

Public Library Evaluation: A Case Study

James J. Govern

To evaluate the relative strengths of public libraries, it is crucial that individual library systems evaluate themselves. Libraries unwilling to evaluate programs, services and personnel — and to make improvements based on those findings — will eventually be forced to do so because of the need for accountability and the struggle for scarce public dollars.

This article describes two approaches that public libraries can use to evaluate their programs and services: (1) the Childers and Van House multiple constituencies model and (2) traditional output measures.

The Multiple Constituency Model of Evaluation

In an article in the October 1, 1989, issue of *Library Journal*, Thomas Childers and Nancy A. Van House list four approaches to evaluating effectiveness within organizations: the goal model as exemplified by output measures; the process model based on internal organizational health; the open systems model, which measures an ability to attract resources; and the multiple constituencies model, defined as the ability to meet

needs and expectations of certain groups.¹ In their study, Childers and Van House explore the multiple constituencies model. The authors identify seven groups to which public libraries are accountable: trustees, community leaders, library administration, library staff, patrons, friends, and government officials. They consider these groups to be "influential, directly or indirectly, in organization-level decisions."²

The authors identify sixty-one key indicators that typically describe what public libraries either do or have. Their study shows that six of these sixty-one indicators were reported in the top nine responses for all constituent groups. Statistically, the six most important indicators of library effectiveness as revealed by this study are: staff helpfulness, services suited to the community, range of materials, range of services, convenience of hours, and materials quality. It is interesting that this study discovered that size of library was not a determinant in choosing what were viewed as important "indicators of effectiveness." The seven constituent groups of small, medium, and large libraries all viewed the same indicators as being important to a library's effectiveness.

In a recent survey of library constituent groups (staff, trustees, county administration,

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Stanly County Public Library 1990 [Trustee] Evaluation of Library Service Survey Form

Listed below are the 6 leading indicators of library service as reported in a recent national survey of public library trustees, community leaders, library administration, staff, patrons, friends and government officials. The groups selected these indicators from a list of sixty-one "things" that libraries typically do. Please rate the effectiveness of our library on these indicators.

	Not Effective			Very Effective	
A. Staff Helpfulness	1	2	3	4	5
B. Services Suited to the Community	1	2	3	4	5
C. Range of Materials	1	2	3	4	5
D. Range of Services	1	2	3	4	5
E. Convenience of Hours	1	2	3	4	5
F. Materials Quality	1	2	3	4	5

Comments or Suggestions _____

TABLE 1.

Effectiveness of Library Services

Constituent Groups:	Staff Helpfulness	Services Suited to Community	Materials Quality	Range of Materials	Range of Services	Convenience of Hours	Averages
Patrons (n = 39)	4.80	4.50	4.50	4.20	4.50	4.40	4.48
Government Officials (n = 4)	4.50	4.50	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.25	4.21
Trustees (n = 6)	4.83	4.00	4.16	4.00	3.66	4.00	4.11
Staff (n = 18)	4.55	4.27	3.94	4.00	3.77	3.38	3.98
Library Administration (n = 1)	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	3.83
Community Leaders (n = 17)	4.29	3.93	3.82	3.52	3.64	2.94	3.69
Group Averages	4.50	4.20	4.07	3.95	3.93	3.66	4.05

library administration, patrons and community leaders), the Stanly County Public Library attempted to apply the methodology of this national study to discover the perceived level of effectiveness of our public library within the six areas. (The following is a copy of the survey form; Table 1 highlights the results of those surveys.)

Interpreting the Results of Constituency Surveys

The results shown in Table 1 indicate that library patrons gave the library the highest average effectiveness rating among all groups surveyed. The lowest average effectiveness rating was turned in by community leaders. Other constituent groups' effectiveness ratings fell somewhere between those two groups. The indicator given the lowest effectiveness rating on any of the six individual areas was "convenience of hours," as perceived by those within the community leaders group. The highest effectiveness rating was given to "staff helpfulness," by the library's board of trustees. On average, the lowest rated area among all areas for all groups was "convenience of hours," and the highest effectiveness rating among all groups for all areas was "staff helpfulness."

This survey has demonstrated in a concrete way for me some things that, as library director, I have assumed for some time: the library staff is by and large viewed as being helpful, and public service hours are not as convenient as they need to be. What I did find surprising from these effectiveness scores was that patrons gave the library the highest rating and that community leaders gave the library the lowest rating.

It should be stressed that the ratings are based on individuals' perceptions of how the library behaves or operates. This survey did not request explanations of the responses from those providing the ratings. We have been able to ascertain various group impressions of library service areas, yet there was no specific information pro-

vided to allow us to understand or analyze why those individuals responded the way they did. I liken this type of library evaluation to public opinion polling with its strengths and weaknesses. Further implementations of studies of this type might be expanded to require comments as well as the numeric rating for each of the six areas. However, within these six areas, an understanding of how your library is perceived in the community is very useful information when considering goals, objectives, and setting priorities for your library.

