

THE RURAL LIBRARY: SOME RECENT RESEARCH

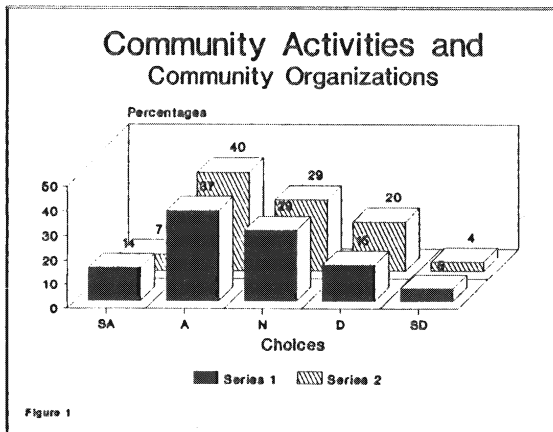
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The purpose of this discussion is to highlight research conducted by the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship during the fall of 1987. The investigation concerned itself with three things: the impressions of public librarians who are involved in establishing roles for their respective institutions, the degree to which planning is accomplished, and the compilation of current socioeconomic data relevant to rural libraries. By implementing this particular survey, the thought was it might provide an interesting opportunity to determine the relevance of the ALA/PLA publication, Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries, 1987, at least to the extent of judging the degree to which the roles cited in that publication were "put into practice." For surveying purposes, a selection made from the eight library roles, cited in the above publication, were reorganized enabling categorically discrete answers to result. In reality, Planning and Role Setting ... deals with functions, for example, the library as a "Community Activities Center," and then attempts to identify role statements appropriate for that function.

Five hundred and eighty-eight questionnaires were mailed to public librarians across the United States in rural and near rural communities of 25,000 or fewer individuals. Selections were drawn randomly from the American Library Directory, and based on resident population, not population served. The study's data base consisted of (n=373) completed surveys.

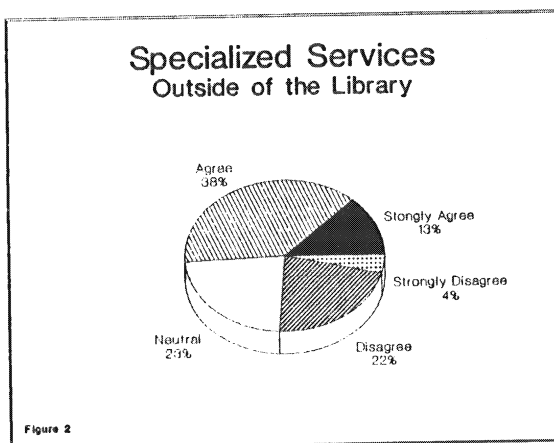
While surveys are rarely conclusive, including the present one, it is important to reflect on the fact that the library profession may ascribe more significance to the workings of public libraries than is occurring in reality. This is not meant to be a harsh comment from a public library advocate, but simply a reminder that even the smallest public library--some considered in this study--are entirely complex institutions. This prologue is also meant to alert the reader to the fact that considerable ground work is still necessary for the improvement of public library services.

Perhaps, the first statement presented in this survey sets the tone for the entire study. Parenthetically, respondents were usually asked to answer on a scale of options from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." "My library is a focal point for community activities," was the first statement to which individuals were to respond. While 51% (179) of those answering indicated some form of agreement, approximately 49% (171) were either neutral or expressed disagreement. This issue may not be startling in that most small libraries simply do not have the facilities available to transform their libraries into community centers, even though some of them have the only meeting place in the town. We have encountered this in other surveys, for example, as an explanation of why the frequency of adult oriented programs is sometimes dismal. However, the author believes that there is a collateral effect to this physical inadequacy, it makes other efforts at transforming the public library into the community's information center particularly troublesome. This can be seen by the survey's second statement: "My library works closely with other community organizations to provide a program of recreational services." While 47% (156) indicated some form of agreement, at least 53% (174) were either neutral or disagreed. Clearly, there are again reasons to explain this, and limitations of space, staff, and money are among them. In the graph below, responses to the first survey statement are compared with that of the second.



In a more positive regard, almost three-fourths of those surveyed indicated that their library "...responds to community needs with specialized services provided inside the library building." The most frequently cited activities were story hours for children, literacy programs, and providing meeting rooms. The situation was a little different, however, when individuals were asked to react to "... specialized services provided outside of the library." In this instance, approximately 51% (164) were in agreement as to the appropriateness of this role, but an almost equal number of respondents 49% (158) either were neutral or disagreed. The favorite external services were book delivery to nursing homes, programs for community groups, and providing materials to schools and day-care centers.

