

Branch Library Use in North Carolina Metropolitan Areas

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When the New Hanover County Public Library opened its first suburban branch in 1983, the library decided to conduct an informal survey of similar branches in other urbanized areas of North Carolina. It was hoped that the survey would give the New Hanover staff an idea of proper staffing levels for what was anticipated to be a very busy branch. A survey was sent out in November of 1983 to nine library systems: Asheville/Buncombe, Cumberland, Charlotte, Durham, Forsyth, Gaston-Lincoln, Greensboro, New Hanover, and Wake. Six of the nine responded (Asheville/Buncombe, Cumberland, Durham, Greensboro, New Hanover, and Wake); respondents represented thirty-four branches in several of North Carolina's most urbanized counties. The survey instrument asked for the following information:

- Branch location
- Size
- Ownership
- Annual circulation
- Percentage of adult circulation
- Number of reference and directional questions
- Availability of adult and juvenile programs
- Staff size
- Collection emphasis

- Type of circulation system used
- Hours open per week

In terms of the locations in which branches were located, residential areas were the preferred site. Fifteen of the thirty-four libraries were located in residential areas, compared with eight in shopping centers, nine in other commercial areas, and two in an otherwise defined area. There was no correlation between the type of area in which a branch was located and library use. Of the five busiest branches, two were in shopping centers, one in another commercial area, and two in residential areas. A further study on the location of high use branches might be helpful in identifying possible common characteristics.

The branches surveyed varied in size from 1,000 to 12,000 square feet.¹ The average was 3,998 square feet, and the median, 2,849 square feet. The American Library Association has traditionally recommended 2,000 square feet as a minimum size for a branch facility. On that basis, nearly a third of our branch libraries would not qualify as being of sufficient size. Only two branches were over 10,000 square feet in size. North Carolina branch libraries clearly tend to be of modest dimensions. Square footage showed no relationship to circulation. Of the five largest libraries in size, only two were in the top five in circulation. None of the five smallest was in the bottom five in circulation (Table 1).

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TABLE 1
Selected libraries comparatively ranked by square footage

Library	Sq. Footage	Rank/Sq. Ft.	Circulation (Annual)	Rank/Circ.
WCL2	12,000	1	87,376	13
WCL4	11,780	2	240,051	2
WCL7	9,360	3	51,879	17
DCL3	8,500	4	14,427	32
GPL2	7,000	5	242,500	1
WCL5	1,408	30	42,079	22
CCL5	1,400	31	36,185	24
CCL3	1,400	32	79,768	15
ABL3	1,118	33	100,904	11
DCL2	1,000	34	2,694	34

TABLE 2
Circulation of leased branch facilities ranked in order of lease cost

Library	Lease Cost (Annual)	Circulation (Annual)	Rank/Circ.
WCL10	\$56,935	223,628	3
GPL5	32,670	137,000	8
GPL4	27,816	138,000	7
GPL3	23,460	160,500	5
DCL1	16,700	110,837	10
WCL03	14,000	211,837	4
NHCL2	13,065	84,772	14
WCL09	9,750	11,433	33
CCL3	7,200	79,768	15
CCL1	5,445	135,814	9
CCL2	3,600	18,939	31

Ownership

The ownership of the branch libraries surveyed did show some unusual patterns. Of the thirty-four libraries, only four were actually owned by the library. Most (nineteen) were leased at no charge or for a minimum charge from another subdivision of government (city, town, school board). This probably reflects the changing organizational structure of various library systems, which may have begun as municipal or independent libraries and later became county departments. The remaining libraries (eleven) were leased. These leases varied from \$3,600 (\$2.12 per square foot) to \$56,935 (\$10.74 per square foot) annually. Leased facilities were usually more actively used than other libraries. Of the eleven leased facilities, seven were in the top ten in circulation, and all but three exceeded the average (Table 2).

I would conjecture that these leased facilities are probably newer and have been located in areas of high population growth, growth which may have bypassed older established branches. It may also be true that administrators are much less likely to tolerate an under-used facility for which they are paying rent.

Reference service

The role of branch libraries in providing reference service is difficult to ascertain because of the lack of consistency in record keeping. One library system did not keep branch reference statistics, and two others did not distinguish between reference and directional transactions. Looking at all information transactions (reference and directional), those libraries which kept statistics (thirty) averaged 26,988 transactions, with 13,051 transactions being the median.

The number of transactions per branch varied from a low of 985 to an astounding high of 214,036. Viewed another way, branches in metropolitan areas averaged 8.9 reference and directional questions an hour. As a percentage of each system's total transactions, branches accounted for 53.9 per cent of all information transactions (Table 3). Branches in metropolitan areas clearly are providing an important reference function. However, for those libraries with strong main libraries (New Hanover, Durham, and Greensboro), branch reference work is far less critical. Since Cumberland is in the process of constructing a new central library, it will be intriguing to see how this affects the distribution of reference use.

Program activities were available for children at every branch surveyed. Adult programs are

TABLE 3
Reference transactions by system

Library	Total Ref. ² (Annual)	Branch Ref. ³ (Annual)	Branch %
Asheville	N/A	N/A	N/A
Cumberland	234,247	123,175	52.6
Durham	153,957	25,925	16.8
Greensboro	355,586	129,594	36.4
New Hanover (est.)	69,540	10,000	15.7
Wake	687,993	520,047	75.6
TOTAL	1,501,323	809,641	53.9

conducted far less frequently. Only eleven of the thirty-four libraries had regular programs (at least one per month) for adults. Those libraries which did have adult programs were characterized by one of the following:⁴

Larger staff — nine of the eleven libraries had staff larger than the average.

