

STI PROJECT FINAL REPORT

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In October 1983, the Illinois State Library approved the LSCA Title I project proposal entitled, "Delivery of Scientific and Technical Information (STI) Through Rural Public Libraries." The core of the project was the provision of a specialized reference service to a target group, specifically farmers, business people, entrepreneurs, technicians, and professional people. Its objectives were to effectively fill requests from people in the target group, to raise the awareness of business people and farmers, and to involve local librarians in the process whenever possible.

This evaluation will take a hard look at each facet of the STI Project. In which areas was the project a success or failure? Were the stated objectives met? What activities within the project should or should not be replicated? What outreach strategies work best for encouraging farmers and business people to use the public library? What role can the public library play in providing information to farmers and business people? This report will answer these questions within the framework of the STI Project's three main objectives.

Objective 1: To effectively fill requests from patrons in the target group. As stated in the University of Illinois Library Research Center STI Project report, of the 590 evaluation

postcards received from STI patrons, 65% said that the information or material they received was excellent, 32% said it was satisfactory, and 3% said it was unsatisfactory. According to people who used the service, the information they received was effective. An example of an unsolicited patron comment supports the project's effectiveness: "We've been raising cattle twenty years. We not only received useful material on the subject requested, but also found out things about beef cattle that we never knew!"

Whether it was a business person asking for information on the market for anchovies in the United States, or a farmer expanding into the growing of Christmas trees, questions from people in the target group received special care during the STI Project period. Local librarians attached notes to STI requests explaining, in detail, what the patron was doing and what he or she needed. In addition, where more clarification of the request was needed, the project librarian called the patron to ascertain what depth of information was needed.

Librarians used the telephone and electronic mail to reduce the turnaround time when their patrons needed information quickly. It is interesting to note that, although information requests took an average of 7 days and title requests took an average of 12 days, 68% of all requests were filled within 3 days. Responsiveness to patron need was high on the part of all librarians involved. If a patron needed information the same day he or she placed the request, that need was met. Same day or one day service was given

in 16% of all requests. This fast turnaround time was averaged in with requests which took several weeks to fill. Some technical/reference materials were difficult to get on inter-library loan. The length of time it took for some associations and other people with information to respond to requests also lengthened turnaround time. For example, one patron wanted building plans for amusement park games and rides. After an initial search, a person who designs such plans was contacted, but it took about two weeks for the plans to arrive at system headquarters.

High patron satisfaction indicates the first objective was met. The special STI reference service given was appreciated by patron and local librarian alike. This satisfaction supports the idea of staffing system reference departments with one librarian who would develop a close relationship with all member librarians. Local librarians would call the system librarian assigned to this position if they needed a rush on a request, if a request required an extra telephone call to the patron, or if the local librarian suspected the information would be difficult to find. Having a system librarian in this position would benefit the system and local library staff as well as the patron. Having a librarian assigned to handle the requests for technical information would free the rest of the system reference staff to more efficiently fill the majority of requests which do not require special handling. The local librarian would benefit by knowing instantly whom to call with a question requiring special handling. The patron would benefit from the exper-

tise which the librarian assigned to this duty would develop.

Objective 2: To raise the awareness of people in the target group. Both indirect and direct public relations efforts were used to raise the awareness of people in the target group. The target group was reached indirectly through outreach to other agencies that serve the target group.

Direct outreach to the target group was accomplished through speaking engagements at 80 meetings attended by members of the target group and by meeting directly with 70 business people and farmers in the workplace. Twelve percent of the total number of STI questions came directly from those personal contacts. Such personal contacts exemplify the project's emphasis on word-of-mouth advertising.

The project promoted word-of-mouth advertising at every available opportunity. On the bottom of the evaluation postcard was printed, "If you are happy with this service, tell your friends!" One STI patron drew an arrow to our suggestion and wrote, "I have, and they are also using it. I think it is wonderful we have this opportunity for information."

Brochures, booklists, flyers in local bank monthly statements, newsletters, taped radio and television public service announcements, and a dozen news releases sent to radio and television stations and newspapers were used in addition to personal communication with the target group. Subsequent STI requests from local libraries indicated that brochures, booklists, newsletters, and news releases were read and used by people working in businesses and on farms.

