



Evaluation of the Processing Centers

KENNETH F. DUCHAC

EVALUATION OF PROCESSING CENTERS is simple enough if one chooses to relate the operation of such a center to that of any other processing concern. A standardized product of a pre-determined quality delivered to consumers is achieved at a minimum cost with maximum efficiency. This, when "product" is defined as the cataloged and processed library book or other material, is the precise core of a processing operation. Evaluation of quantity and cost is easy to do. The problems in evaluation largely concern quality and management.

Most processing centers, whether under a single administration, as in a large municipal library system, or under cooperative auspices, purchase, invoice and bill, catalog, prepare for circulation, and ship books and sometimes other materials. As centers expand their activities, they frequently use their printing equipment for other purposes, or attempt coordination or initiation of book selection activities. Since these practices vary so widely from center to center, the focus of this paper will be the basic processing operation in cooperative centers.

Processing centers have successfully accomplished the purposes for which they were organized—elimination of unnecessary duplication of work, released time for librarians, uniformity of catalog data and processed books, savings on the cost of books. They have contributed to the implementation of broader library objectives—cooperation in other regional activities and organizations, improved quality of materials purchased, union catalogs of holdings.

It is pertinent to explore the problem areas and questions encountered in processing center operations.

Since centralized processing in large municipal library systems goes back to the early twentieth century, one might assume that, with over fifty years' experience, these libraries had solved many of the prob-

Kenneth F. Duchac is Supervisor of Public Libraries, Division of Library Extension, Maryland State Department of Education.

Evaluation of the Processing Centers

lems. The centers obtain only limited help from this direction, however. Many of the policies and procedures in force in the large library systems are antiquated. (A strong case can be made in support of the thesis that in recent years the greatest impulse for improvement of cataloging and processing methods has come from the more aggressive of the young processing centers.) The cooperative centers are also on a totally different footing, of course, with respect to the major factor of control in the administrative sense.

Directors of centers have sometimes suspected that it would be simpler to establish uniform international tariff regulations than to obtain agreement upon uniform cataloging and processing rules for a group of public libraries. The existence of the wild and colorful variety of these practices among libraries, especially those with nearly identical functions within limited geographical areas, is more an indictment of the library profession and its niggling ways than an arrow to the heart of the individual "uncooperative" librarian.

It is truly difficult to reconcile the procedures of ten or thirty or fifty independent libraries. A few of the areas of conflicting practice usually encountered are:

- Use of different editions of Dewey, and of differing editions for juvenile and adult collections;
- Use of Sears subject headings, or those of the Library of Congress, or others, or a combination of two or more;
- Extent of analytics used;
- Use of full descriptive cataloging or a short form;
- Use of Wilson cards or LC cards or a combination of both;
- Use of typed cards or LC cards for photocopied masters;
- Use of the Dewey 920 class or "B" for biographies;
- Classification of short stories in literature or in fiction;
- Length of numbers beyond the decimal point.

These variations are only the beginning. Type of pocket, printed or not, or whether the pocket is pasted or not, or pasted in the front or the back of books, or in what position on the page—all of these questions have brought harassing problems in the establishment of centralized processing services. (To be sure, adaptation to new practices also produces sizable work loads for long established libraries with large collections.)

Agreement on cataloging and processing regulations has usually been accomplished through acceptance of compromises. Obviously,

when the compromises have been largely at the expense of uniformity, the efficiency of the centralized operation is lower and production costs are higher. Some variations in the product are more expensive to accomplish than others, depending upon the pattern of work flow and the volume of pieces involved. In this regard, judicious evaluation of cost and fairly autocratic prescriptions by the center director have generally produced workable solutions.

The primary concern of the processing center is to organize the work in ways that utilize personnel at all levels to their full capacity. This requires machinery adequate to the job, procedures which, in proper sequence, produce a steady flow of work, and staffing patterns which can accommodate seasonal peaks and valleys.

Processing center staffs use a very small number and proportion of professional librarians. In centers which process as many as 100,000 volumes annually it is not unusual for only one or two librarians to constitute the total professional staff. The majority of any processing center staff are clerical workers, some with general business and office skills such as accounting and bookkeeping, invoice checking, preparation of bills, typing and operation of other office and printing machines, filing, packing, shipping and record-keeping. In centers which use electronic data processing equipment, staff is needed for key-punching, programming and other associated operations.

Because cooperative processing centers cannot control the rate of receipt of orders and the resulting unpredictable work peaks which occur, a ready supply of part-time clerical employees must be available in order to maintain a uniform speed of service to libraries and to prevent backlogs. In their early years most centers experienced critical backlog situations due largely to insufficient personnel; other causes included inadequate machinery or insufficient use of machinery.

