
Coalition Building, Fund Leveraging, and Role Changing

Keys to Expanded Social Services by Public Libraries

by Howard F. McGinn

The changes have been gradual, almost unnoticed. They began back in the 1960s when librarians discovered what was then called "public relations." They began with the first appearance of specialized displays of books in an attempt to mimic the displays of the department stores and supermarkets. The goals were noble: increase circulation, bring more people into the library, increase the number of people reading, make the library begin to appear that it was not a musty, silent, tomb-like mausoleum of dead books and comatose employees. The changes produced results. By unwittingly employing a few standard marketing techniques, libraries did increase circulation, did increase the number of customers walking in the library door, and, in spite of the best efforts of the school systems to the contrary, did increase the number of people able to read even as the schools increased the number of graduates not able to read. Libraries became "fun places" full of ALA READ posters, puppet shows, and large money-making video stores. Popular fiction dominated the expenditure of public tax dollars, and a new professional role model—the librarian as cruise director—was created. We rarely stopped to talk with the homeless person keeping warm under the READ poster unless that person's odor or behavior annoyed the better-heeled clientele. We rarely stopped to consider why our customer base was taking on a distinctive white, middle-class tint, why the growing number of people of color or people of a foreign language in our communities felt that they were not welcome in the public library, why we were becoming irrelevant. We should have seen the signs of our

irrelevancy, but this was the age of Reagan and America was standing tall. Now, however, we are beginning to understand that the age of Reagan has left us financially and spiritually bankrupt. We face an unimaginable national debt, riots and bombs in our cities, financial institutions that are still in the intensive care unit, and a lost generation of the young, especially African-American and Hispanic young men whose talents and skills we will sorely miss in the future. And, as our libraries have become irrelevant to most people's lives, our profession slowly fades into extinction. The application of marketing techniques did not bring on this decay; our misunderstanding and amateurish application of them did so. Mass circulation statistics did not produce lower budgets and the seeds of internal collapse; the rush for the quick fix, the quick profit did so. The increased number of customers did not devastate our credibility; our inattention to the human needs of large segments of our society did so. We sold our ancient heritage so that the words of Danielle Steele might be heard throughout the land. But as the Bible says "the poor we have always with us" and in the hope of this post-Reagan era perhaps there are some small steps we can take to regain our relevancy, to restore our profession and professional dignity, to increase our budgets, and, in the process, to make a difference in the lives of the many who never felt they were permitted to enter our buildings. The first step we need to take is to examine possible role changes.

I Am My Brother's And Sister's Keeper.

I am certain that the most frequent response to the question "Why did you become a librarian?" is the answer: "Because I love books." This is the root of our problem. I would like to believe that most of the people giving this response would add "and I want to help people." But in my twenty-five years as a librarian, I have never had that second phrase appended to a person's unswerving devotion to that piece of technology composed of paper, glue, and chemicals that we call a book. Aside from Hitler and Savonarola, few persons will openly express a hatred of books. General Assembly members have even been known to cut library budgets

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drastically while professing to be avid readers. A book, or more realistically, a collection of many books in one place produces a strange response in many persons in our culture. For these persons, entombment in books brings a sense of security, a feeling of eternity, of immutability, of comfort in a world that has run amok. Entombment allows a person to avoid accountability for the expenditure of tax dollars, to avoid accountability for lack of personal productivity, to avoid contact with the common world of business, jobs, and unemployment. For many, entombment in books offers an opportunity to escape from reality, a safe haven to weather the onslaughts of the world of the homeless, the murdered, the illiterate, the hungry. What behavioral patterns, however, would be established by librarians who append the phrase "and I want to help people" to their reason for their career choice? Perhaps these are some.

1. *The Librarian As Job Provider.*

Librarians have an honorable history as social activists. We willingly battle censorship, we march for gay and lesbian rights, we have attempted to overcome adult illiteracy with just a fraction of the funds used by the public schools to produce illiterates. But if the phrase "and I want to help people" were to be inserted in our daily work operations and budgeting, the texture of public library service would change dramatically. For once we would be able to see a direct cause-effect relationship be-

tween our work and the people we serve. The job creation program in the Nantahala Regional Library System in North Carolina is an excellent example of this phenomenon.

The Nantahala Regional System includes Graham County, the county in North Carolina that historically has the highest unemployment rate in the state. In 1989 the State Library of North Carolina began to work with Martha Palmer, director of the system, and Marcia Clontz, the system's outreach librarian, to develop a job creation program in Graham County that would be library-based. Plans were developed to begin a data entry business that could be used by local government officials as a prototype for a much larger corporate data entry industry that would bring good jobs, good working conditions, and no negative environmental impact to this mountain county. Four jobs were created in the library, subsidized by LSCA Title I funds. Libraries across the state began to send their shelf list cards to the Graham County Library where the employees converted the paper records into MARC records using OCLC's Microcon system. These records were then added to the state online catalogs at OCLC. Public libraries across the state were able to have their holdings converted inexpensively and, at the same time, obtain a tape of their holdings for loading into an online system. The program is now in its third year of operation. People are working. The burden is now on state and local government economic development officials to nurture and expand this nascent industry in order to develop more jobs.

2. *The Librarian As Health Provider.*

We are accustomed to people using public libraries to obtain health care materials in order to perform self-diagnosis. The number of persons using the library for this purpose increases when economic conditions are bad. But a program in the Pettigrew Regional Library System in northeastern North Carolina reversed the pattern of the provision of health care. Instead of waiting for people to come to the library, Pettigrew's director, Martha Smith, took health care to the people. The place was Tyrell County, the only county in the state without a physician. The program was a joint program of the Pettigrew Regional Library, the State Library, and the School of Nursing at East Carolina University. The concept was simple.