Output Measures

Another method that the small public library can use to measure effectiveness is output measures as developed by the Public Library Association.³ These evaluation tools were developed so public libraries could measure the results or outcomes as opposed to input of their services. This method of evaluation allows libraries to compare their performance over time, to compare themselves with similar libraries, and to monitor progress on their missions and objectives. Another benefit of output measures is the ability to describe to outsiders and staff alike the library's performance in specific areas. Historically, public libraries reported input such as budget dollars per capita or book budget dollars per capita. Output measures is a way to measure performance.

The Stanly County Public Library staff has surveyed library users each fall for the past three years to determine how we were doing. Our library chose to study the following five measures: title fill rate (proportion of the titles sought that were found); author/subject fill rate (proportion of the authors/subjects sought that were found); browsing fill rate (proportion of the time that browsers found something); reference completion rate (proportion of reference questions that were completed the day of the request); and the document delivery rate (the length of time that patrons must wait for requested materials).

Table 2 shows the results of those surveying periods within those areas. The margin of error is based on the usable sample size.

The reference completion and browsing fill rates show no especially significant statistical differences between the survey periods. The title fill rate, however, has decreased from seventy-one percent (or a range of sixty-eight percent to seventy-four percent) in 1987 to sixty-four percent (or a range of sixty percent to sixty-eight percent) in the 1989 survey. Over the same time the subject/author fill rate has increased from seventy-four percent (or a range of seventy percent to seventy-eight percent) to eighty-one percent (or a range of seventy-seven percent to eighty-five percent). The movement in these fill rates occurred during a time of little change in circulation per capita and collection turnover, two factors which have the potential to affect directly those measures. That is to say, the library and its collection were essentially as busy in 1987 as in 1989.

What could be the possible explanation of the counter movements in these two measures? A collection evaluation study during fiscal year 1988-89 pinpointed several high-demand areas within the adult nonfiction collection which accounted disproportionately for a small part of that collection. For example, the 610s accounted for nine percent of the adult nonfiction circulation during the collection evaluation period, yet that area makes up only five percent of the adult nonfiction collection. We made changes in the book budget beginning with the 1989-90 fiscal year to target those areas where demand and holdings were not in line. This change is one possible explanation for the increase in the subject/author fill rate. Within those areas of high demand, patrons began to see more of a selection.

Analysis of the decrease in the title fill rate

over the three survey periods is more problematic. Our title fill rate has decreased during a period of improvement in the document delivery figures and no significant increase in the level of reserve activity. That is, patrons are waiting less time for requested materials, yet the proportion of the titles sought compared with titles found is decreasing. I do not have a plausible explanation for this occurrence. One would think that, if a fill rate (author/subject or title fill rate) showed a decline, one's reserve requests might increase and document delivery would slow down. This scenario has not been our experience in Stanly County.

One of the most significant bits of information gained from this round of surveying is to be found in the document delivery rate; that is, how long someone has to wait for requested materials (reserves). The Stanly County Public Library has demonstrated an improved ability to turn reserves around more quickly. We delivered forty-eight percent of requested titles within fifteen days of the initial request date during 1989 as opposed to only twenty-nine percent within fifteen days during 1988's survey period.

Because of the poor showing on the document delivery rate in prior years, the library made a change in handling bestsellers and reserves. We decided that we simply were not purchasing enough copies of high-demand items. By buying more copies, as well as adding non-reservable copies of bestsellers, we were able to improve the delivery rate in 1989 over the previous year. These changes, in addition to a closer monitoring of our reserve situation, enhanced our effectiveness in this area. Reserve monitoring was accomplished by having a staff member track the amount of time materials were on reserve using the database component of Appleworks on an Apple II-e. Keeping this file up-to-date gave us a handy way to judge quickly the demand for specific titles, as

TABLE 2.

**Stanly County Public Library
Output Measures Results:
A Comparison of 1987, 1988 & 1989 Surveys**

	1987	1988	1989
Browsers' Fill Rate	94% ($\pm 2\%$)	95% ($\pm 2\%$)	96% ($\pm 2\%$)
Subject/Author Fill Rate	74% ($\pm 4\%$)	77% ($\pm 4\%$)	81% ($\pm 4\%$)
Title Fill Rate	71% ($\pm 3\%$)	69% ($\pm 4\%$)	64% ($\pm 4\%$)
Reference Completion Rate	85% ($\pm 2\%$)	93% ($\pm 2\%$)	90% ($\pm 2\%$)
% of Requests Filled:			
within 7 days	N/A	18%	32%
8 to 14 days	N/A	11%	16%
15 to 30 days	N/A	24%	16%
more than 30 days	N/A	45%	34%

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