Reaching business people and farmers indirectly, through other agencies set up to serve them, was often a more effective way to reach interested potential STI patrons. Initial visits were made to the following agencies: county Farm Bureaus, county Univeristy of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service offices, Chambers of Commerce in each town, area Planning and Development Commissions, three community college's Business Service Centers, the regional Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs office, and Southern Illinois Incorporated. At the first meeting between agency staff and the STI project librarian, STI service was explained and offered to each agency. Some agencies had requests for information right away. Two agencies, which have agreed to be identified, made extensive use of the STI service and actively referred people to their local libraries for service. Southern Illinois Incorporated used the service 32 times, while Southern Five Development Commission used it 26 times.

An additional offer was made to provide a speaker, a display, and resource lists to area agencies. Many agencies, especially in the second year, invited STI Project participation in agency-sponsored workshops, meetings, and shows, e.g. Swine Seminars, Workshops for Entrepreneurs, and Oil Production Seminars. The people in attendance at these meetings were interested in gathering more information to use on the job. Otherwise, they would not have made the effort to attend the program.

In an attempt to cover the entire system area, the STI

Project provided outreach through some more general service organizations, such as the Lions Club, if it was the only service organization in the community. These meetings were somewhat ineffective, because the percentage of potential patrons was lower in a general service organization than in a meeting held by, for example, a Chamber of Commerce.

STI Project contact with other agencies continued after the initial visit in many ways: through STI participation in their programs and responses to their reference questions, and also through mailings to keep them up-to-date on project activities, through their participation on the STI Project Advisory Committee, through their responses to our requests for help, and by working with them to put together the directory of groups who provide information to business people and farmers. While some agencies requested information from the STI Project at the initial visit, others did not ask for information from the STI Project until it was over. Each attempt to promote interagency cooperation added a few more agencies to the number of those who actively used and supported the STI Project.

In an indirect way, the STI Project raised the level of awareness of business people and farmers outside of the Shawnee Library System area. Other librarians showed a great deal of interest in the STI Project. News reports in Library Hotline and American Libraries brought mail asking for more information from the deputy supervising librarian for the Library Council of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia. Other outreach to the library community included poster

sessions at the Illinois and American Library Association annual conferences; a display at the Midwestern Rural Library Conference in Mankato, Minnesota; a memo to Illinois library system directors; a workshop at Cumberland Trails Library System; and participation in a preconference on rural libraries held by the International Federation of Library Associations with 20 Latin American rural librarians. The project also received monthly requests from librarians throughout the United States who were interested in starting outreach programs to their farm and business communities. Packages were put together for interested parties, including project proposals, sample publicity pieces, and news releases. The sharing of experiences and information with other libraries proved to be one of the areas of greatest satisfaction in the project.

About 85% of the project's requests came from business people, mostly people in small business, while only 15% of the total number of requests came from farmers. Because considerable effort was placed on outreach, it was difficult initially to understand why requests from farmers were such a small percentage of the whole. Before the project began several local librarians voiced opinions like this comment: "Trying to get farmers into our library--that's going to be a tough one. Farmers get all the help they need from the Farm Bureau." This librarian made two good points. It is not easy to attract farmers into the library. Librarians knew they had not been reaching farmers before the STI Project and were skeptical that the STI Project would reach them.

When farmer evaluation postcards were analyzed, 82% of all farmers were using the library for the first time for their work, compared to 72% of all people who used the project. Librarians also realized that farmers have the Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, Farm Bureau, Southern Illinois University agriculture faculty members, and several for-profit farm services--all eager to provide information to farmers.

An information service for farmers was developed over the 18 month STI project period largely through trial and error. In the first few months of the project period, farmers and farm agents were asked what kind of information they would use if it were provided at the local library. Those materials were promoted through talking with farmers, and through the media; e.g. a news release on agriculture software available through local libraries. Farm materials on topics in which farmers expressed interest, like books on the futures market, were purchased on demand.

The 15% figure is not a blemish on the project; it signifies an effort to provide an information service to farmers not provided by other agencies. Libraries are unique among agencies providing information to the agricultural community; they provide farmers with books for loan. Also, there is no other agency focusing its efforts on the part-time farmer or homesteader. This provides another gap in service which libraries can fill. It has been the experience of the STI Project that many farmers who make 100% of their income from the farm may only use the library for information as

a last resort, after they have exhausted all other sources of information. A small number of farmers, many of whom have not been farming long or who have particular areas of interest, such as agricultural computing, will read everything available in their area of interest. Once these farmers were made aware of what the library could provide, they used it.