A graduate nurse would ride the bookmobile and, at the bookmobile stops, do physical examinations of the elderly, newborn children, pregnant women, anyone who came for assistance. If the nurse discovered that persons needed immediate medical care, Social Services was notified or the person was rushed to the medical school hospital at East Carolina University. The librarian, meanwhile, distributed information about nutrition, self-examination, child care, and other topics. Videotapes were shown when appropriate. The key factor in making this program work was Martha Smith's knowledge of her community and her willingness to change long-standing bookmobile routes. The route was changed to stop in the late afternoon and evening at backroads churches and fire houses when people were home from work in the fields or factories. Health care was delivered to the people of this very poor county.

The Emporia (Kansas) Public Library has conducted a similar program each summer for the past few years. The children's librarian schedules outdoor story hours in trailer parks in the city. Most of the residents of the parks are Mexican, Vietnamese, or Cambodian. While the parents may not be able to speak English, the children usually have mastered enough of the language to understand the stories. A social worker or nurse will accompany the librarian and, while the story hour is being conducted, the nurse or social worker will do physical examinations or work with the families in helping solve other problems. This summer, a graduate student from the School of Library and Information Management at Emporia State University will work in the program as part of her practicum. As a supplement to these programs, the library has started Spanish language story hours on a year-round basis for children who have not yet learned English. It will soon begin a program to teach English to newly-arrived Hispanic adults. In both North Carolina and Kansas, children, young parents, and the elderly were plugged into the social services system and into other programs through the library.

3. *The Librarian As Mentor.*

The plight of young African-American men is becoming a national concern. Many efforts are underway to reduce the death rate of these young people from murder by handguns and drugs, to increase their job opportunities, to provide a meaningful education, to create positive role models. This summer, the Emporia Public Library will conduct a month-long "Rites of Passage" program for young African-American

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men in the community. The project is a joint program of the library and the Office of Minority Student Affairs at Emporia State University. The programs will be held two nights each week in June and July and will focus on the unique problems facing these young people.

The Greensboro (North Carolina) Public Library's Vance H. Chavis Lifelong Learning Center has attacked these and other problems encountered on a daily basis by the African-American community in that city. Chavis Center director Steve Sumerford has especially concentrated on tutorial programs for students and literacy programs for adults. Funding is provided by the Greensboro Public Library and by a non-profit fund-raising group.

4. The Librarian As Social Service Information Provider.

This is a more traditional role. The now-rapid emergence of statewide electronic networks has enabled public libraries, in particular, to provide information about the wide variety of social services available to customers. The Information Network of Kansas and the State Library of Kansas have recently inaugurated KIDSNET. This free, statewide, electronic service provides a "finder service" on a county-by-county basis for parents needing day care for children ranging in age from toddler to elementary school. It provides lists of facilities for children with special needs, and long-term residential facilities for children without parents, who are troubled, or who need special attention for whatever reason. KIDSNET also spells out eligibility requirements for the receipt of assistance.

Other states have developed or are developing similar programs. The State Library of North Carolina's North Carolina Information Network, of course, has offered job listings for several years. The State Library of Colorado has announced

the initiation of a feasibility study to add health care and social services information to the Access Colorado Network. When this information is online, Colorado residents will have access to a wide range of health and family-related information. Using the Network, for example, a pregnant woman could obtain information about prenatal care services, or a family could investigate adult day care services to help deal with an aging parent who needs constant care. In these four areas of service, two essential factors emerge that make such services possible.

Keys To Service

1. State Library Initiative.

Because these services often require funding not normally able to be provided in a public library's budget, state libraries, by using LSCA Title I and III funds, can provide the seed money to begin and sustain such services. In most cases, LSCA dollars are used to provide leverage to obtain other federal, state, and local government funds, or private dollars. The Access Colorado program, for example, is supported by a grant from The Colorado Trust and the Aurora Prevention Partnership. The Colorado Trust was endowed by the proceeds of the sale of Presbyterian/St. Luke's Medical Center in Denver. The Aurora Prevention Partnership is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Substance Abuse Prevention, and the City of Aurora Youth Initiative. The key, however, is the coordination provided by the State Library of Colorado.

2. Coalition Building.

The pre-electronic form of networking is alive and well. The Information Network of Kansas and the State Library of Kansas have developed access to a large number of legal, social service, legislative, and other state government databases by forming

contractual arrangements with other state agencies. Both Kansas and North Carolina make extensive use of state-operated telecommunications networks to provide access to these databases as well as to the Internet and its wealth of resources. If one is able to maneuver through the gray areas of church-state relationships and not incur the wrath of the American Civil Liberties Union, cooperative programs with churches can be very valuable, if not essential. The Emporia Public Library's Hispanic programs are being conducted with assistance from the Methodist Church. In North Carolina, the state's Southern Baptist Convention and the Roman Catholic Dioceses have developed extensive programs to serve migrant workers. Inroads already made by the churches can be very valuable in initiating programs. The essential key in the development of these coalitions is good, old-fashioned, face-to-face bargaining with the state library representing library interests.

Ronald Reagan did not completely destroy altruistic behavior in the United States. As the proverbial pendulum of social change swings back to a true "kinder, gentler" nation, librarians are finding that it is possible to return to the traditions of service that have been such an essential part of the profession without sacrificing the gains made by the adoption of modern marketing techniques. What is needed, however, is a mass return to these roots. When every citizen can truly feel that she or he is allowed to enter a public library, that there will be information services available that will help meet his or her needs, no matter how mundane those needs may seem to be. When the professional librarians providing these services represent all races and colors in our society, then our public libraries will truly be public.



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