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# A Survey of Bookmobile Service in North Carolina

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Bookmobile librarians like to think of themselves as a special breed, and according to a recent piece of research in North Carolina, they are! Not only do bookmobile librarians go by more than a dozen different titles (ranging from "bookmobilists" to "bookmobile and overdues librarian"), but they are strong believers in using their own judgment and common sense. When faced with choices, they make decisions based on their experience and their understanding of what will work best in a particular situation.

On the other hand, there is also evidence that tradition—"the way it's always been done"—is a strong force in bookmobile practice. For example, traditionally bookmobile service is limited to 9-5 on weekdays. One public library system suggests, however, that while weekday morning stops are best for places like shopping centers, rest homes, day care centers, and so forth, it should be noted that evening and Saturday stops are best for places such as trailer parks, suburban neighborhoods, and rural communities. Tradition is stronger in this case, however, and very few bookmobiles (fewer than 5%) have evening and weekend stops. There are similar patterns in the data, as we shall see.

This research was undertaken for two reasons. First the author has worked on the Durham County Library bookmobile for the past six years and has often realized the need for information on how other bookmobilists select and evaluate their stops. Second, the author was completing work on an M.L.S. at North Carolina Central University, and was thereby required to undertake a serious piece of research. Put the two together, and a questionnaire to other library systems about their bookmobile programs seemed an interesting and potentially valuable project.

A survey was designed and sent to sixty-four regional, county, and city libraries in North Carolina which were reported as having bookmobile service. The list was compiled from the *Statistics and Directory of North Carolina Public Libraries, July 1, 1984 - June 30, 1985* and the *Ameri-*

*can Library Directory, 38th Edition*. Forty-nine surveys were returned in time to be used, making a return rate of about 75%.

First, it may be of interest to compare one's local bookmobile service to these broad statewide averages. Almost half of the North Carolina bookmobiles, forty-seven per cent, carry between 2,000 and 3,000 books. The average number of hours per week that they are on the road is twenty-four. There is wide variation in the frequency of stops both within one bookmobile schedule and among bookmobiles statewide. There is no average weekly cycle of stops for North Carolina bookmobiles. Four cycles seem equally popular: once a month, every four weeks, every three weeks, and a multi-cycle schedule containing a combination of weekly, biweekly, triweekly and monthly stops. (Dr. Bernard Vavrek reported at the second Annual Rural Bookmobile Conference in Columbus, Ohio, that the national average for number of hours per week on the road is twenty-eight, and that the average weekly cycle is every two weeks.)

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Among the survey respondents reporting, only three bookmobiles have evening stops. Three also have Saturday stops and only one, a rural bookmobile has both. Several respondents commented that adding early evening and/or Saturday stops would be a good idea. One stated that fifty per cent more of their circulation is between 4:00-5:30 p.m. North Carolina bookmobiles serve mainly rural citizens. Over sixty-six per cent of all stops are in rural areas. Seventeen per cent are in

small towns, and thirteen per cent are in urban or suburban areas.

Information on who serves as stop selectors and evaluators is clear. Over ninety per cent of the people who make these decisions work directly on the bookmobile. As stated earlier, they are called many different things, but as one veteran of thirty-eight years put it, "I'm the Bookmobile Librarian. I drive the truck." While almost thirty-seven per cent held the title Bookmobile Librarian, none of these had an M.L.S. Of bookmobilitists filling out this survey, one has an M.L.S., one has a different advanced degree, ten have college degrees, eighteen have some college or technical school, and seventeen have a high school education.

Perhaps more than formal education, "life on the road" provides the practical education needed for this job. Along with the many wonderful patrons that are met and served, there are the few problem patrons, plus many problem vehicles and generators, problems with weather, rods, bugs, etc. Things are rarely "normal." But there must be something special going on. The average length of service on a bookmobile is eleven years, and almost thirty-two per cent of the bookmobile librarians have served longer than fifteen years.

So how do these bookmobile librarians select their stops? Besides common sense and past experience, which eighty-six per cent say they use a great deal of the time, what are the other factors involved? While making the primary decisions themselves, forty-four per cent said that they receive important input from their library or regional director. Another forty-three per cent said that other library staff (children's and extension librarians, and other bookmobile staff) also have important input. Beyond this input and their own experience, what are the "tools" of stop selection?

Most, ninety per cent, do *not* use a formal survey to locate potential stops. Population and census tract maps have been used to some degree by twenty-seven per cent of the respondents. One used a mailbox questionnaire to solicit stops, with "fair results." One used an article in the local paper. Another had consulted the county tax office to get an idea of high growth areas. Political considerations were not felt to be important by the vast majority, while geographic considerations were.

