

Public Library Planning and Library School Students

Arthur S. Meyers
Library Director
Muncie Public Library

Between planning as one of the most important tasks of a library administrator and the reality of daily problems and time constraints lies the potential of library school student field work. While the good texts place orderly planning for the future at a very high level in administrative responsibilities, small and large needs of management arise each day and essentially offset the ideal. The wise administrator takes advantage of any opportunity to gain the ideal and, for the Muncie Public Library, several projects completed by students from Ball State University's Department of Library Science have proven helpful. The field work of these students has enabled us to gain some useful data and provided guidance for the future. For the students, the gain has been first-hand exposure to the realities of actual library work, from time constraints to budget restrictions to personnel problems.

Muncie Public has been fortunate in having Ball State's library science students for their practicum experience for a number of years, most frequently assisting at the busy Information Desk in the Main Library Adult Department but also assisting children's librarians in their range of activities. Beginning in 1981, a new possibility for assistance from the students arose, and that was in the area of community analysis.

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As is true with so many "new" directions in human service fields, community analysis is not a new topic. Sixty years ago, Joseph Wheeler described successful practices in serving the community in his landmark, *The Library and the Community: Increased Book Service Through Library Publicity Based on Community Studies* (1924). Twenty years later, the Library Institute at the University of Chicago was devoted to the topic, and the papers presented were published as *The Library in the Community* (1944).

And as a result of the general societal revolution of the 1960s, along with innovative responses of public libraries, it was inevitable that the 1970s would bring a fresh approach to library service. The January 1976 issue of *Library Trends* was "Community Analysis and Libraries" and every study dissecting the urban public library in the 1960s and 1970s stressed the need to relate to the individual community. Crystalizing these changes were *A Mission Statement for Public Libraries* and *Guidelines for Community Library Service* from the Public Library Association, completed in 1977-78. Rigid numerical standards of service were set aside as the individual community's needs became the focus. The culmination of these efforts was *A Planning Process for Public Libraries* (1980) and, most recently, *Output Measures for Public Libraries* (1982).

During the 1970s, Roger Greer began a series of workshops in which librarians learned "a systematic process of collection, organization, and analysis of data about a library and its community." The studies of individual libraries by participants in Greer's workshops were entered into ERIC and thus made accessible to the profession, rather than being lost in the individual library's files.

In September 1980, several Muncie Public staff members attended the Indiana Community Analysis Institute, sponsored jointly by the Department of Library Science, Indiana State University, and the Indiana State Library. The two-day workshop was conducted by Greer and Martha Hale, both with the Community Analysis Research Institute at the University of Southern California. Participants from public libraries around the state learned about the subject, just as hundreds of other librarians in other states had attended their earlier institutes. We learned the whys and hows of community analysis and came away with the hope of bringing this important direction to our home libraries.

The Indiana Community Analysis Project, coordinated by Dr. Choong Kim of the Department of Library Science of Indiana State University, became the state's LSCA-funded thrust to help libraries

plan for the future, based on the needs of the individual community. The Institute was the first step in introducing the idea and method of community analysis to Indiana public librarians and trustees, and was thus part of the larger national movement gaining the attention of public librarians.

The next objective was a demonstration project following the Institute, involving a number of public libraries in the state. Each would experiment with community data definition, collection, analysis, and interpretation or use, and demonstrate the practical value of the process locally as well as collectively statewide.

The final objective was to compile a community analysis handbook of the results—a description of the demonstration projects and a summary of data analysis and correlation, including information needs profiles and reading interests. Although funding did not continue for the handbook, a number of the demonstration libraries completed community analysis projects.¹

As one of the demonstration libraries, Muncie Public wanted to look at several aspects of service. While long-time staff members had a clear idea of *who* they served with *what* materials, I felt a need, as the newly-appointed Director, to examine some of our current services for new information, with a special emphasis on any shortcomings and on the public not using the Library. We identified specific needs in different agencies that could profit from an in-depth examination. But gathering the information would be a slow process if it were placed on people already feeling burdened from daily responsibilities.

It was at this point that Ball State's Department of Library Science asked me to lead a seminar in the Spring of 1981 on public library services, with special emphasis on community analysis. The invitation to teach the course became a golden opportunity to study our Library.

The goal of the course was to provide students an opportunity to investigate the current and continuing role of community analysis in public librarianship. Upon completion of the seminar, each student would hopefully demonstrate an understanding of community analysis in general, the Muncie community and the role of the library as a community agency. They would investigate in depth a major area of community analysis, examine and report to the class on other areas, and become involved in a community analysis project in the Muncie Public Library.

But before the students could begin an examination of the Library, it was necessary for them to have a clear understanding of community analysis in general. We used the Greer definition and

readings from the *Library Trends* issue to lay the foundation. Student reports on the various readings brought home the theory and practice. We also reviewed Muncie Public's plans as a result of our participation in the demonstration project. And we arranged for the students to take field trips to community meetings that would provide the eight students (who were mostly from other cities) an understanding of some of Muncie's community problems and the way the Library was seeking to become part of the solution. Thus, the class attended meetings of the Advocates for Handicapped Rights and the Citizens Advisory Council, the latter an organization of representatives of neighborhood associations that advises on the city's Community Development Block Grant.

