-seven percent (33) responded that they have, while thirty-four percent (31) responded that they have not.

No respondents indicated that having more bookmobile staff would increase satisfaction. Three percent (3) of respondents indicated that having longer stops would increase patron satisfaction, while two percent (2) noted that having more frequent stops would likely increase patron satisfaction. Eleven percent (10) included other things that would increase satisfaction. Among the other things noted were having a better selection of "genre", and new locations of stops.

Seventy-one percent (64) of survey respondents indicated that they keep some measure of statistics on bookmobile services. Every respondent to this question indicated that they keep circulation statistics. Forty-two percent (38) indicated they count the users that come onboard the bookmobile. Thirty-three percent (30) indicated they keep statistics on those attending programs. Twenty-eight percent (25) of respondents keep statistics on reference questions asked onboard. And 16 percent

(14) indicated other areas of statistical measure. Among the other things upon which statistics are kept were the use of magazines and paperbacks, and the amount of time spent at each stop.

When asked whether fixed facilities in appropriate locations would be satisfactory alternatives to bookmobile service, seventy-two percent (65) of the respondents answered. Eleven percent (10) indicated that they thought fixed facilities would be a satisfactory alternative. Twelve percent (11) indicated that they were not certain whether fixed facilities would be satisfactory, and forty-nine percent (44) indicated 'no', fixed facilities would not be satisfactory. In almost every case, the reason cited for fixed facilities not being a satisfactory alternative was that those served by the bookmobile cannot reach the facility. Others sited the inherent cost in operating and maintaining a fixed facility.

When asked how bookmobile services will change for their patrons over the next five years, seventy-one percent (64) of survey respondents answered. Thirty-four percent (31) indicated that services would increase. Seven percent (5) cited their plans to automate the bookmobile and the resulting increase in services as a significant factor in the increase in services to patrons. Eight percent (6) identified population growth in their service area as a factor affecting an increase in services. Four percent (3) noted that the bookmobile itself will be a major factor in the increase in services, either because a new bookmobile is going to be purchased, or the existing bookmobile is operable once again.

Sixteen percent (14) indicated that services will decrease. Financial constraints were often identified as the reason for the projected decrease in services. Other notable factors included decreasing populations, more stops that last longer, more women entering the work force, and the increased mobility of patrons.

Twenty-one percent (17) indicated that services will remain the same. Seven percent (5) identified no increases in the budget as the reason for "stagnant" services. Three percent (2) noted that their schedules were already filled to capacity. There is no time for expansion.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Patronage of bookmobile operations during the period spanning 1994 and 1995 was the focus of Q-10. Forty percent (36) reported patron numbers for 1994. The average number of patrons that came onboard the bookmobile in 1994 was 11,240. Forty-four percent (40) reported patron numbers for 1995 with the average being 11,535 patrons.

Circulation statistics for 1994 and 1995 were reported in Q-11. Sixty-eight percent (61) provided figures for 1994. The average number of books circulated in 1994 was 41,100. Seventy percent (63) provided figures for 1995. The average number of books circulated in 1995 was 41,863.

Sixty-nine percent (62) of survey respondents provided information about the most significant problem they face in providing bookmobile services. Eight percent (7) indicated that the lack of staff was the problem. Twenty-two percent (20) noted that a general lack of operating funds was troublesome. Five percent (4) stated that the inability to carry enough books on the bookmobile was problematic. Twenty-three percent (21) sited mechanical upkeep of the vehicle as the major obstacle. Sixteen percent (14) noted other problems as being most significant. Among the other problems faced were, in no particular order, weather related problems, not actually having a bookmobile, overdue/lost materials, "time", lack of patrons, no back-up personnel, inability to access the database, and the "lack of public internet".

Seventy-one percent (64) of survey respondents provided information as to whether their bookmobile budget was separate from the overall budget of their library. Twenty percent (18) reported that their budgets are separate form the budget of the library. Fifty-one (46) percent reported that their bookmobile budget is not separate. Seventeen percent (15) provided figures for the 1994 budget. The average 1994 bookmobile budget was $70,822. Twenty percent (18) provided figures for the 1995 budget , with an average of $70,070.