If a bookmobile librarian were considering setting up a new stop, the people most likely to be contacted would be residents near the proposed stop. A list of people to contact concerning the locating of new stops suggested by the ALA

*Guidelines for Quality Bookmobile Service* did not result in any other significant group of potential stop locators. When asked how current stops were located, bookmobile librarians clearly indicated that almost half were located by individual patron request. (See Table I.)

TABLE I.  
Location of Stops

49%	Individual patron request
17%	Personal judgment of bookmobile librarian
10%	Institutional request, e.g., day care centers
9%	Organized neighborhood or community request
8%	Survey of potential location
2%	Request from community organizer or church official
2%	Library official
2%	Library staff, other than bookmobile staff
2%	Governmental official request

There seems to be only one concrete guideline that typical bookmobiles have for locating stops: the distance from the stationary libraries. Almost half of all bookmobiles have a specific minimum distance that should exist between a fixed library and the new stop. The average distance is 2.2 miles with the maximum distance being 5 miles and the minimum 1 mile. But fifty-four per cent of those who have specific distance requirements make exceptions, mainly for special populations like the handicapped, children, elderly, or the homebound.

### **. . . circulation is not the only or necessarily the best guide to evaluating service and stops.**

Is there more "science" to the "art" of stop evaluation than there is to that of stop selection? There have been some concrete guidelines offered for stop evaluation in the *ALA Standards of Quality for Bookmobile Service* (1963), *Bookmobiles and Bookmobile Service*, (1959) by Eleanor Frances Brown, and the *Manual of Suggestions and Procedures for North Carolina Bookmobile Service* (1965), but these are all fairly dated and may not be looked on as completely relevant today. While the *ALA Standards of Quality for Bookmobile Service* is the basic guideline for bookmobiles, only twenty-two per cent of North Carolina bookmobile librarians are familiar with it. Of those familiar with it, fifty-four per cent say they use it to some degree.

The above documents do suggest one measurable criterion for evaluation of stops, namely that of circulation. They suggest that the average rate of circulation at a stop should be 60-100

books per hour. When North Carolina bookmobiles were asked if they thought they circulated a book a minute (the minimum suggested by the ALA guidelines), the majority said that they do not, with only two per cent stating that they do at all of their stops. (See Table II.)

TABLE II.  
Meeting A.L.A. Guidelines

All stops	2%
Most stops	37%
Less than half of them	20%
Few stops	37%
No answer	4%

Many people had comments concerning this circulation rate. Several expressed their concern that you could not serve the elderly at this rate. Others said only schools would have that amount of circulation in a rural area. And one who seemed to express the sentiment of many said that with one person who was driving, checking books out and in, shelving, and helping to advise readers, it would be impossible to check out sixty books per hour. (At the Second Annual Rural Bookmobile Conference, there was informal talk about this circulation goal, and many felt it was unrealistic. An average standard of 30 books an hour was viewed as a more realistic number.)

Obviously, circulation is not the only or necessarily the best guide to evaluating service and stops. What other "output" measures do bookmobile librarians use? The number of people who use a stop is the criterion used by sixty-nine per cent of the stop evaluators. But only twenty-three per cent of these said they have a specific minimum number of patrons needed to maintain a stop. The average minimum number was about three patrons, with the range being from one person to five people. The majority which did not have a specific number said that they used a "rule of thumb," depending on the situation. The geographical isolation of a stop, political pressures, and patron dependability are all factors considered by bookmobile librarians in evaluating their stops.

Related to the number of patrons needed to maintain a stop is the question of service to a single family or the "home stop." While all the professional literature says a clear "no" to this form of service, it still seems to be an important part of North Carolina bookmobile service. Over seventy-seven per cent of all North Carolina bookmobiles make single family stops. Some of these stops are made on the way to community stops, and many indicated that the bookmobile is the only outreach vehicle available to reach invalid, disabled,

or elderly patrons. Two bookmobiles said that 95-100% of their stops are of the "house to house, door to door" variety.

Again, personal judgment and past experience play a major role in stop evaluation. Most, seventy-six per cent, use them a great deal of the time to evaluate their stops. Thus common sense is the major factor in stop evaluation. One bookmobile librarian said "we know when people are interested in books, and we maintain the stop as long as they're interested!"

The bookmobile librarians themselves seem to be the most important people in the selection and evaluation of bookmobile stops. While other library staff play a major supporting role, it is clear that the "people's librarians" have the weight of this responsibility. The most important source for locating stops that bookmobile librarians have is the requests of patrons who live near those stops.

One of the things that is made clear by this research is that the professional literature on bookmobile librarianship should better reflect the experiences of those who are working in the field. Much that has been written about standards and evaluation should be revised with input from the practicing bookmobile librarians. While the majority of bookmobile librarians are paraprofessionals, many have a great deal of on-the-job expertise, and are committed to giving their patrons excellent service.

