

The Future of Rural and Small Libraries Conference, Columbus, Ohio, October 1-3, 2001:

So What Do We All Do Until Next Year's Conference?

By Rod Wagner, Director
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So, what do we do until next year's conference? How's that for a wide open question? Each of us will have to answer that question in his/her own way, but because I was asked to be on the program and that question was put in front of my name, I'll venture an answer—a bit later.

Having worked in a state library throughout my career, I have had an opportunity to travel a good deal. Nebraska is large geographically. It has a lot of small towns and a lot of rural area. It has Omaha and Lincoln as urban communities in the eastern part of Nebraska. There are more than a dozen cities ranging in population from ten thousand to fifty thousand. Nearly 90% of Nebraska's landscape is rural, and nearly one in two Nebraskans call rural areas home. Nebraska's 275 public libraries are almost entirely independent, municipal libraries. The majority of these libraries are in towns of populations of under 1000.

Nebraska's public library funding comes largely from local tax sources, such as property and sales taxes. Many libraries receive some state aid funding, but the amount represents a very small percentage of their budget. Nebraska, thus, has many libraries falling within the category of rural and small. The Nebraska Library Commission devotes much time, energy, and resources to serving rural and small libraries, but our agenda is occasionally questioned. I'll share with you a sample, though fictitious, letter from a librarian from a Nebraska village.

Mr. Wagner: (I always brace myself a bit when the letter omits the customary "dear" and begins with "Mr.")

Here we go again. You are just as determined as ever to do us small town libraries in. You expect us to do everything that those big city libraries do. You people in Lincoln just don't understand what it is like in (name withheld to protect the guilty). We are doing our best with what we have and don't have time for the nonsense we get from the state library. Now you want us to join in on this NebrasKard thing (reciprocal library borrowing card).

We don't have enough books on our shelves to take care of our own people, let alone those folks from (name again withheld to protect the innocent). Do us all a favor and do something for us that can really help—get us some more money so we can buy more books for the kids to read.

Sincerely,

The Head Librarian

Just to be defensive, I'll share my reply.

Dear Aunt Marilyn:

It was good to hear from you. Please say hello to Uncle Phil.

Now, I know we haven't been home for a while, but it seems to me that you may have overreacted a bit to the NebrasKard. This isn't just a big library project. Some of the big city library people are bashing us on this one, too, so we're not just picking on small town libraries again. Actually, it was mostly people from smaller towns who encouraged the inter-library borrowing card. Most of the first libraries to sign up were from small towns. Small town libraries are doing some great things and don't take a backseat to anyone. I'll see you at the state convention. Let's talk.

Sincerely,

Rod

p.s. Diane says hello, too.

Milan Wall and Vicki Luther are co-directors of the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, an organization that is based in Lincoln, Nebraska that does work all over the United States and in foreign countries. The organization was formed during the Midwestern farm crisis in the mid 1980s and has grown to be a successful organization helping communities and organizations grow and develop. Wall and Luther have published several books and pamphlets based on their work. One of their pamphlets is titled *6 myths about the future of small towns*. One of the myths that they address is the idea that “towns that are ‘too small’ have no future.” They contend that “No community should perceive itself as ‘too small’ to survive.” They state that,

In fact, small towns can use size as a competitive advantage. As with a small business, the smaller community can retain a certain flexibility. Without the disadvantages of city bureaucracy, it can respond faster to new trends and changing marketplace opportunities. Like a small business, it can seek its own unique niche.

As with small towns, public libraries in small and rural communities can also benefit from their size. Libraries in small and rural communities can use their size as a competitive advantage. They, too, can seek their own unique niche.

Every community has its own personality, which weaves together its history, its people and its experiences. Every town has its own unique circumstances, strengths, and weaknesses. The public library has a very important role within the community and must contribute toward that community's best future.

Some outstanding work is being done in small and rural libraries. It is challenging and interesting to figure out what makes a difference in communities. What are the success factors? What separates those who are thriving from those who are struggling?

Making a Difference

Under the *Library Services and Technology Act*, all state library agencies are required to conduct a five-year evaluation. In early 2001, each state library agency was required to prepare and submit a 5-year evaluation plan to the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Deciding how to carry out a 5-year evaluation in a thoughtful and effective way was, to say the least, a bit of a challenge for the Nebraska Library Commission. In thinking about how we might do this, we decided that we would visit all of our 275 public libraries within a year. "We" has turned out to be about 20 of our staff members, arranging library visits in teams of two.

We named our evaluation project "Making a Difference." Strategies and processes were developed to cover library visit scheduling, communications, documentation, logistics, meeting facilitation, everything but specially designed t-shirts.

The project may not seem all that ambitious or difficult, but there is more to the visit than just dropping in for a quick hello and "how's it going?" The visit includes time with the library director and any appropriate staff to discuss the results of project grants (LSTA and state) funded from the state library as well as local projects and issues. The visit also includes a dialogue session to which the library is asked to invite library board members, library friends, library users, city officials, and

other community members. Documentation is prepared for the library visits and entered in electronic files for analysis.

Library visits started in late April 2001, and by early September, over half of the visits had been made, and about three-fourths of the visits scheduled. Each Thursday morning, the project team meets and reviews library visits made during the prior week. We report and discuss the visits, noting what we have observed and have learned from the visits. I suspect that even if all of the files were destroyed, we could claim that this project has been a great success.

Although we have opportunities to see many librarians throughout that year at various meetings and events, nothing compares to spending time in the libraries, seeing what is going on and talking with the library director and other staff. It is a great opportunity for us to hear their ideas, to hear their questions and to discuss what is going on and how the state library can better contribute to community library services.