Figure 2 graphically provides a picture of the responses relating to services outside of the library.

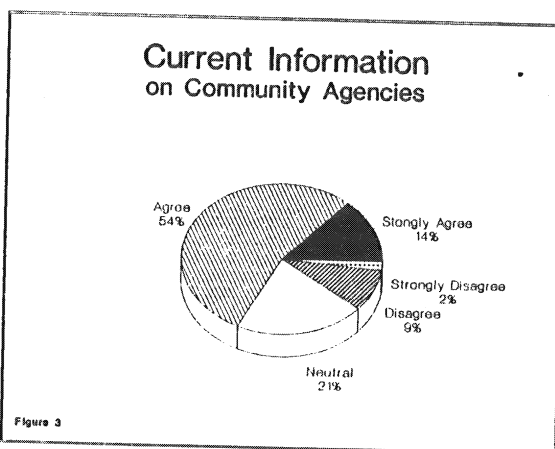


Additional positive results occurred in relation to the statement: "My library assists elementary and secondary students in meeting educational objectives established during formal courses of study." To this role, 94% (346) of the respondents agreed. One person emphasized her or his position by stating, "And how!" There was almost the same overwhelming approval in relation to

the public library playing a role in meeting the needs of college and university students. Seventy-seven percent (270) of those surveyed agreed with this position. The role statement: "My library assists literacy and/or adult basic education students in meeting educational objectives established during formal courses of study," elicited an agreement rate of 71% (245), and assisting with continuing education students achieved an 80% (284) approval rate. Finally, in relation to the statement: "My library supports out of school adults who pursue a program of learning independent of any formal educational provider," also brought an agreement ratio of 80% (280.) Continuing with the strong emphasis on educational roles, is one that "...encourages young children to develop an interest in reading." To this 99% (367), noted agreement. Likewise, 96% (355) of the respondents said, yes, to "My library provides parents and other adult care-givers with materials on reading for children." While slightly more than three-fourths of those responding to the survey indicated in the affirmative to the function of the library "cooperating with child care agencies in the community on an ongoing basis," one suspects that sense of collective agreement would even be higher with the exception of those communities that have a paucity of social agencies dealing with children.

In dealing with the informational role of the typical rural public library, it will not come as a surprise to the reader that 92% (339) of the respondents were in agreement that "My library provides timely information to community residents in their respective areas of interest." Similarly, 69% (245) believe that "My library is a source of current information on community organizations." While attempting to interpret the meaning of "timely or current information" is an interesting exercise in itself, for example, it includes an item gotten through interlibrary loan over the period of one week, or the real-time response to a reference question, one must be slightly skeptical of the overwhelming rate of self-congratulations. Here, there is no intent, directly or otherwise, to suggest that rural librarians are less than genuine in their professionalism. One believes that any differences of interpretation not only relate to the usual problems of semantics, but are also created by two audiences (librarians and clients) seeing things differently. The possible difficulty relates to the fact that infrequently do librarians have the necessary feedback appropriate to judge their effectiveness. The true litmus test would

be to ask library users about their community information center. In a current study of rural library usage in Pennsylvania, very preliminary data suggest a high-level of approval of overall services by library clients but only a modest reliance on the library's resource collection for current information. Bestsellers seem to be in greater demand than, for example, information dealing with community ordinances or the decisions of local governing authorities. The Pennsylvania study will be used as the basis for a national investigation being supported by the U. S. Department of Education, in 1988/89. Figure 3 shows the respondents attitudes toward the role statement, "My library is a source of current information on community organizations."



Back to our role-playing, however. "My library promotes its reference services (within the library) to aid users in locating needed information." To this statement, 93% (344) of the respondents agreed. "My library promotes telephone reference services to aid users in locating needed information." Over three-fourths (275) of those surveyed either strongly agreed or agreed to this role statement. Affecting the response to this last role statement are at least two factors: first, some libraries continue to be without telephone service (our latest data suggest approximately six percent) and, second, "A limited staff does not allow us to encourage telephone service." This latter comment was a quote

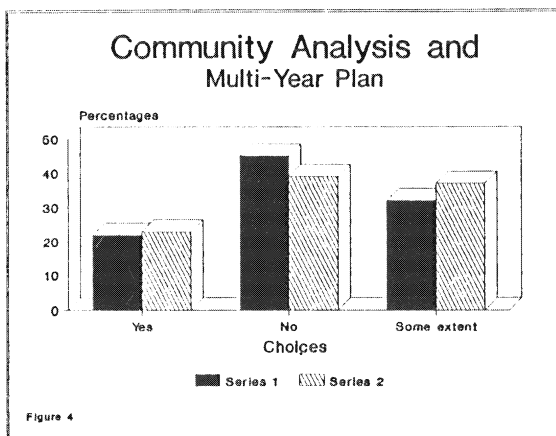
provided by one of the respondents, and is a typical problem. With the reader's patience, one of the funniest episodes regarding telephone usage encountered by the author was a situation in which a rural library staff member indicated that her or his library's telephone number was unlisted. It was explained that the telephone was really intended for administrative purposes rather than for promoting information access.