MATERIALS AND SERVICES OF THE BOOKMOBILE ITSELF

Seventy-one percent (64) of the surveys received answered our query as to whether enough reference question were asked to warrant carrying reference sources on the bookmobile. Twenty percent (18) responded yes, while fifty-one (46) percent responded no, they do not receive enough questions to warrant carrying reference sources.

Twenty-four percent (22) of respondents identified the general type of reference sources they carry. Twenty-two (20) carry dictionaries. Seventeen percent (15) carry encyclopedias of some sort. Seventeen percent (15) carry atlases. Four percent (4) responded that indexes are offered. Twenty-one percent (19) noted carrying almanacs. And nine percent (8) cited some other type of source. A singularly notable "other" source was a cellular phone for calling in reference questions to HQ.

Respondants were also asked to identify any non-book materials car-

ried on the bookmobile. Forty-seven percent (42) indicated that they carried books on tape. Twenty-six percent (23) indicated that they carried video tapes. Three percent (3) noted that they carried maps on the bookmobile. One percent (1) offered some other form of electronic media. Seventeen percent (15) cited carrying some other form(s) of non-book materials. Common forms of other non-book material included cassettes, compact disks and magazines.

Seventy-one percent (64) of the surveys received provided information concerning services for the physically challenged. Eight percent (7) reported that their bookmobile is equipped to handle physically challenged patrons. Sixty-three percent (57) reported that their bookmobile is not equipped to handle physically challenged patrons.

Sixty-seven percent (60) reported that they do carry materials appropriate for the visually impaired. Six percent (5) indicate that they carry books in Braille. Sixty-seven percent (60) carry large-type-books. Thirty-four percent (31) carry talking books. Nine percent (8) carry "other" types of material for the visually impaired. Included among the other material types were magnifiers, toys and puzzles, and books-on-tape. One librarian reported that they did not carry materials for the visually impaired because their service area has in place a program by the Philadelphia Library for the Blind. Only four percent (4) reported that they do not carry any materials appropriate for the visually impaired.

AUTOMATED SERVICES ONBOARD THE BOOKMOBILE

Seventy-one percent (64) of surveys received responded to our query concerning automated services onboard the bookmobile. Thirty-eight percent (34) indicated that they have a microcomputer onboard for charging out materials.

Nineteen percent (17) indicated that their automation systems have been in use for two years or less. Fourteen percent (13) indicated three to five years. Three percent (3) indicated six to eight years. And four percent (4) reported that their systems have been in use for nine or more years.

Among the different brand systems in use were Dynix-Telxon, Gaylord-Galaxy, Geac, DEC, Pick, Biblofile, Brodart, and Library Corp.

Thirty-three percent (30) reported that they do not have a microcomputer onboard for charging out materials.

BOOKMOBILE STOPS

Seventy-three percent (66) of surveys received provided information on the number of stops served by the bookmobile. Each bookmobile averaged 48 stops. Three weeks was the average service cycle for each bookmobile. And fifty-two service hours per service cycle was the average for each bookmobile.

Twelve percent (11) of survey respondents indicated that available population was the most important factor in determining the location of a stop. Four percent (4) indicated they base stops on the location of suitable buildings. Four percent (4) reported that the stop is determined by its distance from the library. Fifty-nine percent (53) indicated that it is based on the need and location of users. Four percent (4) reported "other" factors as being the most important factor in determining the location of a stop.

Eight percent (7) indicated that the most important factor in determining whether a stop should be continued is the available population of the area in question. Forty-seven percent (42) reported that the decision is based on circulation statistics. Two percent (2) indicated that the decision is determined through a community survey. One percent (1) stated that the decision is primarily financial in nature. Nine percent (8) provided "other" important factors. Other important factors included the needs of schools, the needs of users, attendance and circulation. Often the miscellaneous category of other overlapped the categories provided.