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One area that needs further research with input from bookmobile librarians is the question of whether or not "home stops" mentioned above, are an efficient use of library resources, since this practice may be cheaper than sending a large number of books by mail.

Another area for research is the question of evening and Saturday stops. Many bookmobile librarians commented that they seem like a good idea. So why do so few bookmobiles have them? Does this reflect library policy, lack of staff, safety concerns, or just the traditional way of doing things? How can bookmobile librarians begin to move into this new service direction?

And what circulation goal is realistic for the

smaller, often single-staffed bookmobiles of the mid 1980's? Are there different circulation goals for urban and rural bookmobiles? What "output measures" could work to evaluate bookmobile stops? The questions could go on and on.

Many of the respondents indicated great enthusiasm for regular meetings of North Carolina bookmobile librarians. Such meetings could provide a structure through which bookmobiles can begin to formulate some guidelines for stop selection and evaluation. These guidelines would be designed by bookmobile librarians for real life situations and would reflect the wisdom and knowledge that this special breed of librarians has gained from their many years of on-the-job and on-the-road experience.

### A Survey of Bookmobile Stop Selection and Evaluation

#### Part I

*Remember, whoever is primarily responsible for the decisions of selection and evaluation of bookmobile stops should be the one filling out this survey! Thanks!*

1. What is your job title? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Besides yourself, who has important input into stop selection and evaluation? RANK by *number* in order of their importance, with number 1 being the most important. If not appropriate, mark n/a.
  - A. \_\_\_\_\_ Bookmobile librarian
  - B. \_\_\_\_\_ Other bookmobile staff (driver, clerks, etc.)
  - C. \_\_\_\_\_ Extension librarian, head of outreach, branch services head/department head
  - D. \_\_\_\_\_ Director of library
  - E. \_\_\_\_\_ Director of regional library system
  - F. \_\_\_\_\_ Library board or trustees
  - G. \_\_\_\_\_ Governmental officials
  - H. \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
3. Approximately how many books does your bookmobile carry? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is the approximate population of your service area? \_\_\_\_\_
5. How many square miles are in your service area? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Approximately how many hours per week are you on the road? \_\_\_\_\_
7. How often do you go to your stops?
  - A. \_\_\_\_\_ Every week
  - B. \_\_\_\_\_ Every two weeks
  - C. \_\_\_\_\_ Every three weeks
  - D. \_\_\_\_\_ Every four weeks
  - E. \_\_\_\_\_ Once a month (every 1st Monday, 3rd Friday, etc.)
  - G. \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
8. How many different places does your bookmobile go? \_\_\_\_\_ (i.e. different stops)
9. Approximately how many of your stops are
  - A. \_\_\_\_\_ Rural
  - B. \_\_\_\_\_ Small towns/small communities
  - C. \_\_\_\_\_ Suburban
  - D. \_\_\_\_\_ Urban
  - E. \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
10. How many of your stops are to institutions (day care centers, hospitals, rest homes, schools, prisons, etc.)? \_\_\_\_\_

11. How many of your stops are public, community, or neighborhood stops? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Do you have evening stops?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
13. Do you have Saturday stops?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

#### PART 2

##### Stop Selection

14. Do you make use of any formal, written survey before scheduling a potential stop? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, please enclose a sample.
15. Do you have an application form or process for stops at institutions and schools that would like your service?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, please enclose a sample.
16. Do you schedule all stops to be located a specific minimum distance from the main library and its branches? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, what is the distance \_\_\_\_\_  
If no, skip to question 18.
17. Do you make exceptions to that distance? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, what kinds of situations are the "exceptions to your rule"? Please use your "real" stops, not theoretical ones, and RANK by *number* in order beginning with 1 for the exception you use the most, 2 the next most, etc.
  - A. \_\_\_\_\_ Difficult traffic patterns
  - B. \_\_\_\_\_ Special population groups (elders, children, handicapped, etc.)
  - C. \_\_\_\_\_ To encourage nontraditional users (housing projects, etc.)
  - D. \_\_\_\_\_ To avoid difficult physical boundaries (rivers, lakes, mountains, etc.)
  - E. \_\_\_\_\_ Political reasons \_\_\_\_\_
  - F. \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
18. Do you use population maps or census tract maps in locating stops? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Comment if you wish \_\_\_\_\_
19. Is geographic distribution an important factor in locating stops? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
20. Are political considerations important factors in locating stops? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

21. If you would like to add a stop in an area, to whom would you be most likely to talk concerning the desirability and success of such a stop? RANK by *number* in order of their importance, with number 1 being the most important, 2 the next most important, etc. If not appropriate, mark n/a.

