

Staffing vs. Collection Development

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The decade of the 1980s can be one of great promise for libraries. An explosion of knowledge is upon us as an ever more educated public, greatly expanded audio visual resources, a national trend toward self help and an increase in the number of vocational and college level courses which emphasize library services all point to increasingly favorable library conditions in the near future.

Yet at the same time, the struggle between the the library budgets for staff and those for materials grows more, not less, crucial as time passes. After the rather flush times of the 1960s and early 1970s when federal and state funds poured into the library world in amounts previously unheard of, a mixture of tax revolts by citizens, government economy moves on the local, state and national levels, and ever increasing prices for materials and staff have forced many libraries to wonder just how they are to apportion their budgets for best results.

In response, many libraries seem to take the stoic route of cutting back on staff and materials in amounts which nearly parallel each other, claiming all the while that unless aid is given soon even

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more drastic cuts will need to be made. Yet, others appeal to a vaudevillian mixture of crass pessimism and public threats.

A few libraries have experimented with new versions of old ideas and some have gone even further and introduced new features and funding sources. Thus, the appearance of the library volunteer staffer, increased automation of the library and a growth in renewed public spirited campaigns to "buy a book for the library" have evolved.

Viewed separately, each of the methods of coping with the funding problem has its supporters (and detractors), and each method can claim a fair amount of success for its adherents, which shows that most any action taken with sufficient zeal and a dose of good luck will succeed to some degree.

Even when adequate funding is achieved however, the question still remains, how are the costs of staffing and materials for the collection to be brought into some kind of balance with each other? Let us examine the importance of each in turn.

Staff vs. Materials

As an item in the library's budget, a good case can be made for taking the library's collection as the single most important part of any library. Contained within it in print, audio visual or computer format are the guts and sinews of any library's services, the information and the recreation which the library's patrons seek. Here are the thrilling fictional stories, the Dow Jones stock averages, the how to's of flower arranging and car repair, the terse arguments of scholars, the precise observations of scientists. Here reside the comedic genius of Chaplin, the beauties of the Rocky Mountains, the voices of FDR and Walter Cronkite, the melodies of Tschaiowsky and Bach, the fantasies of Sendak and Seuss.

It is the library's media which the patrons can check out, peruse or copy. It is the collection which must be cataloged, shelved, accessed, repaired, recalled, reserved and ordered regularly.

But it is equally true that it is the library staff who carry out the tasks which need to be performed to keep the collection in order, up-to-date and in good repair. It is the reference and children's librarians who answer questions from patrons, compile book lists, put together film and record bibliographies, contact and work with community groups in the library's programming area. Without a library staff no material can be circulated and the buildings cannot be opened for public use.

The library administrator is on the horns of a dilemma. Cutting the collection budget will sacrifice the library's reason for existence. Cutting staff hinders the library's ability to serve the public.

Short term solutions such as temporarily freezing staff levels and purchasing fewer materials lead to long range headaches. Those books not purchased in 1982 may never be purchased in the future. And with lower materials budgets, the importance of books often supercedes the need for the library to meet patron demand for audio visuals, programming and the new and growing field of computers. Stagnation in services and gradual degradation of library services becomes apparent as old habits of behavior become ingrained, new training patterns and ideas are not sought, staff is not replaced, conferences are not attended, and the expansion of library services is stopped.

A sudden increase in federal, state or even local funding is very unlikely. It is also unlikely that costs for staffing or materials will go down. Built-in escalators will see to it that staff contracts and media publisher's prices will continue to rise.

Librarians must, therefore, realize that low budgets will not soon be remedied, that staff and collection cutbacks at times are unavoidable, and must meet these times of cutbacks and slow growth with a reasoned approach to library service, which looks to the future of libraries and their services and not back to the past when times were richer.

The attempts by many to draw a line between staffing and collection building and argue that one must be cut more than the other is useless in solving the problems which result from budget cutbacks. Each has its undeniable uses in the library; friction between the two only serves to lessen library service to the public.

Instead of friction, then, libraries should be exploring ways to develop both staffing and collection development with an eye towards economy and efficiency. Conflict between the two should be lessened, not increased, as means are found to shore up needed services in both areas without sacrificing either for the sake of the other. Some personal ideas on how to begin follow.

In collection development, it is time to realize that libraries are not meant to be set up as social service centers, museums, community recreation centers or grandiose monuments to an architect's dreams. A library is meant to provide the community it serves (be it public, school, academic, business, or whatever) with as complete a collection of recreational and informational media as can be offered.

In this spirit, increased use of less expensive book and audio visual formats are an obvious alternative to cut backs of library offerings. Though many librarians are loath to see the introduction of paperbacks into their collections, use of these for subjects which

will soon become dated (science) or which are likely to be lost in circulation (the occult) make sense from a budgetary view. The use of less expensive book club editions for second and third copies of best sellers in public libraries and rental collections are other means of keeping budgets in the black while still providing the public with the books they want.

In the area of audio visuals, the collection of expensive 16mm films by individual libraries might be on the way out. In Indiana the costs for maintaining and building such collections has caused the possible suspension of even the statewide film service. Less expensive video and even filmstrip and slide formats can often be introduced. In the case of video, the service will be welcomed by the growing number of video enthusiasts.