In the most successful centers careful attention has been paid to the definition of professional tasks. Many use in-service trained employees to catalog adult and juvenile fiction and for other tasks usually classified as professional. Others have found experienced office management personnel to be superior "straw bosses" for the assembly line aspects of the operation.

The offset printing press is the *sine qua non* of processing centers. Machinery which produces offset press masters or catalog cards by photographic means completes the tandem which eliminates the ne-

Evaluation of the Processing Centers

cessity for typed or purchased sets of catalog cards. Add competent operators of these devices and the processing organism functions.

Even with data processing equipment, the essential product of the machinery is the package consisting of a set of catalog cards, shelf-list card, pocket and book cards for each volume processed. The catalog cards are most efficiently produced by devices which photograph prepared cards and produce offset masters bearing the images of eight cards per master; these are used to print pre-punched sheets of cards eight-up which must then be cut to size. Library supply firms and other stationery vendors sell punched stock of correct dimensions. The offset press is used also to print pockets and book cards. Most centers print book cards and pockets singly, although double-track use of presses is not unusual.

Quality control of printing output is essential. (Poor printing is a frequent and justified complaint by libraries.) The key to good printing is usually the machine operator because both the photographic and the printing machinery currently available is known to be temperamental and, of course, complex.

Most centers report incidents of unsatisfactory service by manufacturers' representatives. This criticism applies to major printing and photographic equipment and also to small devices, e.g., pasting machines. Many centers initially underestimated the cost of machine repairs and service. Service contracts are essential as machines grow older. Inoperative machinery makes for crises in processing operations. It is almost a truism that maximum use of machinery produces maximum efficiency and lowest unit costs. Paper and other supplies are cheap in comparison with personnel costs. Each additional custom operation, each individually typed unit, adds measurably to costs.

Procurement of books and other library materials raises no problems for processing centers which are not already well-known to most library systems. Because of the large sums centers spend for books, they stand in about as good a position to bargain with jobbers and publishers for maximum discounts as large library systems. Most centers have experimented with splitting orders between two or more jobbers, ordering from a single jobber or selected publishers, jobbers of special materials, and combinations of all of these sources of materials. There is no best, single answer to the question, "Which source or sources give the best discount and the best service?" One center will report excellent service from a jobber or publisher which another has tried and disgustedly abandoned.

In the past year, with the pressure of new Federal funds expended for library books under Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, procuring books has been more difficult and delays are frequent. Currently, the best service seems to be supplied either by large established jobbers with large inventories or by certain publishers. There is no doubt that large accounts have had less trouble getting books than have the smaller ones.

Centers can expect to receive discounts of 35 to 39 percent on most trade books, depending upon the volume ordered, the number of returns, the degree of duplication of titles per order, and the center's invoicing, billing and shipping requirements. Negotiations with jobbers and publishers about terms of service and discount are carried on by most centers periodically.

Problems which are perplexing to center management arise from the fact that the center produces, not a catalog for a library, but only the raw materials from which a catalog is made. It remains for someone to make sense from the catalog cards—to provide the cross references, to assure uniformity of entries, etc. Most centers agree that the individual library is responsible for tasks involving the arrangement of books on the shelves as well as the arrangement of the catalog and the content of the cards.

A decision to use a new edition of the Dewey classification also produces complications as new numbers are substituted for old with resulting problems of collection arrangement. The most satisfactory solution seems to be to let attrition play its role and to rely on the catalog as the significant tool for location of materials.

It appears virtually impossible to satisfy all libraries in deciding age level for certain books for children and young people. Similar difficulty pertains to notification of libraries on all individual changes adopted either in classification numbers or subject headings, but centers should try to improve their performance in this respect.

The tendency is increasing to look to the Library of Congress' decisions regarding both class numbers and subject headings, although it is safe to say that not a single center follows LC's practices completely. The use of LC subject headings and the latest edition of Dewey for adult materials is the general rule. Concerning materials for children there is more variation, and Sears headings and abridged editions of Dewey are more widely used.

Most centers photograph or otherwise copy LC proof sheets whenever available, in preparing catalog cards for all books. Because a

Evaluation of the Processing Centers

large percentage of proof sheets is not received before centers receive their books, most centers have had to make original cards for a larger percentage of titles than they had expected, in order to ship books on hand promptly. All centers attempt to catalog and prepare pocket sets for all books in advance of their receipt. With use of LC proof sheets and other sources of catalog information, the percentage of original cataloging done by a center is estimated to be less than ten percent of all titles handled.

