

The Education of the Rural Librarian: Advantages and Obstacles

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Introduction

Librarianship in rural areas today is in a state of crisis. While it cannot be said that all rural libraries are disorganized and unproductive, sadly this is the norm, not the exception. There are many factors that contribute to the hardships of rural libraries, including lack of funding, lack of resources, and lack of interest, all of which will be considered further throughout this paper. And while it is true that these burdens have a significant negative impact on rural libraries, perhaps the single-most important factor that contributes to the problem is the lack of education of the rural librarian. This unfortunate predicament will be expanded in this paper, specifically the particular obstacles that prohibit rural librarians from obtaining this education.

What Is Rural?

Before the rural library itself can be considered, a definite sense of what “rural” is must be established. The concept is a unique one, because although nearly everyone has a definition for rural, these definitions are rarely the same. For instance, according to The Bureau of the Census, all people living in places with a population of 2,500 or more are considered urban; consequently, all people living in town of less than 2,500 are considered rural (United States Department of Agriculture, 2000). The Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship at Clarion University of Pennsylvania, however, takes another approach, using 25,000 as the limit for being rural (Vavrek, 1983). These two very different definitions illustrate how difficult it is for various groups to reach a consensus on what is rural.

But, let’s consider “ruralness” beyond a strict population guideline. Today in the United States, rural areas comprise 83 percent of land in the United States and 21 percent of the population, or 51 million people, live there. In addition, in 1992, the 2,288 rural counties supplied 18 percent of the nation’s jobs and generated 14 percent of its earnings (United States Department of Agriculture, 2000). But even though the majority of land and a significant portion of the population are contained in rural areas, these areas lack many

basic functions that are taken for granted in urban areas. For instance, there are 2.5 million substandard housing units in rural areas, as compared to 2.4 million in cities and 1.2 million in the suburbs. In addition, 418,000 rural households still lack running water (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2000). The natural resource-based industries that many rural areas depend on are steadily losing ground, forcing workers to find new ways to make a living, ways that are too often found only in the city. And low-skill, low-wage rural manufacturing industries are finding it harder and harder to compete with the ever-increasing number of foreign competitors who can do things faster and cheaper (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2000). Rural America continues to exist as a second-class partner in relation to levels of education, health, and disposable income (Vavrek, 1990). Rural areas have higher percentages of people under 15 and over 65, median income is 20 percent lower, and 10 percent fewer residents have finished 12 years or more of school (Ford, 1995).

Moreover, in delving beyond financial and employment obstacles, rural America is a veritable cultural wasteland (Vavrek, 1983). People used to the culture-rich city life are often shocked upon viewing the visible lack of such amenities in rural areas. Where are the libraries and bookstores, museums and theaters? And how can rural people possibly live without them? These questions, coming from those who are used to having immediate access to these services, may not even make an impression on the rural dweller. If they have never had the luxury of using these resources, they may not even notice that they lack them.

Rural Libraries

These overall problems associated with rural communities are the same ones rural libraries face everyday. Like other rural operations, they tend to be overlooked in favor of the bigger, more powerful metropolitan libraries. However, if one were to look strictly at the numbers, rural libraries would dominate, as the majority of public libraries are found in rural areas. Specifically, 65 percent of all public libraries in the United States are located in areas of 10,000 or fewer people; in addition, 82 percent of libraries are located in areas of less than 25,000 people (Vavrek, 1983). Rural libraries tend to be smaller than their urban counterparts, and employ a much smaller staff. In fact, 13.7 percent of libraries serving populations of 25,000 or fewer have no full-time employees at all, and 21.7 percent have only one full-time employee (Barron, 1995). In addition, volunteers comprise 25 percent of all library employees (Vavrek, 1983).

Further compounding the problems faced by rural libraries are the characteristics of remoteness and isolation in populations of rural areas (Hoffman-Pfeffer, 1989). This geographic isolation was illustrated in a survey of librarians serving communities of less than 2,500 people. Specifically, the average report-

ed distance to a city of 25,000 or more people was 52 miles and some of the patrons within the service areas of these libraries had to travel more than 12 miles to receive library service (Vavrek, 1983). It is easy to assume a distance this great would discourage library use by potential patrons, thereby furthering the problems of rural libraries.

Another issue that plagues rural libraries is lack of funding. The national average budget for rural libraries is \$16,000, a problem that is exacerbated by the fact that most public libraries serve a population three times larger than the tax base that supports them. The typical rural library still struggles with such basic issues as paying the phone bill, and heating and keeping the building open, never mind allotting a pitifully small amount of money to purchase books (Vavrek, 1990).