Computer Networks

The increasing ability of computer networks to supply reference citations and even hard data should be encouraged by all libraries concerned with lowering collection costs. It is not inconceivable that in the next ten years, a large amount of reference service will be performed through computer use. Not only will this save space by eliminating numerous paper copies of reference materials, it will eventually save the library money as well since the information will not be housed in the collection, but will be rented from a supplier.

Appeals to the public for donations to the library are a source of funding all too often overlooked. The West Lafayette Public Library is a good example of what can be done in this area. The library selects those periodicals, books and media which it feels should form the basis of a good public library collection and then announces to the public at large that it is accepting donations of any and all books, magazines, records and other usable library type material. The results have been gratifying in the sheer quantity of materials donated on a regular basis; this has been worth the effort since quality materials are donated. As many as 20 different magazine subscriptions have been picked up by members of the community; magazines of quality such as *Life*, *Architectural Digest* and *Poetry* and even the *Christian Science Monitor*, have been donated, saving the library valuable funds to be used elsewhere. Back copies of nearly any magazine which the library wants to keep are found from the donations of patrons. Phonograph records are also a commonly donated item ranging from classical to rock and pop. Such donations

allow the library to concentrate its budget on purchasing new releases which keep its collection current. The library has yet to purchase a copy of a paperback for its popular browsing collection; often donated copies of best sellers or lost classics act as quick replacements.

The judicious use of interlibrary loans and cooperative collection development between libraries can be of much help also. In a three or four county area, every library need not collect large collections in every area. Through discussion, one library can be appointed to collect in one little used area, and the other libraries in other such areas. Academic libraries have done this for years. A health library for example, will collect few works on fiction and the general humanities and social sciences library will collect few books on surgery, thus, allowing each library to serve its specialized clientele while still providing a wealth of library materials to its patrons through library cooperation.

Library Staffing

Staffing is usually the largest item in any library's budget.¹ And it is also the item which causes the most panic among librarians when the budget is cut back. Less money budgeted for staff means lower salary increases (or no increases at all) or even the reduction of staff, through retirement or at worst, firing. And certainly, staffing the library is a major need for the library to be open at all. Someone must circulate the books, clean the records, answer reference questions and open the doors in the morning.

But with contracting budgets, the need for different types of staff must come under close scrutiny. When all is said and done, a library can operate with a small staff. It cannot operate without books and other media, the very basis for services.

This is not a clarion call for the elimination or cut back in clerical staff and/or professional staff. It is a reminder that with limited funds available, much thought should be given to hiring new staff while the materials budgets remain strapped.

The old image of the librarian as a dynamo of energy who manages an entire organization with minimum staff is due for a comeback. While most library jobs, taken on a per person or per activity basis alone, are clerical, the heart of library service today - reader's advisory, materials selection, and cataloging - are professional

occupations. A professional cadre of trained and experienced professionals are needed to handle these. Nevertheless, library directors would be remiss if they did not consider the possibility of using their professional staff at least part of the time for clerical work. Although years have been spent extricating the profession from a myriad of clerical jobs, when budgets contract, job descriptions expand. While it is less expensive to hire clerical than professional staff, clerical staff can rarely perform professional duties. The reverse is quite possible and practical.

Another option available, and one that should not be dismissed lightly, is the use of volunteers in the library. Many public service organizations such as schools and hospitals, already use the donated services of people from the community. Use of volunteers in libraries in the past has met with opposition from the professional staff, who fear that volunteers didn't know how to do the job, were unreliable and/or were after professional jobs and were therefore seen as a threat to job security.

Properly handled, none of these worries need arise. A volunteer needs to be trained for the job just as any other employee needs to be, and the volunteer needs to be selected just as carefully as the professional or clerical staff. The volunteer will be just as reliable as the professional and clerical staff (and sometimes more so) if the volunteer is to feel that his/her activities are vital to the operation of the library and the amount of hours assigned are not out of line.

Though many volunteers do express an interest in library service, few are ready to commit themselves to the profession full time. If they are, such a commitment should be welcomed, provided that the person is a valuable addition to the library world. It is the responsibility of the library administration to assure the paid staff that volunteers are not being hired to replace paid staff.

The advantages of volunteer staffing are important. Volunteer activity increases public awareness of the library in the community. It emphasizes the need for adequate library funding and, because of the diversity of personalities, educational backgrounds and talents, an enriching atmosphere is provided. Professional and clerical staff can learn from the volunteers just as the volunteer can learn from the professional. And best of all, the use of volunteers helps to keep staffing costs down, once more moving the budget tension between staffing and collection development towards conciliation.

Also to be considered is job sharing. While those employees who work part time usually do not receive the benefits that full time staff do, they do have schedule flexibility. Thus, those skilled in various jobs, be they clerical or professional, but who do not desire to work full time, can assist in a more meaningful way.

Certainly both staff and collection are essential parts of any library. Within the 1980s a spirit of enthusiasm and hope can help all involved work towards the solution of good library services as well as supplies.

Note

¹ Indiana State Library. *Statistics of Indiana Libraries, 1980*. Indianapolis: Indiana State Library, 1981.