In this author's view, the survey's response to the next role depiction is quite revealing. While 67% (233) of those surveyed indicated that they "...assist researchers to conduct in-depth studies in a specific subject," one must again reflect on the facts that the typical rural library has a modest resource collection (by our reckoning approximately 25,000 volumes) along with a staff of no more than three full-time people (more likely it is only one-person.) Also relevant is a quote by one of the respondents who said, "We don't get many in-depth requests." Data collected by the CSRL actually suggest that approximately three questions (of all types) are asked by clients in the typical rural library on an hourly basis. Such an environment really precludes the opportunity for much in the way of extended reference service. One believes, that while intentions are always good, the issue focuses around the interpretation of "in-depth" reference. One might also remind the reader that only 25% of the full-time staff working in rural libraries are academically certified at the master's level. As a consequence, reference training remains as a priority goal among state, district, and regional library providers. Regardless of the issue of how in-depth is "in-depth," the next two role statements were interesting in that they dealt with the availability of resource collections on a specific subject. Less than half of the respondents (170) indicate the availability of an in-depth collection within the library. Of that total, 16% (61) of those surveyed identified local history and genealogy as the subjects provided by their libraries. Another six percent (22) listed state history as the next most popular collection. Interestingly, public libraries continue to maintain a responsibility for the textbook role of providing information on state and local history. Respondents were asked to relate to a final role description dealing with the library's information function: "My library provides current high-demand materials in a variety of formats." The results were that 61% (212) either agreed or strongly agreed to this position.

Bestsellers--21% (78), videocassettes--17% (63), and books on tape--9% (34), were the most popularly available formats. Fifty-seven percent of those participating in this study indicated that they also promote the use of their highly demanded material.

LIBRARY PLANNING

Unfortunately, results from this section of the survey suggest that the responding librarians are only modestly involved in planning for library services. Indeed, these data show little improvement in a pattern that has been observed by the author over the last six years. Only 22% (81) of those surveyed indicated that a community analysis had been conducted by or for the library over the last five years. Figure 4 illustrates a comparison of those respondents conducting community analysis in relation to the availability of multi-year plans.



The leading reasons given for the lack of an analysis were insufficient time, not enough staff, and not enough money. Parenthetically, the possible responses were "yes," "no," or "to some extent." The author interpreted "to some extent," which was answered by 32% (119), to be a qualified "no." On the issue of whether or not the library had a multi-year plan, only 23% (86) answered affirmatively--37% (136) responded with "to some extent." While the

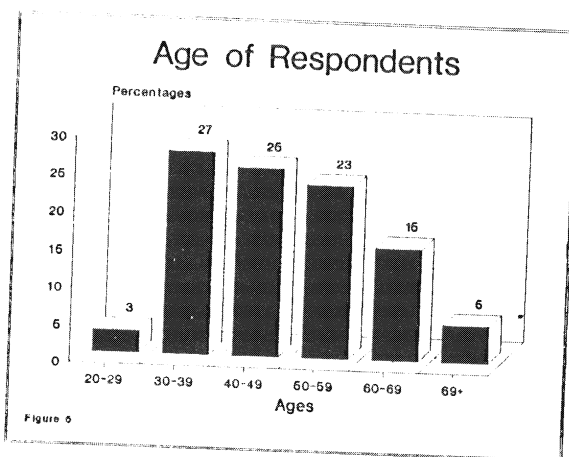
leading reasons for the absence of a plan were "that it was in process," "lack of time," and "lack of money," five percent (19) of the respondents commented that the "trustees were not interested." The next question dealt with the utilization of output measures. Only 25% (88) of those participating in the survey indicated using output measures in their libraries--34% (120) answered "to some extent." An agenda of answers was given explaining the nonuse, but the major category, 13% (48), was lack of familiarity/lack of awareness. While not much of a case can be made based on 48 respondents, it is the author's belief that uncertainty may be the single most mitigating factor for the lack of implementation of output measures in rural libraries. It does little good for the ALA/PLA to publish a revised edition of Output Measures when the original concept continues to be in its seminal stages of application, and not only in small libraries.