Perhaps the most detrimental characteristic of rural public libraries, however, is the evident lack of professional librarians who have the education to meet the information requirements of the rural community. In fact, only one in 20 library directors in communities of less than 2,500 people have a Master's Degree in Library Science or the equivalent; in communities of 25,000 or less, only one in five has attained this level of education (Vavrek, 1997). And while most librarians are dedicated, hard-working people, this dedication cannot totally prepare the person to fully function as a qualified librarian. So what can the library community do to ensure that these enthusiastic individuals can obtain the education they need? What are the obstacles that they will confront in this pursuit? And, when you come right down to it, why do they even need this education?

Why Do Rural Librarians Need Advanced Education?

The question of why rural librarians should pursue the MLS is one that has been repeated over and over again in rural America. Many feel that they have been doing a good job so far, and if the job is done well, then why spend the time, money and energy on a master's degree? Essentially, the answer to this question is that the work they have been doing is not enough, it cannot be. The problem is they do not realize this, simply because they do not know any better.

For instance, if a community is receiving substandard library service, they may not realize it is substandard, because they do not have quality library service to compare it with. They may assume all library service is less-than-informative and not really worth their time. They may never be aware of the information and services available to them. And if they do not know library service can be a benefit to them, they will not demand that it be so in their community (Barron, 1991). The library will become an unpopular, unused entity. Without community support, the librarian will be unable to raise the

monetary funds essential to library upkeep. What citizen would want to support a service that is of no perceived use to him? Before long, the library will be shut down.

Although this may be an extreme view of the effects of poor librarian education, it is realistic. The burden of the library's survival and growth lies squarely on the shoulders of the librarian. But how can a librarian with such an education deficit be expected to accomplish everything demanded to ensure his or her library becomes something more than just a warehouse of popular reading materials (Barron, 1995)? And never mind that the community does not know what to expect from their local library; the sad fact is that the majority of librarians themselves do not know what competent library service should be (Vavrek, 1982)!

It is also essential to consider the effect technology is having on rural libraries and librarians. Librarianship has changed in a myriad of ways during the last few decades, mostly due to the advent of the Internet and computer technology. While the benefits of such technology are obvious, the negative impacts must be considered as well. To librarians unfamiliar with computers, having to learn how to use them as part of their daily work life can be a daunting and stressful experience. These new tasks add a whole new dimension to librarianship. Currently, many graduate schools are having a difficult time ensuring their library science graduates are proficient in such technology. Imagine, then, how hard it is for the non-professional librarian to achieve this level of proficiency on his or her own (Vavrek, 1997).

Technology cannot meet the information needs of people without the help of the information professional. For this reason, the librarian, as an information professional, must understand the "hows and whys" of information technology. They must know when to go online and when other resources, perhaps more traditional print ones, should be used (Fitzsimmons, 1996). Providing this expertise will be the role of the librarian of the future.

But will librarians be able to meet these information demands? The education deficiency of the librarian today is so great and present methods are so inadequate that they cannot cope with future challenges as currently configured (Barron, 1995). The successful library in the 21st century will depend on the ability of its librarians. It is essential that each library become a learning community, whether the community expects it or not. To ensure this, library staff will have to have the education to match the needs of the community (Barron, 1995). However, to do this the librarian will have to overcome many of the obstacles that stand in the way of obtaining further education.

Obstacles to Educating the Rural Librarian

To some it may seem obvious that obtaining increasingly higher levels of education is a good and necessary thing. So why is it that the rural librarian faces so many obstacles to further education?

To begin with, rural people are typically conservative and place little value on education (Vavrek, 1989). The mindset is focused more on survival than betterment, experience not education. Most people struggle to support their families, working each day at low-skill, low-wage jobs. Advanced education, or any education at all, is often a forgotten dream from years gone by.

Even if the rural librarian does not share this view about education, and feels that educating him or herself is an important endeavor that should be undertaken for the good of the library, there will still be obstacles to face. The library board may also share this close-minded view of education and refuse to allot the needed funds to pay for the schooling. Many times they believe it is unnecessary to change the status quo and are resistant to change. Why would they need an academically certified librarian when their community has functioned perfectly well without one for years (Vavrek, 1989)? Too often, rural America, and librarianship in particular, suffers from what Killacky refers to as Transactional Leadership. That is, being “white male dominated, top-down, hierarchical, reactionary, non-inclusive, with limited vision, perpetuating the status quo and not given to change other than that which is in the exclusive interests of the leader” (Killacky, 1992). Thus, Transactional Leadership is one explanation for why many government officials in small towns do not recognize or respect the idea that having a professional librarian with the necessary skills and training is paramount to the success of the library (Rogers, 2000).