What Makes a Difference?

It didn't take long for us to develop the view that the thing that makes a difference in these communities isn't the size of the community. Regardless of community size, there are libraries that are thriving and surviving and libraries that are struggling and dying.

Our staff spent some time talking about "what makes a difference." To add to this discussion, we considered a list of factors that was developed by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development.

Through their research and work with communities, the Heartland Center developed a list of "Clues to Rural Community Survival." Those 20 clues match up well with observations about library success and survival. The following clues are adapted from the Heartland Center's work and applied to small and rural libraries:

1. *Evidence of community (library) pride* – If pride in the library and its mission and roles are lacking, it is on rocky ground. Pride needs to spring from the staff, board, friends, community members and leaders. Does the library demonstrate pride in its look and feel? Is there evidence of the community's respect for its history and culture?
2. *Emphasis on quality in business (library) and community life* – Is value reflected in the library? Is there enough apparent care to show that the library is a valued community asset worth the cost of investment?

3. *Willingness to invest in the future* – Do community leaders and residents think to the future when making choices about the library and its value to children and future generations? Is there a willingness to commit community resources (financial and other) toward the library's future?
4. *Participatory approach to community (library) decision-making* – Is there evidence of community participation and involvement in decisions concerning the library? How well do library leaders connect with community representatives in planning for library services?
5. *Cooperative Community Spirit* – A library that is thriving will readily show evidence of cooperative activity. This evidence comes in the form of community members working together rather than fighting over what to do, how to do it, and by whom it should be done. There are disagreements along the way, but work moves forward toward achievement of shared goals. Is library support and use broad based? Is a positive community spirit evident in issues that involve the library? Are community members willing to commit the time to do important things?
6. *Realistic appraisal of future opportunities* – Attention is given to building on assets that minimizing weaknesses. Choices are made based on realistic considerations. Thriving libraries are also willing to try new things, and take legitimate risks.
7. *Awareness of competitive positioning* – Attention is given to libraries in other towns with an emphasis on learning from their experiences and leveraging local resources.
8. *Knowledge of the physical environment* – There is understanding of and appropriate and effective use of the community's physical environment. The library is also valued as a "place." However, the physical environment is only part of this idea of "place." Is the library a place that community members want to be? Libraries built in recent years have witnessed significant increases in their usage. They are places where people want to come to spend time. Older library buildings can achieve this feeling of comfort by giving thought, care and effort toward making the library a comfortable, friendly, and inviting setting.
9. *Active economic (library) development plan* – There is an active and organized approach to community library development. Library development is pursued within the framework of overall community and economic development.

10. *Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders* – The Heartland Center observes that it is typical in successful communities to have both formal and informal means for established leaders to bring new recruits into public service. What involvement is there of young people in library development? For that matter, all age levels? There is an emphasis on making children feel welcome and there is a noticeable rapport between library staff and youth.
11. *Acceptance of women in leadership roles* – Here, libraries lead the way, but to what extent are women in library leadership roles also involved in broader community leadership roles? In contrast, what is the involvement of men in library leadership roles?
12. *Strong belief in and support of education* – Communities that thrive recognize the importance of education beyond the K-12 system. They support lifelong learning efforts. Libraries are integral to lifelong learning. They provide services for community members from preschool-aged children through the elderly. Thriving libraries have well-developed partnerships with community and area schools and other educational institutions.
13. *Problem-solving approach to health care* – Public libraries have much to offer in providing access to consumer health information. Consumer health information is highly sought through public libraries.
14. *Strong multi-generational family orientation*- Public libraries in thriving communities have a strong family orientation. This is evident within the library's service and program offerings.
15. *Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life* – Thriving communities have a solid core of community organizations such as churches, civic organizations, schools, and libraries. It would be rare to find a thriving community that lacks a thriving and effective public library service program.
16. *Sound and well-maintained infrastructure* – This includes the on-going and effective up-keep physical structures (i.e. streets, water systems, utilities). This also includes broadband telecommunications services available to citizens, businesses, schools, and libraries.
17. *Careful use of fiscal resources* – The Heartland Center notes that thriving communities spend money carefully but also maintain a sense that expenditures should be made for important community

purposes. Thriving communities also spend money focusing on the long-term view toward the community's future. Money will be found for those things that are important to the community.

18. *Sophisticated use of information resources* – Successful communities have an extensive record of data, information, and knowledge about the community. Consequently, there is both awareness and effort to systematically compile and maintain the community's information assets in a variety of formats. The library plays an active role with the central purpose in managing the community's information assets.
19. *Willingness to seek help from the outside* – The best communities know where they can reach for outside assistance and resources. They are tapped into the full range of resources and services. Again, the public library has a central role in supporting access to outside resources through its informational and communications capabilities. Libraries are very good at resource sharing. Successful libraries expand the definition of sharing through innovative approaches.
20. *Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself* – The Heartland Center recognizes that, while outside resources are needed, when all is said and done, a community's future is in the hands of those who live there. It takes both leaders and followers to work together to build a surviving and thriving community. The librarian is a trusted and valued member of the community.

Every community and every library can assess its strengths and weaknesses by preparing a self-assessment. Whether that assessment is completed using a system of pluses or minuses, a numbering scale, or anecdotes, all twenty of these characteristics can be gauged to reveal what's working well and what needs improvement.

What do we do until next year? We look for the clues. We think about what makes a difference. Then, we set out to do what is needed to build a better library service program that helps our communities be better places to live. Attitude is at the heart of what makes a difference. Our libraries' strengths and weaknesses depend on how determined and committed people are to making a difference.

Bibliography

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