Forty-eight percent (43) identified demand as the most important factor in determining new stops. Thirteen percent (12) noted that new stops are based on available population. Two percent (2) reported that new stops are determined through a community survey. Three percent (3) reported that it is primarily a financial decision.

Forty percent (36) of survey respondents indicated that the character of their stops has changed over the last five years. Twenty-nine percent (26) reported that the character has not changed over the last five years.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

Sixty-two percent (56) of survey respondents indicated that staff development opportunities are available. Ten percent (9) reported that staff development opportunities are not available.

Sixty percent (54) of survey respondents indicated that they do take advantage of staff development opportunities. Three percent (3) indicated that they do not take advantage of staff opportunities. Two per-

cent (2) indicated that they participate in staff development on a weekly basis. Nine percent (8) participates monthly. Twenty-six percent (23) participates annually. Twenty-three percent (21) reported "other" information. Other information included as available, 2/year, 2-3/year, 3-4/year, and quarterly.

POPULATION SERVED BY BOOKMOBILES

Sixty-nine percent (62) of surveys received provided information concerning the population of the total service area served by their bookmobiles. The average population of bookmobile service areas was 108,629. Note, however, that the range of populations reported is 992,00. A Detroit, MI area library reported a service population of 1,000,000.

CONCLUSIONS

The data gathered from this survey presents some evidence regarding certain trends in bookmobile services.

Perhaps not surprising to anyone reading this, evidence indicates that the main constraint put on bookmobile services, according to the operators, is the lack of sufficient funding. In this way bookmobile services are no different from fixed facility services. But the effect of insufficient funds can be amplified when the services in question are that of the bookmobile. For many, particularly the elderly, house bound, children in day care, and in some cases schools, the bookmobile is the only link to the library available. In this case the contracting of budgets, or the "stagnation" of budgets when the cost of living increase is factored in, can mean the cessation of services all together. Whereas, with fixed facilities the services within the building may decrease, but are still available to all that can reach the library.

Since the vast majority of libraries are institutions of a public nature, that is they receive some level of public funding, it is imperative that they examine how well they serve all of their supporters. As noted previously, for many, through no doing of their own, the bookmobile is the only service they receive. Should they be denied service all together when service continues for those more "fortunate"? What, then, is the duty and purpose of the public library?

Traditionally reference services have been a segment of library service carried out by people for people. Herein lies the dilemma for bookmobile services. With staff already taxed to a great degree, how can there be any time left over for answering questions commonly

posed by patrons? In truth, the author suspects that a sizable portion of bookmobile operators serve as a reference librarian of sort. Evidence collected by the survey do not corroborate this view, however.

Survey evidence suggests that the majority of bookmobile librarians do not receive enough reference questions to warrant carrying reference sources. Among the sources that are available on bookmobiles that carry reference sources are primarily dictionaries, encyclopedias, almanacs, and atlases. Many survey respondents indicated that these items circulate with the rest of the collection.

Perhaps bookmobile librarians simply do not receive as many reference questions as suggested. This would seem to indicate that the bookmobile is viewed as a source of books and information, but not necessarily in the same way as the traditional fixed facility. More than likely, though, the evidence supports the notion that bookmobile librarians are too busy circulating books to answer questions.

Much to the surprise of the author the percentage of bookmobiles that are equipped to handle physically challenged patrons was a mere five percent. Given the fact that bookmobiles serve such a wealth of seniors and disabled people this is surprising, but upon further examination the situation reveals itself. First, many people served by bookmobiles are physically unable to leave their residences to board the vehicle so it makes no difference whether the vehicle is accessible to them. Secondly, many bookmobiles operate from vehicles manufactured and purchased prior to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act into law. Many vehicle manufacturers did not offer these amenities to their clients. Third, but certainly not the least important, is the dedication to service that most all bookmobile librarians evidenced in this survey. Being accessible to the physically handicapped does not matter as much when you have personnel willing to bring the books to your door.