Another major obstacle to rural librarian education, as discussed previously, is the lack of funds in the rural library. What incentive does the rural librarian have to exert huge amounts of time, money and energy into obtaining a degree that will, in effect, lead to a salary in the ballpark of \$16,000 (Vavrek, 1989)? What good is it to have a master’s degree if one is barely living above the poverty level? Even if library boards are aware of the lack of education and are allocating more resources to staff training, small libraries typically do not have the resources at the local level to commit to such an undertaking (Vavrek, 1997). The fact is, most rural libraries are unable to pay a salary commensurate with the job. With that in mind, it is easy to see how the rural librarian would choose to remain uneducated, as their work situation will not significantly improve if they obtain an advanced degree.

Additionally, even if the funds were available and the librarian was lucky enough to receive the continued education, to some dedicated workers this could be detrimental. The increased knowledge can sometimes prove frustrating to the already overworked librarian, encouraging him or her to do more

and more. The level of job stress may increase, possibly putting the librarian in an even worse situation than before the advanced education was obtained.

Another barrier to rural librarian education is the geographical distance to colleges and universities that offer a library science program (Vavrek, 1982). Even if the librarian has the desire to attend a class or workshop, money must be found to pay for travel and registration expenses. In addition, the librarian must take time off to attend, and, as many rural public libraries are staffed by only one person, a substitute must be found to run the library in the librarian's absence (Vavrek, 1989). Long distances to library schools only increase the amount of time a substitute will be needed, further discouraging the librarian to attend. These barriers notwithstanding, distance education is an integral part in the education of the rural librarian and it is important to explore it further.

Distance Education

"In the industrial age, we go to school. In the information age, school can come to us. This is the message implicit in the media and movement of distance education."

—The Online Journal of Distance Education and Communication

This byline is a good explanation of what distance education is: simply bringing education to the people (Barron, 1991). Although distance education may seem like a relatively new phenomenon, in actuality, it can be traced back to the Chinese who sent packages to local officials so they could learn how the emperor wanted things to run. Throughout the ages, distance education was used to reach an otherwise unreachable public. Women were offered the opportunity to learn at home, newspapers were used to teach safety concepts to coal miners, and radio was used by universities to reach students (Barron, 1991). More closely related to the study of librarianship, in 1888 Melvil Dewey called for the development of correspondence courses for librarians not able to attend his program (Barron, 1991). It is from such a historical past that distance education as we know it today has come to serve the rural public librarian.

But library educators did not always hold correspondence study in such high regard. In the '50s the American Library Association put a specific statement in its standards for accreditation that prohibited to use of correspondence study for graduate credit (Barron, 1991). Even today there is still reluctance to embrace distance education. Many are concerned the student will lose something by not being in an academic environment (Barron, 1991) and the interaction of teacher and student is impersonal and non-direct (Barron, 1995). They also believe there are not enough resources to support

the student in this fashion. Without the campus nearby, the library resources of distance students must come from the local public library, which does not have a collection to support undergraduate, let alone graduate education (Schwellenbach, 1995). Another issue is that distance students will not be socialized into the profession, as one would normally be (Barron, 1991). They will not have the same opportunities to network with library professionals, who could potentially be future bosses, or at the very least professional references. In short, many believe the overall quality of distance education is so different that the student will not receive a thorough understanding of librarianship (Barron, 1991).

But there are many who recognize the obvious benefits of distance education, and in reality, the traditional classroom of yesterday is quickly becoming less and less conventional, as converging and complimentary technologies are being used by educators (Barron, 1995). According to Barron, an example of such converging technologies is a televised class, which depends not only on cameras and cable, but also on computer satellites, telephone systems, and fiber optics. In addition, these complementary technologies support the entire learning/teaching process (Barron, 1995).

In studying programs that have actually implemented such technologies, it would appear distance education does indeed fulfill a major void in the education of the rural librarian. For, if the rural librarian is left with distance education as his or her only option for professional advancement, what right do opponents of distance education have to deny him or her this opportunity? Even if distance education is indeed less productive than education in the traditional sense, is it not better than no education at all?

