

Public Libraries and Audio Visual Services: Case History of Allen County Public Library

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Introducing new services in a single department can be exhilarating, but to simultaneously introduce a totally new concept while extensively revising an existing one is a tremendous undertaking both for staff and patrons. Such revision is currently happening at the Allen County Public Library. The Fort Wayne Telecommunication Center, the public access outlet for Fort Wayne and the surrounding area as well as the in-house production unit for the Allen County Public Library, began operations January, 1981. The facility consists of state-of-the-art color equipment, studio and control room. Manned by a professional staff, it offers patrons maximum opportunity for program development and presentation.

As an access center, it provides many new services to the community. The most visible of these services is the cablecasting of locally originated programs which can be recorded on one-half inch and three-fourths inch formats. Programming is currently run from 5-9 p.m. Monday through Friday, but community interest and involvement has been so great that this schedule will soon be expanded to six hours a day seven days a week. An additional service beginning this fall is call-in programming. Phone requests for replays of programs will be taken during a two hour period each day.

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At times when regular programming is not presented, a data-caster is used to display public service announcements for the community. Access to all of these services is free to the public and requires only an application. Although some community members provide programming which has been produced in their own facility, many choose to produce at the center itself. In-house productions cover a wide variety of content, mode of presentation, and funding. The premiere cablecast on January 9, 1981 was with "Theatre for Ideas," a group funded by the Indiana Committee for the Humanities and Fort Wayne Cablevision. Other of our programs, such as "Latino Video," a presentation aimed at the Spanish-American population, have similar funding on a smaller scale. Matching funds for programming are provided by cablevision and are channeled through a grass-roots organization known as the Citizens Council for Program Development. Any interested producer can submit a proposal to the group and, upon acceptance, receive funds on a matching basis. However, it is not necessary to obtain funding in order to gain access to the telecommunication facility. Indeed, most of the productions are by individuals who have an interest and an idea, but who have very little working capital. Since studio time is free, the only cost the user normally incurs is the cost of the personal copy of the tape. Original recordings are on library stock, with dubs made at cost for the producer. Once a program has been produced for viewing, the producer retains legal responsibility for the content.

Not all users in the center are producers; many are volunteer crew members who have completed training sessions conducted at the studio. Instruction for volunteers includes training to use the studio camera, the portapak, to produce and to operate the control room. Throughout the training patrons are given total freedom of choice concerning their level of involvement. They can choose a role behind the camera or in front of it, but, whatever the choice, they can feel a part of the community commitment.

To gain access to the facility a producer must fill out an application form, reserve an appropriate amount of time for production, attend a preproduction meeting with the center's staff and make the necessary arrangements for the production crew. Producers must obtain all talent releases, copyright waivers, and certified volunteers to serve as crew for the production. Names of people who have completed designated workshops and who wish to work on crews are kept at the center.

The studio is appropriate for small, intimate productions, while the adjoining auditorium can be used for an extensive production. Many interesting productions such as a series for the deaf, a health series, and cultural presentations, have developed from volunteer efforts. The variety is endless; and each production is unique. All

productions are retained by the library for a period of one year. If they are of possible historic value to the community, they are permanently retained on a master tape and stored in Art, Music and Audio Visual Services. Nearly all tapes are briefly listed in a catalog in Art, Music and Audio Visual Services for patron use. If patrons wish to view past productions, they request that a copy be made on either VHS or BETA format. In this way, programs of general public interest are duplicated and expensive staff time and material are not consumed in the dubbing process.

While the Telecommunication Center was a totally new concept, the art, music and audio visual services evolved from a major revision of three long standing services. Prior to February, 1981 the departments of genealogy, art and music, and films and recordings all shared crowded space on the second floor of the Allen County Public Library. These departments were so compressed that many of the services could not be developed. When Allen County Public Library's new addition opened in January 1981, genealogy had new quarters, and plans immediately began for creating a new environment for the arts services. New policies were established to give the patron greater flexibility, the collection was made more accessible to the public, and quantity limitations eliminated for all materials other than film, videocassettes and equipment.

Two independent departments merged, creating art, music and audio visual services. This department is committed to the development of media; reference services and more than 14,000 books and magazines were absorbed elsewhere. Architect Jim Jankowski and Director Rick Ashton created a physical plan devoid of visual barriers and thus produced an open atmosphere. The floor plan established three galleries for the framed print collection with one gallery available for visiting exhibits and patron activities. A service area in the center of the building, two patron lounges and six preview rooms were also created. The preview rooms have the capacity to serve as listening rooms for records and cassettes, video and 16mm film preview rooms, and workrooms for patrons using the overhead and opaque projectors. Between the preview rooms, an area will be established with lounge chairs and listening centers so patrons can congregate informally to hear their favorite recordings via headphones. Browsing will be promoted, and bins will house the most recent recordings added to the collection as well as the newly begun multi-media collection.

In May the library began lending videocassettes of recent and popular feature films to the public; this service has been a phenomenal success. VHS cassettes and the machinery necessary for playback are available to library patrons for three day loan periods. The five playback units are now constantly shuttled in and out of the library and the bookings are closed out well in advance on our two

month booking cycle. Overhead, 16mm, 8mm, slide, filmstrip and opaque projectors are also made available to the public.

Other services offered to the public include a loan collection of 132,000 mounted pictures, mounted art, and 2,800 framed prints. The collection also holds more than 6,000 pieces of sheet music ranging from classical to rock and a collection of 1,700 8mm films. A fine arts slide collection together with a travel slide collection are currently being prepared.

Since the booking of more than 450 items manually is a difficult process the department is currently investigating computerized systems. This will give the department greater inventory control, enable the staff to access and maintain patron information, generate receipts for material transactions, and immediately have various statistical evaluations available. Once computer capacity is available in the department, it is possible that the installation of computer entertainments will become the department's next growth item. While Allen County Public Library awaits the computer, investigation of possible other video games and of the movement into the video-disc field continues. Thus, the art, music and audio visual services of Allen County Public Library plans to grow and to change in order to meet the needs of our patrons.