
How Should We Train Adult Services Professionals for Public Library Work?

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One good way to determine what we should be teaching our public library professionals is to ask practitioners, preferably directors who know the problems their employees face and the strengths and limitations of their training. In 1986, the Library Research Center of the University of Illinois indirectly did this when it polled directors of fifty outstanding U.S. public libraries about their current major problems and expected future problems, trends, and goals. These libraries were chosen from a pool of two hundred recommended by state library agencies as being exceptional in their public services and in their general administration. From these two hundred, the fifty libraries were chosen with the highest average per capita circulation and per capita operating expenditures.¹

Responses of the directors of these libraries and a review of the literature on educating public librarians suggest that future education should concentrate on three major curriculum areas: community analysis as a tool to focus services; patron guidance as a tool to focus selection and make use easier; and materials exposure as a tool to increase student familiarity with information sources, authors, and genres.

Community Analysis: A Tool to Help Focus Library Services

Kenneth D. Shearer, professor at the School of Library and Information Science at North Carolina Central University, says that ideally both present and future education should teach public services librarians to make rational decisions about how to allocate scarce library resources in a way which reflects a commitment to community services and knowledge of the major roles a public library can play.²

At least three major objectives are reflected in this statement. The first recognizes that during the last two decades public libraries have been

competing for funds which are ever more limited. The directors in the outstanding public libraries would certainly agree. Forty-eight percent said getting enough money for current operations was a major problem for their libraries now.³ Moreover, the directors do not view the future economic climate for public libraries with optimism. Within the next five years, thirty-three percent of the directors predict a stagnant local economy and declining local tax support, twenty-seven percent expect declining state and/or federal fundings, and twenty-nine percent anticipate pressure to develop alternative sources of funding.⁴ Lowell Martin, a nationally-known public library consultant, says this means that public libraries must stop trying to be all things to all people, but should rather make hard choices about which services should be provided.⁵ As an important first step, library schools should force students to consider these issues, either by examining actual public library settings or working with simulation studies.

The second objective follows from the first. Given limited resources, budding public librarians should be committed to providing the type of service the community needs. This commitment is generally shown in the field by conducting some form of a comprehensive community analysis to determine what the information needs of the community are, monitor what community resources are available to meet such needs, and see if any environmental or population characteristics encourage or inhibit delivery of library services.⁶ Future adult services professionals should understand and be able to carry out such analyses, using tools developed both within and outside of the profession—from census data to the forthcoming *A Planning and Roles Setting Manual for Public Libraries*.⁷

The third objective is that students should know about the role(s) the public library should play in meeting these needs. Thus, future librarians should be able to tell how they would decide on the role(s) their own public libraries should play, and to name and describe major means of

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delivering such services. These means include, but are not limited to, distribution methods (e.g., the headquarters library, kiosk, depository collections) and distinct services and/or programs currently offered to adult users of public libraries (e.g., literacy programs). Finally, students should be taught how to plan the implementation of such services.

In addition, future education should provide information on evaluating these services, a necessary step in measuring their effectiveness and in working toward improving them. Thirty-eight percent of the directors of the outstanding public libraries said measuring the library's performance was currently a major problem for their library.⁸ This implies that current public library professionals are not adequately trained in evaluation, and that library schools need to focus on this more.

User Guidance: A Tool to Focus Selection and Make Use Easier

A second area which should be emphasized in future education for public service professionals is in-depth instruction in helping the adult library patron choose and use materials. Again, this trend is seen as a natural one which closely relates to what library schools should be teaching. User guidance is actually related closely to the concept of information overload. This type of overload occurs when a person's capacity for processing information is exceeded; the strain of handling too much data interferes with the individual's decision-making process. Library patrons are particularly susceptible to the effects of information overload since they are expected to make selection decisions from among the hundreds or thousands of items available for their use.

To overcome this, Lester Asheim has suggested that librarians should act as a filter, screening out irrelevant materials and helping patrons focus their attention on a smaller, more-easily-assimilated group of items.⁹ This should result in less user confusion and frustration, and ultimately, in greater overall use. Thus, library schools should be promoting techniques designed to help users select those materials which will best suit their needs—be they for information, education, or recreation. The directors of outstanding public libraries reflect this need, noting that major emphases or goals for the next five years are to provide improved reference services (particularly improved services using new technology), and aids to make browsing easier.¹⁰

Future education for adult services professionals should therefore work to increase the stu-

dents' understanding of how the typical adult chooses and responds to information. It should also expose students to techniques to guide both individuals and groups of users to relevant materials.

