



## Library Services to Adult Education in the Smaller Community

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THERE ARE THOSE who say that the public library in the United States takes itself too seriously. It tries to be all things to all people with the result that many of its functions are performed without adequate support either in terms of skilled staff or finances. A friend of the writer's once reported that the public library is relatively unimportant in the lives of most of the people in a given city. In terms of public support, perhaps the friend is not altogether incorrect. Although operating expenses of public libraries went from \$48,823,000 in 1939 to \$109,777,000 in 1950, the per capita expenditures in 1947-49 only went from 92 cents to \$1.04.<sup>1</sup> This fails to approach standards set by the profession and in terms of the total library picture the public in effect says, "the library be damned."

The public library movement, despite oratory to the contrary, was not a spontaneous desire of the people. Philanthropy played an important part in the development of library service in this country.<sup>2</sup> For example, the good men of Boston had their Atheneum and could have made out quite well with the facilities at hand, but they gave time, energy, and money for public library service. It was these men and the generation preceding them which gave America its educational commitment. When the Public Library Inquiry startled librarians by its sociological dissection it worked from a major premise that most of the librarians believed in the general proposition that everyone had a right to an opportunity to learn.<sup>3</sup> Citizens of today are the inheritors of the sober eighteenth and nineteenth century traditions whereby a book was a thing to be held in awe and that the world was a recognizable place for all, for all time.

Now we are not so sure. The public library rightly has become a child of the new age. The twentieth century has invaded our consciousness.

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ness with a persistent irritation which urges us to keep up with the frightening chimera of change. Librarians have been somewhat slow in assuming their roles and the stereotypes based on an earlier inept and inadequate librarianship persist as an unwelcome image in the minds of too many people. But librarians are learning fast, taking note of the expanding dynamism of society, its technical attainments, and the reluctance but yet the increasing vigor with which America goes about the business of providing world wide leadership. Noting also how the responsibilities of shared leadership in international affairs have come into recognition because of the inescapable fact that power's concomitant is responsibility.

Recognition of the library's twentieth century role has brought administrative adeptness. Library staffs are becoming more specialized, and the book collections reflect the indispensable nature of modern tools for modern times. Now librarians are in a position to anticipate some of the needs of the public and slowly but surely are forcing a recognition of the library as an individual and community resource. Indeed this interest in the current may be causing the pendulum to swing a bit too far. Cries of anguish are going up in the land because head librarians have in practice, though not in theory, relinquished the direction of the growth of the book collection in favor of maintaining relationships with boards and city commissions.

Mechanical efficiency is overshadowing the intellectual efficiency of the institutions, with management illuminating the horizon as a favorite topic for library discussion. There is a reaction setting in ranging in tone from an over-romanticizing of the book to a recognition that administrators no matter how slick a shop they run are somehow abrogating to committees of staff members their responsibility of providing the community with an educational institution.

To give expression to these apprehensions a new voice is being heard, one often heard before. It says, "Books are basic," and "Back to books." This voice from the past is making efforts to re-examine library philosophy. Thus along with the twentieth century awareness of change comes this re-affirmation of the seventeenth-century heritage with a commitment to education.

It seems that library development in the United States has always been two directional. The heritage which determined the philosophical basis for the library movement stemmed from a seventeenth-century puritanism which sought to justify the ways of God to man. It was the eighteenth-century philosophy of Locke and his followers which

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emphasized the importance of self improvement.<sup>4</sup> These two streams made possible the American experience which demanded that the people be informed. Today the library is faced with programming for the realities of an ever changing era and the verities of an educational commitment which says, "Know Thyself." That is why adult education in the library will have a constant validity. Now it is appropriate to examine whether public library adult education is coming up to the over-all standards of the institution as a force in American life.