Most cooperative centers accept library orders for materials, new or old, at any time. Requests for twenty copies of a given title may be received at twenty different times and may be procured by the center on as many different orders. This lack of coordination of the ordering process increases the cost of operation and produces problems which single library systems (theoretically) do not face. Estimates must be made before or upon receipt of the first request for a title as to how many copies may eventually be ordered through the center and thus how many sets of catalog and book cards will be needed. This uncertainty has led to the files of extra cards or card sets maintained by processing centers. Some centers have experimented with the printing of over-runs of various quantities, with varying results; others have tried reproduction of sets of cards as needed. The usefulness of files of extra cards hinges on the correctness of the initial print order estimate, on the size of the file, and on continuous weeding.

Accurate files of several types are important to efficient flow and quantity of work. Most centers find the following files useful or even essential:

- A single copy of the unit catalog card (or a set of cards) for every title the center catalogs;
- LC proof sheets;
- Extra cards or card sets;
- Outstanding orders;
- Cancellations;
- Standing orders.

Files are usually arranged by title or by purchase order number. Some centers maintain biographical or geographical authority files. Others use standard reference works in lieu of such files. Some centers maintain union catalogs of holdings of member libraries; alternatively, files of titles previously cataloged may be kept in shelf list order.

Each file requires maintenance and the cost of keeping it current should be weighed against its usefulness. Up-to-date filing and re-filing is essential to prevention of unnecessary duplication of work.

Shipping is generally accomplished either by parcel post or by a center's own delivery service. More problems are encountered with truck freight (usually in receiving shipments from suppliers) than in the shipping of books to libraries. Centers usually make shipments to libraries at least once a week.

Billing procedures vary, but generally libraries receive some type of invoice with each shipment and subsequent monthly statements of the costs of books and processing. Centers bill libraries for the actual costs of books plus a processing charge per volume. The standard product of a center—the book with catalog cards, pocket, book cards, spine label and plastic book jacket—is sold at the cost of the book plus a fee seldom lower than seventy-five cents per volume. Many centers have raised their processing charges in recent years due to increased costs of materials and labor. Processing charges currently range from seventy-five cents to more than \$2 per volume.

Statistics kept by centers include:

- Number of volumes processed;
- Number of new titles processed;
- Total titles processed;
- Number of volumes ordered;
- Number of catalog card sets produced.

All centers attempt to measure their costs and efficiency with considerable precision. Since they are non-profit operations, their costs must accurately match actual income. Generally the cost of maintaining statistical records is justified only with regard to the number of volumes processed. All other needed statistics can be gathered by periodic sampling. This practice causes problems for the many surveyors of processing centers, but for both a center and its constituent libraries most other complete sets of statistics have limited usefulness and unnecessarily increase unit costs. Records of expenditures and other fiscal data must satisfy standard accounting and audit requirements.

Processing centers, no less than other businesses, need capital to operate. Some have found their funds inadequate to pay for books which they have received but for which they have not been reim-

Evaluation of the Processing Centers

bursed by the libraries. (Centers which do not act as purchasing agents avoid this problem.) When a backlog occurs and the inventory of books is large, undercapitalization can threaten the financial position of a center.

The most prevalent and justified criticisms of processing centers are that they take too long to deliver books and that the quality of their work is below acceptable standards in one or more particulars. It is indeed rare for centers to deliver books to libraries in less than two weeks after they receive orders. However, many centers' average delivery time is three or four weeks after receipt of an order. Librarians tend to forget how long it usually takes to get delivery from jobbers and also how long it used to take them to catalog all the books they received. The slow delivery criticism applies particularly to titles which are in current demand. Centers attempt to ship all books received as soon as possible. Many books are processed and ready to ship on the day they are received. At worst, the center should be organized to complete processing within two weeks of receipt.

That the quality of work is substandard is perhaps true in some cases. There is no question, however, that in many instances the center's processing is in every way superior to what the individual library was able to do previously. Every center makes mistakes of all kinds and some even admit to them. Changes in personnel can cause quality to vary; experiments can have unsatisfactory results. Generally, the quality of work meets or exceeds the standards of most libraries. The essential handicaps of processing center operations result from lack of control of ordering procedures and from inadequate authority to enforce uniform practices. Centers also cannot catalog and process single copies of titles at a cost lower than that of the individual library unless the request for a given title is repeated.

The accomplishments of the centers are nonetheless impressive, individually and collectively. They have demonstrated the effectiveness of standardized practices and the practicability and economy of cooperative operations; further, they have provided a necessary example for future cooperative arrangements.

The re-emergence of the book catalog as the index to library collections provides an opportunity for processing centers to become even more important in the development of library service. It is not unreasonable to expect that in the near future the centers will broaden the scope of their functions and objectives to include coordination of

KENNETH F. DUCHAC

selection and ordering of books and the production of book catalogs for individual library systems, or for groups of systems, and for various types of libraries. It is certain that the accomplishment of such a next step would be slower in coming were the processing centers not serving their clients effectively.