Specific topics which might be emphasized include: the role of information in the lives of adults, the differences between information habits and characteristics of specific groups (e.g., the highly versus the poorly educated), both individual- and mass-guidance techniques to focus adult selection, and adult use of new information formats (e.g., the CD-ROM).

Materials Exposure: A Tool to Increase Student Familiarity with Information Sources, Authors, and Genres

Education for public services librarians should also emphasize the actual materials: not just books but other formats which are currently and will be used by adult patrons in the future. Students should read and view a large sample of the actual materials, in an effort to increase familiarity with specific information sources, authors and types of works.

Obviously, two primary job duties of many public services librarians will continue to be the initial selection of materials and the later evaluation of their use. Materials exposure can provide the basis for discussing these issues and others likely to be even more important in the future. For example, two issues likely to be important in the next few decades are censorship and the century-old, but still relevant, debate about quality and demand selection.

Overall Impressions of the Library Schools' Current Treatment of Adult Materials and Services

A review of the course syllabi and conversations with those educators in North Carolina who teach in the area of adult services suggests that they have generally identified, and are conscientiously trying to communicate information which they feel will be of value to prospective public librarians about adult materials and services. Current course reading lists are for the most part recent and relevant, course goals and objectives are clear, and assignments are designed to be varied and interesting.

However, several problems were noted. Although coursework in each of these areas is offered at four of the five library schools in North Carolina, generally future adult services librarians are not required to take classes emphasizing

all three areas. Thus, students may leave library school lacking some necessary knowledge.

Second, no studies have been done, either within the state or nationally, to test how well students are learning the materials. In view of nationally-documented trends in graduate programs of lowering admissions standards and yielding to grade inflation, student grades do not always appear to be an accurate indicator of the actual learning which has occurred.

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Third, no studies have been conducted to show whether students are able to translate classroom information into good professional practice. Personal conversations with library directors around the state suggest that students graduating from the state's library schools are not always able to accomplish this effectively.

Finally, few efforts have been made to move beyond looking at the curriculum into considering factors relating to the individual students themselves. Peter Neenan, in a short but insightful article, says that any effective training program for adult services professionals must "develop in learners a flair for creativity of vision and approach, a sophistication in coordination of

program resources, and the wisdom to judge the effectiveness of program outcomes and impacts."¹¹ These character traits, and others such as receptivity to ideas and a general commitment to service, Neenan says, can at best only be enhanced by good graduate programs. Thus, "recruitment, selection and encouragement of candidates with these characteristics is critically necessary."¹²

Clearly further study is needed if we are to provide top-notch professionals to meet the needs of adults using the public library of the future. Such studies should be done cooperatively, with both library school professors and practicing librarians contributing advice and aid in identifying ways to overcome obstacles to a thorough, truly professional, education.

References

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2. Kenneth D. Shearer, "The Public Library," (syllabus for course taught during Fall, 1986 at North Carolina Central University's School of Library and Information Science), p. 1.
3. Goldhor, p. 4.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
5. Lowell Martin, "The Public Library: Middle-Age Crisis or Old Age," *Library Journal* 108 (1 January 1983): 17-22.
6. Vernon E. Palmour, Marcia C. Bellassai, and Nancy V. De Wath, *A Planning Process for Public Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1980), p. 8.
7. This is the revised version of *A Planning Process for Public Libraries*, which is planned for release in the summer of 1987.
8. Goldhor, p. 4.
9. Lester Asheim, "Ortega Revisited," *Library Quarterly* 52 (November 1982): 218.
10. Goldhor, p. 5.
11. Peter A. Neenan, "Adult Services: The Educational Dimension," *RQ* 27 (Winter 1986): 154.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 154-55.



School Library Media Week was celebrated throughout North Carolina, April 6-10, 1987. Here we see Annette Cameron, media coordinator at



Adams Primary School in Wilson, as she organized a school-wide study of Japan to carry out thematically the week-long celebration.