Library and adult education literature fails to indicate any recognizable trends. The phenomena of adult education is not new but its emphasis is certainly at odds with the traditional librarianship in which the lone reader with his book was the touchstone of library service. The contemporary interest in the group and its manifestations has not gone unnoticed by the public library. Today certain programs have validity only when the appeal is to specific groups or interests rather than the individual. The trick, librarians think, is to learn how to recognize group needs, program for them, and at the same time fulfill the basic obligation to the individual. It is here that the small public library's problems in adult education begin and end.

There are more failures in adult education practices in small public libraries than in larger ones. Some of the reasons seem self evident, but mention should be made of them. For example, the small library's resources are so limited that programming in depth becomes extremely difficult. Also, there simply is not enough staff time or, more important, staff skills available to do the kind of job which will bring new dimensions to library service, a reason why so little has been done to put into practice the recommendations made at the Allerton Park Conference, November 14-16, 1954, on the "Training Needs of Librarians Doing Adult Education Work."<sup>5</sup>

Finance, or rather lack of adequate financing, is another of the culprits. Small public libraries have not learned how to gain the kind of acceptance from their communities which will make adequate support automatic. Energies are spent holding the line, which means going backwards, and there is not enough left over to insist upon first class adult education programming. Then, too, the library profession still has not insisted strongly to library schools or to communities that persons trained in adult education are of first importance to the proper operation of the library.

Another area in which adult education for the small public library

is difficult is in coordination with other agencies in the community, equally interested in continuing education. In small communities coordination is not the stuff of which dreams are made, it is a vital necessity. Sometimes it takes the pooling of several resources to gain a modicum of basic strength necessary to carry on an objective. In too many communities, coordination is merely a word. It is called coordination when four agencies get their names on a program and one agency, many times an outside one, does all the work. Although small communities do not have the variety of intellectual and educational resources found in large cities, there are manyfold more than are imagined and coordination is the key to their exploitation. Unfortunately, coordination often gets off to a bad start because of institutional jealousy, each one seeking to justify itself to the necessity of the community. Granted most agencies have a specialty or set of responsibilities which are fairly unique, but the adult education profession has shown us the catholicity of the field and how easy, logically speaking, it is to cut across organizational lines in program presentation.

In many ways the greatest stumbling block to public library adult education also haunts the professionals: everything from exhibits to providing meeting facilities is called adult education. An insistence upon a loose construction of the word education has had the effect of negating its meaning as an identifying force. This is damaging to libraries because if every activity for adults is called education then it will become increasingly difficult to pinpoint the cultivation of the mind as a laudable and basic endeavor.

At a recent meeting of professional adult educators the main speakers presented thrilling messages. The one thing especially noted was the sense of broad perspective exhibited by these speakers. Their talks, like R. J. Blakely's collection of speeches, *Adult Education in a Free Society*, presented dimensions which were as wide as the problems of a vital and dynamic people. There was little concern for the minutiae of adult education housekeeping problems. As a matter of fact, Blakely deplored the over-worked adult educators who kill themselves helping grown men and women learn to kill time.<sup>6</sup> And yet in the specialized meetings, the talk concerned itself with housekeeping. Heated discussions were held on whether paid workers were better than volunteers but there was no discussion of the educational aspects of adult education. If this is the leadership pattern for adult education in the United States, then the public library should have another

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look. Such a pattern leads only to programming for trivia, providing textbooks for how-to-do-it classes.

The library is going to have to decide upon some identification of terms or it will be diverted from its chance, now only a hope, to help provide for educational experiences which are in keeping with its traditional role. Despite some successes in terms of librarian participation, the public library is only a slight part of the professional adult educational pattern of the United States. A glance at that excellent periodical *Adult Education* showed that from 1954 through 1958 there was not a single article about adult education in public libraries except a report from the American Library Association on adult education activities in public libraries in 1954. An examination of *Adult Leadership* shows only a few successes. It is not that library activities are not wanted. It is just that public libraries have not really understood the rationale of an adult education commitment because the tradition of programming for the individual keeps getting in the way.

