

A Statement of Opinion:

A Response to
“The Educational Role and Services of
Public Libraries in Indiana:
A Study Conducted by
Dr. Shirley Fitzgibbons and Dr. Verna Pungitore”

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While the relationship between public libraries and state humanities councils might, at first glance, appear to be an alliance made if not in heaven then certainly in the stacks, the report, “The Educational Role and Services of Public Libraries in Indiana” indicates the underlying reasons why this bonding is often problematic.

This report, prepared by Dr. Shirley Fitzgibbons and Dr. Verna Pungitore of the School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University, was prompted by an inquiry by Ray Ewick, Director of the State Library. As its title suggests, the report is a survey of public libraries that seeks to assess the types and levels of educational programming and services being provided by Indiana’s public libraries. While not aimed specifically at the concerns of humanities professionals, the report does provide significant information about how librarians perceive themselves and their institutional mission; it provides insight into attitudes and practices currently affecting how librarians and humanities professionals — in this case, the Indiana Humanities Council — relate to one another.

Before venturing into the information provided by the report, some

background on the nature of humanities council/public library relations is helpful. To begin with, an essential role of the state humanities council is to encourage public programming, primarily for adults, dealing with those issues and ideas germane to what are called the humanities — bodies of knowledge and ways of understanding that reflect life experiences, attempt to understand them and judge their value. This encouragement is provided through grants that can support a wide variety of public programming: lectures, seminars, performances, film showings, exhibits, book discussions, etc.

In libraries one finds the fruits of humanistic endeavor. Books and assorted other texts are collected, as are forms of human expression in any array of other media. This is literally the stuff of the humanities, the core around which humanities programming and inquiry can grow and thrive. It is natural that public humanities activities should turn to public libraries as the logical bases from which their work might proceed. From a humanities point of view, the public library is actually a humanities center— and there is one in virtually every town in the United States. The

potential for a mutually enlivening partnership seems obvious.

No wonder then that humanities professionals have often been bewildered by the arm's length reception they have sometimes encountered in their dealings with their public library counterparts. Humanists wonder why there aren't more grants being generated by public libraries, why there isn't a greater demand for packaged programming, why, in general, there isn't more embracing. A sensitive lot, humanists are tempted to take such coolness personally. What the humanists don't realize is that they are bumping up against a deep confusion, not of personalities, but in the library profession itself. The fact is that there is little agreement in the profession about the role and place of public programming in the larger context of library service. Indeed, there is plenty of confusion regarding library service itself, a point that is underscored by "The Educational Role and Services of Public Libraries in Indiana" report. Although the virtues of public programming seem self-evident to humanities professionals there is a spectrum of opinion among libraries, ranging from those that readily recognize its importance and viability through a broad band that see programming primarily as effective PR to those that are plainly against it.

But let us get back to the Fitzgibbons-Pungitore report. In the section, "Educational Services and Programming for Adults", the authors put the disjunction between librarians' intentions and actions in a nutshell: "Most major studies of the public library since the 1940s show that the adult patron represents almost 75 percent of the users. They have also shown that the adult user prefers to read light fiction rather than to seek information or to further formal or informal educational needs. Yet may public libraries have emphasized information

services in recent years."

Anyone familiar with library literature will attest to the overwhelming attention, some might suggest obsession, that has been directed to librarianship as information science. Look again at the name of the school that Fitzgibbons and Pungitore represent. Why librarians insist on information when the public is interested in recreation — and recreational reading at that — is a question for another time. The point here is that the public's agenda and librarians' priorities appear to be at cross purposes with one another and that humanities programs are caught in the middle.

In the section of the report entitled, "Purposes of the Public Library," the authors ask respondents to rank the importance of four major library roles: educational, informational, recreational and cultural. The authors admit what reflection makes clear, these are terms that lend themselves to overlap; certainly a program featuring a novelist reading her latest book about events in Central American might be classed in all four categories. However, the use of these terms is still interesting in what librarians' usage reveals about how they see themselves and their intentions.

The authors asked librarians to rank the importance of the four roles. 68% of the libraries indicated informational; 59% educational; 47% recreational; and 17% cultural as "extremely important." Quoting from the study: "It is evident that Indiana Public Libraries consider these top three purposes to be almost equally important. Virtually none of the libraries indicated any of the four purposes to be not important; and only the cultural purpose was considered to be 'somewhat important' by approximately 20% of the libraries." Rankings changed when librarians were asked to rank these purposes in terms

of how library resources were used. Information remained on top (42%) but recreation took second and education was third. "Less than 2% of the libraries ranked the cultural purpose as most important, while 76% of them ranked it as least important." The rankings changed again when the librarians were challenged to rank purposes based on their perceptions of patrons' use. 60% thought patrons considered recreation their most important service. 90% believed that patrons thought their cultural function was "least important."

