# Standards for Public Libraries

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OFFICIAL STANDARDS for public libraries have been promulgated by the ALA at intervals over the past forty years—specifically in 1933, 1943, 1956 and 1966. With the exception of the 1966 formulation, each statement reflected fresh concepts of public library service or organization. These fresh concepts, injected into the library scene every decade or so, stimulated new development in the field for a period of several years after they appeared. Then their clarion call faded and a hiatus prevailed until new directions were developed and a fresh statement issued. At the present time we are in one of the intervals, with public library standards that are no longer a call to action, and original concepts not yet formulated to animate the next statement.

Various states have also adopted standards over the years. For the most part these have been adaptations of the national statements, but in a few instances they preceded the ALA documents and introduced principles which were later picked up nationally. State standards will be incorporated into the picture as the present article proceeds.

This discussion will first look at public library standards up through the prevailing 1966 document. The statements will be analyzed as to their content and appraised as to their impact. An effort will be made to determine just what was meant by "standards" at each stage, and to detect what justification and authority stands behind them. Finally, some views will be ventured on what should come next in public library standards.

## NATIONAL STANDARDS OVER FOUR DECADES

The first formal standards for public libraries at the national level appeared in 1933,[1] at the depth of the Depression. Libraries were hit by the prevailing economic conditions at least as hard as other educa-

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tional agencies and government services were. At the same time, users flocked to the public library; some city libraries had their peak year in circulation in 1933. People sought new vocational information and skill which they expected to get them a job; or they sought escape from a world that had become hopeless for them. We would say now that libraries were caught in the "crunch"—the term then was "pinch"—but neither term suggests the wide gap that opened between resources and demand.

In this setting the 1933 standards hopefully called for a few essential minima of service. The $1.00 per capita financial slogan was born at this point. A few years later its initial prescriptions for personnel were supplemented by a related publication of ALA.[2] This early effort was no more than a brief statement that public libraries ought to have adequate resources and funds.

The next statement of standards[3] was again born out of adversity, this time a global war. While the Germans advanced, and rumors of genocide spread, plans were made for libraries, as for other services, for after the war. The postwar standards were compiled well before victory, and constitute an act of national and professional faith.

The 1943 statement represents a coming-of-age of public library standards. The 1933 statement was exactly two pages in length; this formulation was ninety-two pages. It covered the whole range of objectives, government, organization and services, as well as collections, personnel and finance; and it did so in a general framework that has carried through in subsequent statements. Many library administrators used it not only as a source of standards, but also as a compact planning and administrative guide in the postwar period when libraries were attempting to get back on their feet.

The chairman of the 1943 committee, Carleton B. Joeckel, prepared the basic draft of the statement. Along with the subsequent and related national plan of 1948,[4] it constitutes a culmination of his significant contribution to librarianship. A vision of the public library as an adult education agency (*The Public Library: A People's University*[5] had appeared in 1938) was the clarion call of this document and it sounded on into the heyday of the public library in the 1950s. There was also a practical sense of the central role of government, a theory of the political science of public library administration, that has not been fully grasped to this day. The presentation combined qualitative and quantitative measures in a balance that has been maintained in later statements.

While there is a section in the 1943 document on minimum size and area for effective service (the larger unit concept), it is not integrated with the standards as a whole. Joeckel had been doing his pioneer work on public library government during the 1930s at the University of Chicago. He could not formulate a strategic statement without some mention of the direction of his thinking, but the idea of basing the standards on library systems rather than on individual libraries had not yet evolved. However, that section on larger units in the 1943 standards was by no means lost or forgotten. It forms the framework for the 1948 national plan, and was used again by the Public Library Inquiry a few years later.[6] That report recommends larger units as one of the major features in its chapter on "Direction of Development," but without direct acknowledgment of either the postwar standards or the national plan.