To what extent can the smaller public library utilize agencies outside the community? Extension departments of universities and colleges, for example, are eager to be of assistance to local groups which program in adult education. These agencies have an abundance of organizational skills, teacher resources, and a budget for publicizing a program. There is no question of the valuable service performed by extension departments both on the campus and out in the communities, but to this writer at least, they have stressed the service aspects of their departments so much that programs are developed with an eye to the public relations benefits to the university or college. The representatives who offer programs to communities are salesmen, not educators. This places a premium upon the speculative program. Imaginative programming goes out the window. It is strictly bread and butter education. Therefore in this writer's opinion, the small public library cannot look to the extension departments for the answers to its programming perplexities, the objectives are too different. A. T. Hamlin, elsewhere in this issue, discusses the responsibility of public libraries to provide library service to extension course students.

The prospect seems dismal. How can small libraries with their inadequate basic financing, their paucity of committed resources, and their lack of real coordination hope to do a job of adult education which can achieve real standards? Little wonder then that at least half of the libraries according to the A.L.A. fail to have any appreci-

able adult education activities? <sup>7</sup> It may be true that the library profession has not come up with a settled notion of what limitations to place upon its participation in the field but the deficiencies mentioned by C. W. Stone in 1953 have only been bettered in degree if at all.<sup>8</sup>

Should we return to the library yesterdays when all efforts were centered on the individual and his book? The question is academic for we could not even if we tried. Adult education is going to become an increasingly important aspect of library service. Data to corroborate this point of view may be still scarce but there are some rather specific recognitions which will influence educational thought.

For one thing, our rapidly expanding population will bring political domination to American cities and suburbs and weaken the legislative grasp of rural areas.<sup>9</sup> Educational support in modern times has depended more upon the urban than the rural community. For another, our technological age is demanding more than mechanical skills from the people. The future doctors now starting in the University of Kansas face extensive requirements in the humanities. We are getting a bit jumpy now that we know a potential enemy who lives in a home without indoor plumbing can learn how to fly a jet plane and read Plato as well. There is a realization that we have serious lacks in today's educational pattern. This is reflected in modern man's lack of understanding of himself, his loneliness in a crowd, and his yearning for group status. *White Collar*, *The Exurbanites*, and *The Lonely Crowd* are three investigations in point. Modern man needs to know who he is. *On Shame and the Search for Identity* has wise words on this subject.

A third indicator is the growing awareness of the need for education in depth. The foreigner who visits our shores is astounded at the hit and miss character of the learning of the average American. Knowledge seems to have been a swift flowing river into which we have dipped from time to time, not a deep and quiet pool into which total immersion is necessary. Understanding more than the surface of knowledge brings the maturity needed by all people in this world of trying perplexities.

Norman Cousins said that a vast vacuum exists today beyond the college classroom and filling that vacuum is the number one job of American education.<sup>10</sup> This perhaps is the challenge and the opportunity of the public library, for no matter what the size of the library, the problem of helping to fill the vacuum is present. It must not be forgotten that the word before "fill" is "helping," for the library should



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be aware that it cannot do the whole job. The important thing is that public library adult education fits a logical pattern, commensurate with the library's basic purpose. C. O. Houle suggested this when he mentioned that the library adult education program should grow out of the nature of the library and not be borrowed from somewhere else.<sup>11</sup>

Here then are some assumptions which, for the writer at least, make valid adult education in the library. First, America is variety. There is no one agency or set of agencies prepared to accept the total responsibility for out of school education in depth. The library can well take its place as one of the agencies with educational responsibility because of its historical context in the American experience.

Second, the library is justified in engaging in library adult education because of the challenge to its resources. There are greater possibilities of stretching the materials at hand to create use if opportunities present themselves. A booklist on music is good. A booklist in conjunction with a music program in the library is better. But a booklist which results from a carefully planned adult education program planned to widen the intellectual and aesthetic horizons of people is the best.