Longer hours of operation — ten of the eleven libraries are open longer than the average.

Larger size — eight of the eleven libraries were physically larger than average.

The predominant use of branch libraries by the public is the borrowing of materials. An enormous range was present in the survey (Table 4). One library circulated only 2,694 books, and another, 242,500. The average was 83,724 and the median, 50,006. Most branches (twenty-eight) circulated more adult material than juvenile.

Asheville's branches averaged an adult circulation of 74 per cent, which was the highest of the systems surveyed; this is probably due to the high proportion of retirees in the area. Durham had the lowest percentage of adult circulation (52 per cent). Circulation per hours open showed the same broad range. One library circulated 2.1 books per hour while another averaged 79.9. The mean was 31.2 books per hour, with a median of 22.9. Staff productivity reflected this broad range in circulation. The lowest figure was 1,347 circulations per staff, and the highest was 38,516. The average and median figures were 22,938 and 24,081 respectively. Of the five libraries which had the most circulations per staff, only one was automated.

Branch circulation as a percentage of total circulation revealed the importance of branch libraries for a library system. In those two libraries with a small central library (Cumberland and Wake), 65.1 and 94.7 per cent of all circulation

TABLE 4
Branches ranked in circulation order

Branch	Total Circ.	Staff Size	Circ/ Staff	Circ/ Hour	Circ/ Sq. Ft.
GPL2	242,500	6.500	37,308	70.7	34.6
WCL04	240,051	9.000	26,672	67.9	20.4
WCL10	223,628	8.750	25,557	68.8	42.2
WCL03	211,837	5.500	38,516	79.9	56.1
GLP3	160,500	6.000	26,750	46.8	34.9
WLC06	157,053	6.500	24,162	43.8	34.6
GPL4	138,000	5.750	24,000	40.2	29.7
GPL5	137,000	6.000	22,833	39.9	27.4
CCL1	135,814	6.000	22,636	39.6	41.2
DCL1	110,837	5.250	21,112	33.8	22.2
ABLS3	100,904	3.750	26,908	38.0	90.3
ABLS2	93,385	3.125	29,883	35.2	38.1
WCL02	87,376	3.550	24,613	30.3	7.3
NHCL2	84,772	2.500	33,909	37.1	35.3
CCL3	79,768	2.840	28,087	25.6	57.0
ABLS1	63,961	2.675	23,911	24.1	23.5
WCL07	51,879	5.000	10,376	16.9	5.5
ABLS4	48,134	2.325	20,703	18.2	16.2
WCL11	47,869	1.260	37,991	26.3	18.2
WCL01	45,548	2.250	20,244	16.2	20.6
GPL1	43,600	3.750	11,627	12.7	8.5
WCL05	42,079	2.300	18,295	14.1	29.9
CCL6	36,685	2.000	18,343	13.6	8.2
CCL5	36,185	1.290	28,050	15.5	25.8
CCL7	34,197	1.188	28,785	16.4	22.8
CCL4	33,778	2.290	14,750	12.0	5.6
WCL08	33,653	0.930	36,186	21.6	23.3
WCL12	32,623	1.500	21,749	20.9	18.9
WCL13	24,982	1.330	18,783	16.0	11.6
NHCL1	20,539	0.750	27,385	15.8	13.7
CCL2	18,939	0.750	25,252	12.6	11.1
DCL3	14,427	7.000	2,061	4.4	1.7
WCL09	11,433	2.500	4,573	4.0	4.4
DCL2	2,694	2.000	1,347	2.1	2.7
TOTAL	2,846,630	124.103	783,357	981.0	843.5

TABLE 5
Branch circulation as a percentage of system circulation

Library System	Total Book Circulation	Branch Circulation	Branch Percentage of Total
Asheville	733,855	306,389	41.8
Cumberland	576,850	375,366	65.1
Durham	583,116	127,958	21.9
Greensboro	1,161,933	721,600	62.1
New Hanover (est.)	502,701	105,306	20.9
Wake	1,277,085	1,210,011	94.7
TOTAL	4,839,540	2,846,630	58.9

was done from branch libraries (Table 5).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the author makes the following observations about North Carolina's metropolitan branch libraries:

Leasing of facilities is a popular and successful alternative to actual ownership.

Branch libraries play a major role in the provision of reference service.

Several libraries show such little activity that there is a real question as to the value of keeping them open.

Staffing patterns, while generally relating to use, remain highly variable in many instances. A reassignment of staff would be appropriate in several instances.

Program activities in branch libraries are almost exclusively child-oriented.

Productivity of library staff should be a major concern of all library administrators. Sixteen of the thirty-four branches were below the annual average of 22,938 circulations per staff.

Data collection is hampered by the lack of consistency in record keeping.

Because of the limited number of libraries in this survey, the conclusions drawn must be considered impressionistic rather than definitive. I do think, however, that the survey is accurate in its broad outlines and I hope that it will provide library administrators with some insight into the operation of branch libraries in our urban centers. I also hope that the survey will provide them with some meaningful comparisons, so that they

can judge for themselves the success of their particular branch libraries.

References

1. Facilities of less than one thousand feet were not considered in the survey.
2. From *Statistics and Directory of North Carolina Public Libraries (July 1, 1982 — June 30, 1983)* (Raleigh: Division of State Library, 1983).
3. From figures submitted.
4. Eight of the eleven had at least two of these factors.



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