After the first few class sessions, the students began to identify particular projects they were interested in. In each instance, we attempted to structure the project so it would have a practical tie-in to either the student's current job or personal area of interest.

As one of the Library's special concerns was learning more about the use of the Main Library, two of the students developed a walk-in user survey. Prior to this project, the Library staff members who attended the Greer workshop had been formed into a planning committee. We drove through the neighborhoods close to the Main Library to gather impressions and information. The number of items checked out and used in the building was charted on a weekly basis, using the standard format that Kim, as the demonstration project coordinator, had provided us during a visit to Muncie and in other communication. A door count of patrons entering the building also was conducted to assist Library staff members in gaining a fuller picture of the actual usage of the building.

In conjunction with the door count, patrons had the opportunity to place a dot at the location of their homes on a map near the front entrance. The purpose was to show graphically where the Main Library patrons came from. And it was revealing to see the picture of a Library that was being used by all sections of the city, despite a pattern of convenient neighborhood branches and book-mobile service.

One portion of the community analysis could not be easily done by the staff because of time constraints, and that was a walk-in user survey, determining the various people who used the building and comparing the types of material that circulated with what was actually owned. For this more time-consuming gathering of data and analysis, the library science students would prove invaluable.

Armed with material from Kim and Greer, two of the students developed and implemented a walk-in user survey for the Main Library for a two-week period. Besides providing a demographic profile of the users, the survey revealed a pattern of weekly visits to the building by a significant proportion of the users. A key reason for the use was the wide selection of materials, which were not available in our neighborhood outlets. The patrons came to the Main Library to use newspaper microfilm, clipping and picture files, telephone directories, and the diversified reference collection. The single most compelling reason for the visit was to meet a specific information need.

The majority of persons who answered the questionnaire expressed satisfaction with the quality of staff services and collection of materials. A separate study of the questionnaire answered by evening patrons resulted in findings similar to those noted above.

Two other students analyzed circulation and shelf list data from the Children's Room in the Main Library. The most important finding here was the age of the collection, with more than 90 percent of the titles copyrighted before 1977. This finding served as an incentive to update the Dewey classes which were especially old. On the positive side, three-quarters of all the Children's Room books had circulated within the past five years, which showed it was an active, wisely-selected collection.

Another student project was an examination of the possibility of Sunday hours at the busy John F. Kennedy Branch Library. After a literature search and the compiling of an annotated bibliography, the student surveyed eighteen large and medium-sized libraries in the state to gain information on their experience with Sunday service. Where a library had Sunday hours, the service was well-used, but where a library did not have Sunday hours, the lack of money was always mentioned as a major reason. An interview with the Kennedy Branch Librarian and an examination of the staffing costs for service and the utility costs that would be incurred resulted in the student's recommendation that extended service not be started at the present time. The student also suggested that at some future date a survey of the users of the branch should be taken to learn their desires. We had no plans to raise the public's expectations until there was a real possibility we could provide the service.

The next project was map overlays and graphs based on data already collected on Main Library use. Population density and age and housing density were plotted out and projected. School locations

and district boundaries were shown in relation to service outlets. Once again, the value to the Library was to view up close the city demographically and where services might improve or be affected in the years ahead. The students were aided in this project by several resource people from community agencies, showing again the inter-relationships of a public library with total community planning.

The final project from the seminar was an examination of signage in the Main Library. Once we accept the architectural limitations of an eighty-year-old Carnegie building, the question of library signage is very important. And the profession is recognizing this important service factor with several recent writings in both books and articles.

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With the conclusion of the course, it was essential to ask for student evaluation. Most of the students felt they could begin a community analysis in their own public library, with one noting she "would definitely want help from the staff since it is a rather large undertaking and also because it is something they should be involved with." Another wished "each of us could have dealt with our own library situation. It would have been more useful to me and the library where I am now employed."

Most students answered in the positive when asked if the course enhanced their understanding of Muncie and the role of the Library in the community. While one student thought "from listening to the other reports I gained a better understanding of community analysis as it applies to Muncie," another wrote "I wasn't too interested in Muncie's public-only took the course because I thought it might help in relating to my library." All of the students expressed good ideas on how the course could have been better-taught and how the Muncie Public Library could respond better to community needs, while at the same time recognizing the realities of an old building and financial constraints.

Careful planning of any public service requires time and commitment of people. Public libraries have an important ally in departments of library science and elsewhere in the academic community through field work by students. The wise administrator takes advantage of such resources.

Note

¹ For example, Choong H. Kim, "The Indiana Community Analysis Project at the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library: A Prototype Model" (Terre Haute: Indiana State University, 1982).