Third, adult education programming enhances audience potential for library use. This should not be considered in terms of people enticed into the library but rather a variety of participation. A series of lectures on such diversified topics as Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire; Teddy Roosevelt; A. Conan Doyle, the Doctor Detective; and The City in History will involve many segments of community life. The clergy, a political science club, doctors, policemen, and members of the city commission will find a common focal point in the library. Single lectures are not programs in depth, but may be used as stimulators to broaden the horizons of individuals.

Fourth, there is no need to recount the public relations advantages accruing to libraries who have a varied adult education program. However, there is a reverse twist to the public relations aspect which might bear mentioning. An active library is good for the morale, for want of a better term, of the members of the community. Twentieth century America does not give enough people an opportunity to feel proud of participating in worth-while public enterprises. Relatively few belong to clubs and there are not enough public agencies identified specifically with the individual; there is a deepfelt longing for identification in modern life. The public library giving people the

opportunity to feel that they are sharing in a selfless and worthy community enterprise is performing a valuable service. Those who do not participate actively in the program of their public library often point with pride at the services it renders to the community. This is public relations at its best, making the ones who pay the bills proud of the opportunity to do so. It beats the National Library Week braggadocio all to hollow.

Fifth, public library adult education programming can provide another avenue where individual lives are touched. Stone is right when he says that a continuous insistence upon the individual is given without reference to the associations which established that importance.<sup>12</sup> In the world of today the individual is affected by the group yet the touchstone of progress remains with the individual. A. W. Griswold expressed the thought with literary exactness when he said in a speech to the Yale seniors in 1957, "The divine spark leaps from the finger of God to the finger of Adam, whether it takes ultimate shape in a law of physics or a law of the land, a poem, or a policy, a sonata, or a mechanical counter."

Sixth and finally, the library's stand in identifying its policies for adult education should be on a sound basis stemming from its own concept of education. The concept of adult education should narrow in content and widen in context. It should aim at liberating the human spirit so that man may know who he is and what he stands for. Library adult education should give man hope for tomorrow based upon a clear-eyed assessment of man's past. Adult education for the public library should be liberal, general, and its action should encompass a leading forth.

On to the specifics. Philosophy motivates but somewhere along the line something has to happen. The library that engages in adult education must be careful not to diffuse its resources to the point of diminishing returns. It should recognize that true coordination with existing community agencies doing adult education is of crucial importance. If the library allows itself the luxury of paying only lip service to coordination then it should be recognized that public relations has taken over.

More attention must be paid to the development of skills within the library organization. Before this can happen a greater awareness of the educational possibilities inherent in the public library should be evident. Eleanor Phinney indicated in her five case studies that live adult education programs were almost a foregone conclusion pro-



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vided the head librarian had an educational commitment for her library.<sup>13</sup>

Much, too much, has been written about knowing your community. An intimate knowledge of the adult education resources in and out of one's own community is not simply a matter of compiling a list. There is no substitute for the educated librarian, one whose intellectual curiosity has been tested by an intimate association with the abounding riches of community intelligence—riches not easily found. To really know the community, the operation more closely resembles dredging than a genteel listing.

Finally, it is necessary to talk about this often requested bugaboo of recognizing the needs of the community. Setting out to find what the people want often leads to some pretty weird requests which if granted would take the library far afield of its purposes or its resources. In fact, it is not necessary to worry too much about identifying the spoken needs of the community in order to have adult education programs. Gardner Murphy of the Menninger Foundation tells us that, “. . . people do not even know what they want to learn until they encounter the material with all its rich emotional and impulsive meanings, and its relation to their own lives.”<sup>14</sup>

Actually the public will respond to creativity in adult education in spite of the fact that they have had relatively few opportunities. It may be that the public library will have to do away with some of its fringe activities called educational. If the library pays skilled attention to liberal adult education it will come closer to fulfilling its destiny as a place where man may go to be educated—for life.

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