The 1956 statement[7] was a departure in several respects, and because it had some definite influence it is worth noting these characteristics specifically. To begin with, the whole concept behind this document not only deemphasized quantitative standards but also deemphasized isolated standards as such and stressed the principles for developing effective service. This was exemplified in its title, in which the term "standards" comes at the very end, almost as an afterthought: *Public Library Service; A Guide to Evaluation, with Minimum Standards.* It was exemplified also in the structure of the document: principles are presented first, with specific standards following and in a sense in a subordinate position. The 1956 pronouncement was thus more a planning document than a measuring document. The intent was that individual libraries and groups of libraries would use it first to review purpose, organization and service provided, and then check with the few concrete measures on how well they were doing.

One "new" principle animated the whole document, that of library systems. The 1956 standards did not invent this concept, but they were the first to systematically apply the idea to the whole range of library service. This was not only a distinctive step, not only the official acceptance of an idea whose time had come, but it significantly affected the content and level of the document. A problem that had haunted all previous efforts was what to do about the small library; how far to compromise standards in the face of the reality that most American public libraries are so small that alone they cannot even aspire to reasonable standards. Now with the systems concept underlying the statement, criteria were set that groups of libraries could be expected to achieve

together, and such criteria could be closer to what was required to meet the needs of people.

On this basis the 1956 standards eliminated the frustrating "sliding scale" which unrealistically imposed higher criteria on smaller libraries. The earlier postwar document called for one volume per capita in the collection in larger places, but three volumes per capita in smaller places. In other words, the way in which the smaller libraries were to come up to standard was simply to make a distinctly greater effort, a proposition that bore little relation to taxation and public financing. Another example is the standard proposed as a supplement to the 1933 document: that the number of volumes circulated per staff assistant in places under 10,000 population should be 25,000 a year, while in places of over 250,000 the figure was 15,000 per assistant. In this case the gap between the small and the large agency was presumably to be closed simply by having the staff in the smaller agency work harder. Both sliding scales and circulation as a basis for determining staff size are absent from the 1956 document.

To meet the problem of changing price and cost levels, the 1956 statement introduced another feature: the financial supplement.[8] Money standards were put into a separate publication that could be, and was, revised at intervals of several years. In the process the basis for financial criteria was changed and made more functional. Originally a single per capita dollar figure had been prescribed. In the 1943 statement it was broken down into three levels of "limited or minimum," "reasonably good," and "superior" service, without any clear definition of these terms. The 1956 supplement adopted the pattern of buidling up operating budgets for different specific library situations, using the standards themselves as the elements of the budget—more of a program base for financial support and less an *ex cathedra* pronouncement. The resulting dollar figures could safely be assumed to provide enough to achieve the suggested standards at least at a minimum level. The 1956 publication, for example, contained sample "standard" budgets totalling from $2.60 to $3.41 per capita, while the recent 1971 supplement (the fourth revised supplement over fifteen years), using cost figures of that date, raised these to $7.66-$8.23 per capita.

In shifting the focus from the individual library to the consolidated or cooperating group of libraries, the 1956 document opened up a new problem. Now the smaller individual library had no specific standards by which to measure itself or plan its own budgets and financial presentations to fiscal authorities. Many were not, and some still are not,

members of systems, and even those that are within systems want some measure of their contribution to the total. Discussion of this problem went on for several years, resulting in 1962 in the *Interim Standards*[9] ("interim" until all libraries are members of systems). The compilers of this statement sought to meet the interests of both individual libraries on the one hand and of systems on the other, and in general kept a good balance.

The 1956 document also spawned other standards statements. Most closely associated are those for young adult services (1960)[10] and for children's services (1964).[11] Each states that it was built within the framework of the basic statement, and claims consistency with the principles of that statement. The criteria for bookmobile service[12] which appeared in the same period are not as closely related, although within the general family. The 1963 statement for state libraries[13] is even less closely related, although it is worth noting the recurrence of some principles that first appeared in the public library statement, and the presence of several of the same individuals in the groups that compiled both.

From 1956 to the early 1960s public library standards were very much alive and well. They were reviewed and discussed, adopted and adapted, applied and criticized. They formed the ground plan for many statewide programs. What actual effect that had will be commented on later in this article.