Faced with this data, one is forced to pause and wonder: isn't it curious that library professionals, charged with the administration of publicly funded institutions aimed at "the enlightenment of the people and on the vitality of their social and cultural ideals (American Library Association: Post-War Standards for Public Libraries)" place such a decided lack of emphasis, when faced with the word, on their *cultural* role? Here is another potential source of disconnection between professional librarians and professional humanists; for, from a humanities standpoint, what else is the public library if not a cultural institution, particularly if we are to regard ourselves as living in a pluralistic democracy. Given librarians' de-emphasis on their cultural role and the disjunction between their perceptions about what they should be doing and what their patrons actually want, it is no wonder that there is such a lack of consensus in the library community about the role and importance of adult programming in library service. Once again, the Fitzgibbons-Pungitore study is revealing for those of us who have pondered this situation.

If librarians are cool to the idea of public humanities programming it is not because these programs are unsuccessful when given a chance.

Just 15% of public libraries responded that they offered culture/humanities programs, but the total attendance for these programs was 15,465. This figure can be compared to the most common form of library programming, the personal financial seminar, a solid information-related program type. 22% of libraries offered these, a total of 360 programs with an estimated attendance of 5,922 — roughly a third of the attendance drawn by the 398 humanities programs that were held during the same time period. Although only 10% of Indiana libraries held Let's Talk About It programs — 172 programs in all — these presentations drew an estimated 3,660 participants. In the area of local history, 17% of Indiana libraries offered 268 programs with an estimated total attendance of 130,995 and, finally, libraries offered a total of 703 film programs with an estimated total attendance of 20,902.

The Fitzgibbons-Pungitore reports seeks to make a case for Indiana Public Libraries as educational institutions and it does a respectable job. The implications of the report are broader than this, however. A humanities-oriented reading suggests that librarians, seeking short-term professional credibility as information managers in a so-called 'information age' and political clout as educators during a period of crisis and re-evaluation in public education, may be allowing rhetorical distinctions to dictate action and needlessly narrowing their role which, it can be argued, is to enliven and enlighten the cultural life of the communities which they serve. The risk in this narrowing is that librarians, as they seek to enhance their relevance, may inadvertently be distancing themselves from their patrons and undermining the goals of increased credibility and funding that they are striving for. The splendid record of humanities

programming in public libraries indicates that the broad view is a constructive one; that the public is

ready to be engaged if the effort is made.

A Response to David Hoppe by Verna Pungitore Indiana University SLIS

We appreciate Mr. Hoppe's thoughtful comments regarding the report and are pleased that he has shared with the readers of *Indiana Libraries* his "humanities" perspective on the issue of the public library's role in the life of the community.

There is little to disagree with in his letter. Libraries do indeed collect and provide access to the "fruits of human endeavor." Instituting and strengthening cooperative ventures between humanities professionals and public librarians can only enhance the cultural life of our communities and should certainly be encouraged.

Often it is the librarian in the smaller community who seeks to form such partnerships, realizing that the public's access to local sources of cultural, artistic, or humanities programming is limited. In larger communities, however, there are many competing agencies that provide such access on a regular basis. Librarians in some of these communities apparently believe that they should identify for their institutions a purpose that is uniquely theirs. Hence the emphasis given by librarians to the provision of "equal access to information," or to the provision of self-paced alternatives to formal education.

As the report indicated, one of the difficulties encountered in attempting to measure the extent to which public libraries assume an educational role is that of determining the boundaries of the term "education." Many informational, cultural, and recreational activities and services are also educational. Certainly, a distinction between educational and cultural (humanities) programming can easily become an artificial or purely semantic difference. The perceptions expressed by public librarians of the importance of each role were necessarily dependent upon the way they individually defined role boundaries.

Perhaps librarians are so accustomed to thinking of the library's "cultural" purpose (in terms of the library's contribution to the betterment of society) as a given component of all the library's services, that they tend not to recognize that particular role as one that is separate and distinct. By maintaining a dialogue with humanities professionals such as Mr. Hoppe, maybe we can increase our awareness of the importance of public libraries to the cultural lives of individual communities.