There is no information available from the past to which to compare the state of automation onboard bookmobiles today; however, the evidence collected supports some obvious trends. One in five survey respondents report having had an automated circulation system for two years or less. All told over thirty percent of the respondents have had an automated circulation system for five years or less, while just seven percent have had one six years or more. Indeed, it seems automation is finally reaching the world of bookmobile services as well. It has taken longer than for main libraries, but perhaps that is to be expected given the priority bookmobile services receive. Clearly the trend is on the

rise, and before long automation onboard the bookmobile will be the standard rather than the exception.

To the extent that this survey is credible, it suggests an interesting, although not surprising situation for bookmobiles nationwide. The statistics gathered suggest that more patrons were served during the 1995 service year than during the 1994 service year, while at the same time the budgets of those bookmobiles decreased. The number of patrons served increased by just over five percent, but budgets contracted over eight percent. This figure is somewhat tempered by the fact that the number of books circulated during this same period decreased by over forty-percent. Still the trend is toward bookmobiles offering what they have to a greater number of people on less money.

While this may come as no surprise to anyone associated with bookmobiles and/or libraries, it still raises the critical question of the role of bookmobiles and, to a larger degree, libraries. The services provided by bookmobiles seems largely invaluable to the recipients. In fact, for many it is an either-or situation. Either they are served by the bookmobile, or they are not served. Is this something that a "public" institution should allow? Furthermore, what does this say about the value of those who will go unserved if the bookmobile falls short? This in not intended to serve as an indictment of the bookmobile, rather it is directed at those that take the 'public' library and its various extensions for granted.

Whatever the outcome of the various dilemmas identified earlier, if they are even resolved, one thing is certain. The success of bookmobiles thus far in their history, and their continued success in the face of difficulty, should be attributed to those that make it all possible—the operators and librarians themselves. It is they who fight the battle daily; it is they who keep the vehicle running; it is they who deliver to those who cannot leave their residence; and it is they to whom the real credit belongs.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

To the surprise of the author, despite all efforts to ensure that questions not be vague or misleading, or allow for more than one interpretation, there appeared to be several areas of the survey questionnaire itself that ostensibly could be improved upon.

One difficulty not anticipated was that of actually getting those responding to follow directions. It sounds pompous for a beggar of information to say this, but it is not intended that way in the least. If a

question is asked and one answer, the most important factor for instance, is wanted, then one answer is all that is expected. Rather, it should be stated, was expected.

The question dealing with materials for the visually challenged led to some difficulty in interpreting results. One choice offered as an answer was Talking books. Many respondents indicated "other—books on tape". This confusion is, in large part, due to an error on the part of the author. At this time he is no longer sure what the difference between Talking books and Books on Tape is, if there is any.

Terminology appears to have played a role in the ambiguous nature of many of the answers concerning library automation. Microcomputer was believed to have been a term that all readers would understand. Clearly it is not yet a word of the realm. Several respondents noted that they did not have microcomputers onboard the bookmobile, but then stated that they would download information when they returned to the library, or identified having had an automated circulation system onboard the bookmobile for some period of time. Clearly one must be very careful about diction when constructing a survey.

In retrospect, when asking respondents to note how often they participate in staff development opportunities, it may be better to simply allow them to fill in the frequency. The variety of answers given under "other" could have easily been placed in any of they categories provided. As a result, the outcome from this section of the survey is likely skewed to a small degree. It seems in an effort to simplify, the process was actually made more complex and ambiguous.

Should another survey be conducted wherein it is asked that the respondent provide information concerning service cycles, and number of stops per service cycle, I recommend that each of these terms be briefly, but completely defined within the survey. Some of the answers encountered lead the author to believe that the intent of those questions was not clear.

On the whole, however, despite the preceding gripes the process went smoothly and was very rewarding. It has provided the author, and hopefully others, with valuable information, and experience in conducting a survey. Provided the results in hand are satisfactory, the opportunity to conduct surveys in the future would be welcomed.

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