As Barron states, "If we don't reach out with every available technology, are we not denying rural public library staff, and, just as critical, the communities they serve, access to information and education which are the basis for economic development, cultural maintenance, and personal satisfaction (Barron, 1995)?" This opportunity should not be denied. Library educators throughout the United States need to make this a priority for their library science programs. Right now, less than 20 percent of library schools offer distance education as an alternative to their students (Barron, 1995). This number must increase. And it must be an ongoing process, not one that stops at the end of the weekend conference, or the one-day workshop. As Killacky (1992) contends, it is simply not enough anymore to mount an interesting, stimulating, and enjoyable program and then never have the participant hear from you again. It is a constant operation. Educators must prepare librarians for the program as well as the rest of the journey.

Certification/Continuing Education

Certification is an option for rural librarians who do not have the time, funding or ability to attend a library science program. Certification, while not as involved as a library science program, can lead to many benefits, for both the rural librarians and the rural public library. Specifically, certification can:

- lead to improved library service
- result in benefiting the user
- motivate librarians to acquire, maintain and develop skills
- help to improve the public image of the librarian profession
- provide guidelines for public library boards to select and retain personnel
- recognize public librarians who update their knowledge and skills

(Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, 1999).

Librarians receive their certificates from a variety of sources, including library boards (Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, 1999), commissions, and professional associations and can be obtained in a variety of ways. Several of the ways to obtain certification include:

- taking job-related coursework or continuing education courses from colleges or universities
- participating in professional library association activities
- holding an office in a professional library association
- participating in seminars, workshops, conferences and lectures
- writing reviews of library materials, or editing a library publication in regional, statewide or national publications

(Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, 1999).

Currently, 23 states have mandatory certification requirements for particular levels of librarianship, while 18 states only *prefer* qualifications or voluntary certification, and nine states have no certification requirements at all (Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, 1999). Currently, Kentucky has one of the most in-depth state certification programs, requiring certification for library directors, assistant librarians, bookmobile librarians, and branch or department heads. The three-level certification program is run with a goal of coordinating and implementing educational offerings for public library personnel (Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, 1999). The following is an outline of Kentucky's certification requirements:

The Library Experience Certificate

Requirements:

- Twelve hours in Library Science
OR
- Nine hours in Library Science AND
● Three hours in a related field of study
OR
- Six hours in Library Science AND
● Ten years of library work experience
OR
- Bachelor's degree AND
● Six hours in Library Science

The Paraprofessional Certificate

Requirements:

- Sixty hours of college (including twelve hours in library science) AND
● Two years of library work experience
OR
- Fifteen hours in Library Science AND
● Five years of library work experience
OR
- Master's degree AND
● Six hours in Library Science
OR
- Bachelor's degree AND
● Twelve hours in Library Science

The Professional Certificate

Requirements:

Professional I

- Master's degree in Library Science (ALA accredited)

Professional II

- Master's degree in Library Science (non-ALA accredited)

Professional III

- Bachelor's degree AND 21 hours in Library Science
- OR

- Master's degree AND 12 hours in Library Science

Professional IV

- Applicant passed the 1980 library certification examination

(Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, 1999).

As in many other states, certification in Kentucky is meant to reward librarians for the work they have done to improve their professional situation, and to provide a type of guideline for library boards in the hiring of new librarians. While it is admirable that twenty-three states have mandatory certification requirements, the fact is that over half of the states do not have requirements. Ideally, in the near future, more states will come to require certification standards along the lines of the Kentucky model, as certification requirements serve to uphold and supplement the work of the rural public librarian. States must encourage quality continuing education programs for library professionals in order to maintain a healthy degree of professionalism, as well as to increase the knowledge of public librarians, in the process keeping up with the vast changes that are occurring (Steiner, 1990).

Certification and continuing education programs are an extremely important part of rural librarianship. Without them, uneducated librarians who lack professional qualifications will continue to serve the public in what is probably an unorganized, haphazard manner; continuing education programs must be formed to meet their needs (Hoffman-Pfeffer, 1989). And librarians are hungry for this type of education. According to Hoffman-Pfeffer (1989), practically all rural librarians want to do the best job they can and are sincerely concerned for the community in which they work. In turn, this concern motivates them to want to learn, and continuing education and certification programs are just two options that can be employed to meet these needs.

Funding for Rural Libraries and Rural Librarians

As previously mentioned, one of the biggest obstacles to rural librarian education is the lack of funds in the rural library. There may not be enough money to pay for continuing education classes, travel to distance education classes, or for the substitute librarian who is needed to fill in while the librarian furthers his or her education. So how can rural libraries find the funding needed to support such an important part of the library's functions?