By 1966 the basic document itself needed either revision or replacement. While library systems were not universal, they were widespread. An expanded supply and changed distribution system for both print and nonprint materials had come into existence. In the mid-1960s, for the first time since World War II, some indicators of public library use had turned downward, harbingers of a trend common in larger city libraries by the end of the decade. Occasional voices had been raised challenging the goals and social function of the public library.[14]

The choice was either to go back to the 1956 statement and update it, or to formulate a new one. The decision was made to revise the material in hand. Some of the existing standards were raised, particularly for the headquarters unit within systems. Essentially, the 1966 publication is a replica of its predecessor of ten years, reflecting the same overall concept of public library service, treating the same elements, presenting them in the same organization, and with the same assumptions as to what public libraries are for.

In retrospect this decision must be questioned, although it can be

understood. In the middle of the 1960s few people foresaw the threatened position in which the public library would find itself five years later. Those who did have forebodings had not conceived a fresh direction or role for the public library which could form the foundation of a genuinely new statement of standards. The compilers of the 1966 revision themselves did not rest easy: "This, then, is an unfinished document . . . because the rapidity of change in modern life makes it impossible to foretell what changes are in the making."[15]

With the advantage of hindsight the decision to reissue the then existing document with minor changes can be seen as a missed opportunity. The pronouncement of the 1950s had served its purpose and might better have been relegated to the archives. What the public library needed a decade later was a statement pointing the way into the future, for a country increasingly more preoccupied with self-fulfillment and the quality of life than with economic well-being. The 1966 document is not such a model. While a library in the 1950s might have come reasonably close to meeting the needs of its constituents by providing the elements and achieving the levels prescribed at that time, this cannot be said of the public library today working from the present standards. In substance we are living with public library standards formulated almost two decades ago.

## State Standards

For the most part standards adopted by the states have followed the national formulations. The state governments in the U.S. system provide the legal foundation for public libraries as part of the responsibility for education that rests with the states. In some cases maintenance of standards for libraries is specified in state law, and in any case a responsibility for adequacy is implied whenever the state authorizes public services. Despite this, the states have usually waited for the national professional organization to set standards and goals for public libraries, and then either adopted them officially or accepted them implicitly as they made statewide plans for development. This contrasts with the situation for schools, where the states have established standards rather than adopting those either of a federal agency or a national organization. The position of the states on standards for library service is symptomatic of the generally anomalous position in which the public library finds itself in relation to its legal sponsor and source of authority—anomalous at least in finance.

However, there are exceptions. New York State, for example, long

had standards for local libraries that were more detailed and explicit than those emanating from ALA. They were not only recommendations for what service should be in the state, and not only were tied into the minuscule ($100 per year per library) state aid of that time, but actually had the force of law in the sense that all money, local as well as state, could be withheld if a minimum level was not maintained. In New York and other states with earlier standards, this minimum level was modest—the old problem of adjusting to the reality of a predominance of very small units—and even then the standards were seldom enforced.

In the last decade, as state aid for libraries has increased in some states, state-based standards have been appearing which libraries are expected to achieve in order to receive state funds. One might think of these as "creeping standards," introduced administratively, usually starting at a minimum level, and applied with considerable leeway and flexibility. Rather than goals for a high level of service, such state standards are designed to bring along the stragglers. New Jersey is an example of such use of state standards, and with state aid in that instance now in the range of $1.00 per capita, there is enough leverage to make the criteria meaningful.

The present status across the country is that some, usually modest, standards have been set by most states, with cautious application of them by state agencies. Moderate as this control is at the present time, it could be a forerunner of increased enforcement of library standards by the states, particularly if the financing of municipal and county libraries should shift more to the states, along with the current prospect of a distinct shift to state financing for schools.

In a few exceptional instances states have taken the lead in public library standards. The California statement[16] of the early 1950s was structured around library systems rather than individual agencies, anticipating the 1956 national ALA standards. But the instigators within the states have usually been the state library associations, rather than government library agencies, and the state organizations have customarily followed the national association. Here also some indications of change may be evident, with the state professional groups beginning to develop an identity of their own, which could stimulate standards distinct from the national pattern. Since ALA repeated itself the last time it formulated public library standards, the action may shift to the states in redefining and raising goals and criteria. Perhaps New York, Califor-

nia, Washington or Maryland are where one should look to find new standards emerging.