Homesteaders and, in that same category, people starting small businesses were eager to use the STI Project. Both groups often have limited resources, are in an information-seeking mode, and have an appreciation of the role additional information can play in increasing the productivity of their small farm or business. This made them prime candidates for using the STI Project. Efforts to raise the awareness of these two groups were effective in large part because they were already highly motivated to use it. Motivating the full-time farmer to use the STI Project was a more challenging task, because it involved changing his or her attitude about libraries, as well as changing a long-established behavior pattern--not going to the library.

In summary, a thorough attempt was made to raise the awareness of people in the target group. The effort which proved most effective and which will most likely have the greatest long-term results, was the fostering of interagency cooperation through the project. A library wishing to provide information to farmers should find effective ways to build strong connections with the agricultural support network, so that eventually the library can become part of the network,

providing books, materials and information to farmers. In addition, libraries will find that it takes little additional effort to build on their long-standing tradition of providing self-help materials to people with small businesses and farms.

Objective 3: To involve local librarians in the process whenever possible. In the STI patron's eyes, the local libraries were integrally involved in the STI Project, as displayed in this unsolicited comment from an STI evaluation postcard, "Excellent service from Shawnee and Chester. The field I needed information about is constantly changing, so I found the reprints of recent magazine articles especially helpful." (Underline added by patron.)

Public librarians in the Shawnee Library System area displayed their involvement in the STI Project in many ways. The public librarians from Metropolis, Eldorado, and Marissa provided leadership for the project by serving on the STI Advisory Committee. In 29 instances, librarians attended and/or spoke at meetings and visited potential STI patrons with the project librarian, many times in the evening and on their own time.

While some librarians' support for the project grew over time, others showed commitment to it from its conception. At the all-librarians meeting held to introduce member librarians to the STI Project, plans were mentioned for future meetings between potential STI patrons, the local librarian, and the project librarian. Shortly after the all-librarians meeting, an initial meeting was set up for one librarian

in particular and the project librarian to discuss the STI Project. When the project librarian arrived, the local librarian had set up an entire afternoon of visits to potential STI patrons. Her interest and participation in the project continued by having an STI exhibit at a local festival. She requested the use of several STI rotating book collections, using them for attractive displays in the Main Street storefront library. To an STI display on farming she added a farmer's seed cap which proclaimed, "If Dolly Parton was a farmer, she'd go flat-busted too."

Involvement in the project was encouraged and good communications fostered through three consultant visits to each of the 45 public libraries in the system. Memoranda were sent and items for the Shawnee Library System's brief newsletter, the Bulletin Board, were submitted to keep librarians up-to-date on project activities and to provide them with encouragement. The close telephone contact maintained by local librarians and project librarian throughout the project helped with the quality of reference work as well as the quality of the working relationship between the librarians. Local librarians' involvement in the STI Project, together with efforts made by the STI Project to communicate with local librarians, combined to create strong working relationships between most libraries and the STI Project.

Conclusion: Major findings from the experience of the STI Project follow:

1. Library systems would benefit from assigning one librarian to work closely with local librarians to provide reference

service to patrons with technical or difficult-to-fill information needs.

2. One of the most effective methods of raising the awareness of a library's target group concerning a new information service is to work with the agencies already providing information to the group.

3. When deciding whom to target, it is important for a librarian to decide who wants the library's help. People starting small businesses and people with small farms made best use of the STI Project, because they recognized their need for information and were motivated enough to seek it.

Major successes of the STI Project include the extensive efforts made to reach out to people who had not been reached before, and providing effective reference service to the target group. A major accomplishment of the project is an increased awareness for both local librarians and the Shawnee Library System staff of the information needs of business people and farmers and the resources needed to meet their needs. A failure of the project may be that it was seen primarily as a system service; there may have been less use of local library resources than was anticipated. Without the involvement of local librarians, however, the service could not have been provided. The people who used the service needed a place near their homes where they could comfortably request information; the STI Project provided the information. For many rural libraries this is not a bad place to start in the provision of service to their communities.