A. \_\_\_\_\_ Civic, community or church leaders  
B. \_\_\_\_\_ School bus drivers  
C. \_\_\_\_\_ Residents near the proposed stop  
D. \_\_\_\_\_ City/County/Regional Planning Authorities  
E. \_\_\_\_\_ Other library staff \_\_\_\_\_  
F. \_\_\_\_\_ Library Board or governing body  
G. \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

22. In originating a stop, how great a role does your personal judgment and past experience play in locating the stop? (For example, no one asked for it, but you think it would be a good one.)

A. \_\_\_\_\_ Use personal judgment/past experience a great deal  
B. \_\_\_\_\_ Use it some of the time  
C. \_\_\_\_\_ Use it rarely  
D. \_\_\_\_\_ Do not use it in originating stops  
E. \_\_\_\_\_ Comments? \_\_\_\_\_

23. Approximately what percent of your stops were located by

A. \_\_\_\_\_ Individual patron's request  
B. \_\_\_\_\_ Civic and/or governmental official's request  
C. \_\_\_\_\_ Survey of potential locations  
D. \_\_\_\_\_ Institution's request  
E. \_\_\_\_\_ Organized neighborhood or community request  
F. \_\_\_\_\_ Personal judgment/past experience of bookmobile stop selector  
G. \_\_\_\_\_ Library official (director, board member, etc.)  
H. \_\_\_\_\_ Community organizer or church official  
I. \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

### Part 3

#### Evaluation of stops

24. One of the few attempts to establish criteria by which bookmobile stops can be evaluated was in the ALA'S STANDARDS OF QUALITY FOR BOOKMOBILE SERVICE, published in 1963. Are you familiar with these standards? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, do you use them? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Comments? \_\_\_\_\_

25. It has been suggested by ALA that the average rate of books checked out per hour should be 60-100. Using a book a minute as the minimum rate, how many of your stops meet this standard?

A. \_\_\_\_\_ All of them  
B. \_\_\_\_\_ Most of them  
C. \_\_\_\_\_ Less than half of them  
D. \_\_\_\_\_ Few of them  
Comments? \_\_\_\_\_

26. Do you evaluate your stops by the number of patrons served?

A. \_\_\_\_\_ Yes, regularly  
B. \_\_\_\_\_ Yes, occasionally  
C. \_\_\_\_\_ Yes, seldom  
D. \_\_\_\_\_ No (If no, skip to 28)

27. Describe the numerical standards you use to evaluate your stops:

A. \_\_\_\_\_ Minimum number of patrons per stop. What is that minimum number? \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_ A rough "rule of thumb" depending on situation  
C. \_\_\_\_\_ Comments? \_\_\_\_\_

28. Do you have home stops that serve a single family?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

29. How long do you allow for a new stop to work out before dropping it?

A. \_\_\_\_\_ 3 months  
B. \_\_\_\_\_ 6 months  
C. \_\_\_\_\_ 9 months  
D. \_\_\_\_\_ 12 months  
E. \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

30. How great a role does your personal judgment and past experience play in evaluating stops?

A. \_\_\_\_\_ Use it a great deal  
B. \_\_\_\_\_ Use it some of the time  
C. \_\_\_\_\_ Use it rarely  
D. \_\_\_\_\_ Do not use it  
E. \_\_\_\_\_ Comments? \_\_\_\_\_

31. How often do you revise or change your printed bookmobile schedule?

A. \_\_\_\_\_ Once a month  
B. \_\_\_\_\_ Every 6 months  
C. \_\_\_\_\_ Every 9 months  
D. \_\_\_\_\_ Every year  
E. \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

32. Have you ever seen the N.C. State Library's SELF-STUDY OF BOOKMOBILE SERVICE(1959)? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, do you use it? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

33. Do you use ALA's A PLANNING PROCESS FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES (1980) in the selection and evaluation of stops? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Not familiar with it \_\_\_\_\_ Comments? \_\_\_\_\_

34. Do you use ALA's OUTPUT MEASURES FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES (1982)?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Not familiar with it \_\_\_\_\_

35. Does your library use any other type of evaluation for its bookmobile service? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, please enclose a copy or brief description.

### Part 4

#### Personal information

36. What is your formal educational level?

A. \_\_\_\_\_ MLS professional  
B. \_\_\_\_\_ Other advanced degree  
C. \_\_\_\_\_ BS/BA college degree  
D. \_\_\_\_\_ Technical school/community college degree  
E. \_\_\_\_\_ Some college or technical school  
F. \_\_\_\_\_ High school diploma or GED  
G. \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

37. How many years have you worked on a bookmobile? \_\_\_\_\_

Any comments you would like to make would be very welcome. Use the back of the survey.

Thanks! Thanks! Thanks! Thanks! Thanks! Thanks!

# National Library Week, April 5-11