In an interview with three rural library administrators, Paula Torgeson (1991) asked each how they feel libraries should be financed, given that librar-

ians in very small public libraries do not like to spend available monies on their own education, preferring, instead, to spend the money on books and other library materials. The first suggestion came from John Houlahan, a rural public library director for 16 years. He suggests libraries establish trust funds and use the interest to support education for the library's staff, the money for these trust funds coming from memorials and other donations. In addition, fundraising issues could be designated a role of the Friends of the Library. This is a good idea in theory, but it seems that if a library is in a position to raise extra funds, these funds will inevitably be spent on matters other than librarians' education.

The second suggestion came from John Christenson, director of the Traverse des Sioux Library System in Mankato, Minnesota. Christenson purports that there is no reason why there should not be as many tax-supported educational opportunities for the small-town librarian as there are for policemen, firefighters, schoolteachers, and wastewater plant operators. To achieve this, he proposes, state libraries, library associations, and regional library systems need to be aggressive in providing continuing education. In the same way, local library boards must be more aggressive in asking local funding units to support training for library workers along the same level as other public employees. An admirable idea, if the library has a board willing to go the extra mile, and generous local funding agents that are not suffering from the previously discussed Transactional Leadership problem.

Finally, the third suggestion came from Donald Reynolds Jr., assistant administrator of the Central Kansas Library System. Reynolds' suggestion is a different one altogether, as he suggests that perhaps it is the library itself that is to blame. He implies the library that lacks funding for continuing education is simply a library that has never asked its board to budget for it. Continuing education, he says, is as important as anything else the library does, and when librarians and trustees realize this (as they obviously do not, or they would have the available funds), the money will be available in the budget to support it (Torgeson, 1991).

A New Standard of Professionalism is Needed

As any professional librarian can tell you, library patrons are always surprised to learn that a graduate education is required to become a professional librarian. As Steiner (1990) contends, "The general public thinks of a librarian as stamping due dates in books, sending out reminders and collecting fines. The public assumes, out of ignorance, that anyone who works in a library is a librarian." It is this lack of professional recognition that is hurting librarianship today. And who could blame the patron of his ignorance? With only 20 percent of rural public librarians possessing a professional master's degree, it is no wonder he is misled.

And then there is the recurring negative stereotype of the librarian. Everyone knows what that is. On an infamous episode of the game show *Family Feud* in 1981, this negative professional image was typified when contestants were asked to match five personality characteristics of librarians. The correct responses were:

- glasses
- quiet
- single
- mean/stern
- stuffy

Even today, almost 20 years later, these stereotypes are constantly encountered in a reflection of how the media negatively views the profession. This negativity, in turn, has an adverse affect on the identity of librarians themselves, and this damaging professional image batters the status and self-confidence of fledgling librarians who generally have enough outside worries, without having to constantly defend their chosen career. Further denigration occurs by the evidence stated above, showing that the public is painfully unaware of the level of education required to become a professional librarian (MacDonald, 1995).

It is for this reason that a new standard of professional staffing is essential for the survival of public libraries. The attitude that anyone may be a librarian, regardless of training, must end. Vavrek (1990) suggests three ways to achieve this goal:

- All libraries receiving state aid must have a professionally trained person on staff.
- Library boards must develop staffing plans.
- Funds must be committed to provide financial incentives for local communities to hire a professional.

If it is believed that libraries are important, standards should be identified and established, especially if we want the library to stand for a level of competence. People need to be shown that libraries are more than just cute little reading rooms for children and old people (Torgeson, 1991).

National standards would create a model for rural public libraries and reduce workers feelings of geographical and professional isolation. In addition, standards would provide a collective and normative basis for dealing with crucial library problems (Vavrek, 1982). It is for these reasons and countless others that many professional librarians advocate a new standard of professional accountability.

Conclusions

Today, a large majority of librarians in rural public libraries do not have a professional Master's Degree in Library Science. Although the general consensus of these librarians is a willingness to obtain the degree, too many obstacles prevent them from doing so, including a lack of funding, long distance travel to classes, and lack of community support. But, the fact remains that in order to serve adequately the community they live in, librarians need advanced training. Without it, the job cannot be performed to the highest degree needed, and patrons will not receive the information they seek. Or worse, they will not even realize they are missing anything.

Rural libraries need to become information centers, with the rural librarian acting as the information expert. It is not enough that libraries keep a large collection of the latest bestsellers on their shelves. They need to do more. And without further education, the rural librarian will be unable to see that this happens. New standards of education and professionalism need to be established, be it on a state, regional or local level. Not everyone should be given the title librarian, just because they know how to operate the date punch machine, or the online card catalog. Without further education, librarians will be unable to support the communities they serve, the library will fall out of use, and, inevitably, and sadly, it will cease to exist.

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