SOCIOECONOMIC DATA

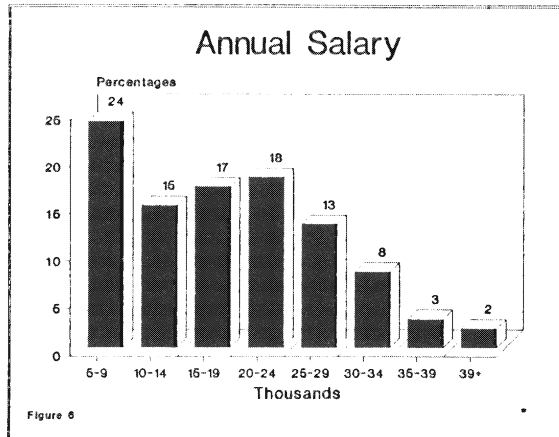
In a continuing effort to gather normative data about rural librarians and the communities in which they live, the survey included a variety of general questions. Initially, it was thought that it might be an interesting exercise to ask the respondents to classify the geographical area in which they live, even though they were identified by the surveyors as rural. While 70% (253) agreed that they were rural, 19% (69) identified themselves as suburbanites, and 7% (28) said they lived in urban areas. Because of the interest in rural revitalization, the survey instrument included a question regarding the community's three most important industries. Of the 161 individuals identifying the industry of primary importance, 26% (96) indicated farming, tourism was next at seven percent (25), and at four percent (15) was metal industries. While students of rural America are cognizant of the shift from agriculture to a variety of other economic conditions, small town USA has not entirely escaped its roots. Following the previous question was one in which the respondents were to label community problems. Not surprisingly, 80% (167) indicated unemployment, etc., as the major difficulty. Twenty percent (43) identified rapid population growth as the greatest challenge. And only 25% (83) thought that their problems would be solved in the near future.

The final questions were directed at the librarians. One question concerned involvement in library associations. Forty-one percent (151) of those answering

indicated membership in the American Library Association, but 80% (294) belong to their state organizations. In relation to the ages of the respondents, Figure 5 depicts those reporting.



Although one may not always be convinced that the public library is the community's library, the librarian certainly is. The typical rural librarian has lived in her or his community for an average of 17 years, although the range in the survey was from one month to 64 years. Further, she or he has been employed in the library for an average of over ten years. The range in this latter response was also one month to 64 years. And what about current salary? While 13% (42) earn \$30,000 or more, over 56% (181) earn between \$5,000 and \$19,000. Thirty-nine percent (125) have a salary from \$5,000 to \$14,000. The library profession should reflect on the fact, that for a family of four, \$14,000 is at the poverty level. Figure 6 graphically shows the salary levels reported by the respondents.



CONCLUSIONS

The question now remains, what are the most significant aspects of this study. It is somewhat obligatory to remind the reader that surveys seem to beget surveys as opposed to finalizing issues. Resulting, however, is an affirmation that conceptually and pragmatically role-setting is a significant construct of library services. Along with the Planning Process and Output Measures for Public Libraries, Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries is part of a powerful trio. But the distressing factor is, notwithstanding these publications, librarians in small and medium sized institutions are simply not planning for future library services. The mitigating, but not complete answer, is that staff members are too busy delivering services. How much is to be expected of the one-person library manager? These are not irrelevant concerns. But there appears to be a consistent lack of planning--of both short and long duration--among librarians in communities of 25,000 or fewer people, which represents most of the public libraries in the United States. These circumstances have been observed in other studies emanating from Clarion and not restricted to small communities. For example, in surveys of "book-mobilists," in both urban and rural settings, there was an equal dearth of planning.

But how much planning is sufficient? The author does not have an appropriately convincing answer. The alternative is relatively clear. Without planning, local surveying, etc., the public library becomes an extension of the librarian's views rather than those of the community's. Libraries are fascinating in many respects, but few other public institutions operate with such a modest feedback level. There is another practical concern associated with the lack of planning—public librarians may be taking on too many roles. Because of the high level of commitment, there is an inherent tendency to want to accept more and more responsibilities. It may not be clear in some libraries, for example, that literacy programs are not possible without compromising other library services, or at least managed by using a marketing approach to target specific audiences over a limited period of time.

The final question becomes one, then, of how is planning facilitated. It is, of course, a responsibility at all sectors of library administration. But national library associations, and particularly those at the state level could have a profound effect by making planning, and its collateral aspects, as a sustaining goal. One of the weaknesses of American librarianship is that we fail to plan over a calculated period of time. It should not be surprising that symptoms of the same deficiencies are seen throughout the countryside.