The net effect to date of national standards promulgated by a professional association, and then accepted without legal authorization within states, is that there is no structure for certifying or accrediting libraries. There is no official means for enforcing minimum levels, as prevails in state regulations for schools, nor any practical professional means for accomplishing the purpose, as prevails in the regional accreditation structure for colleges and universities. On one hand are the noble professional pronouncements for public libraries; on the other hand are local laws and traditions which allow each library to be just as poor or "unstandard" as it wants to be, or more precisely, as poor as its local constituency is willing to tolerate.

## Impact of Public Library Standards

Public library standards exist, as we have seen, without governmental sanction. The money for libraries comes from the public purse; the prescriptions for service come from professional groups. Whatever effect public library standards have must therefore come from persuasion. The process on which we depend is: (1) a forward look by a professional committee; (2) convincing local professional administrators of the import of the committee vision; (3) convincing of library trustees by the local administrators; (4) conveying the message to the holders of the purse strings; and finally (5) seeking general understanding on the part of the electorate which puts the purse strings holders into office. If one thinks of the 1966 ALA standards, and then of the extent of knowledge of them by the local citizen, he is aware of the width of the gulf and the depth of the problem. No wonder the public librarian laments that his agency is not understood by the bulk of the people.

The 1933 statement appeared in the depth of the Depression. The standards statement is matter-of-fact rather than inspiring, although the first sentence does have a familiar lilt: "The public library is maintained by a democratic society in order that every man, woman and child may have the means of self-education and recreational materials." Any words would have been feeble in the face of the hard realities of the time.

The mid-1930s saw a flurry of statewide library plans, with the standards usually referred to; but for the most part these remained paper plans without implementation. By the time library budgets had turned modestly upward in the late 1930s, the standards statement had

lost whatever challenge it may have had, and it is seldom referred to in the prewar literature. Looming ahead was a holocaust that would render any polite statements not only peripheral but irrelevant.

The 1943 standards also appeared at an unpromising time, when the outcome of the war was uncertain, but they managed to survive and exert an influence. They had to survive an additional hiatus immediately after the war while the country refocused on peacetime pursuits. Yet their call remained clear, both at the local and the national levels. They provided the measure or model on which many budget requests of the late 1940s were based, and were the start of a straight line that leads from the standards themselves, to the national plan five years later, and on to the Public Library Inquiry two years after that.

The 1956 statement appeared under more propitious circumstances. Libraries were well on their feet after the war by this time, funding was more substantial, use had turned upward beginning in the early 1950s, and the future of the public library had a glow which it had lacked since the 1920s. The optimism was not unfounded, for the peak period in use of the American public library was in the years from 1956 to 1965, which was also the most encouraging period in its financial support.[17] Further, the 1956 standards were followed by the passage of the federal Library Services Act in the same year.

The document itself starts with an accolade to the educational function of the public library: "the function of the open door—and that it shall be inviting." The door remained open in the following decade, to the many students and others who sought to enter, but how inviting it was would be brought into question when use turned downward late in the 1960s. Many of those who came through the door had to do so, and others found the winding paths of the paperback rack, the appeal of the magazine, the inventiveness of the film and the convenience of television to be more inviting. Ironically, it was the call to purpose in the 1956 statement that had the least influence, and in time the public library has come to pay a penalty for this.

It would be unjustified to ascribe the steady development of library systems in the late 1950s and early 1960s solely or primarily to the national standards, although their role in this connection has been documented.[18] The systems movement was underway before the 1956 document appeared and state money had been allocated for the same purpose. But the standards came at the right time: they provided a banner for the movement, helped to show how it could be accelerated, and embodied an idea that caught the interest of trustees and government

officials seeking to relate local services to other nearby municipalities without giving up autonomy.

The coordinate impact of the Library Services Act should not be discounted. In a sense the federal government joined hands with the professional movers and shakers. In its early years LSA was by law limited to rural areas and the first share of its money went to bookmobiles. After a period the standards and the federal money were coordinated in purpose and exerted a strong influence on systems development.

To the extent that the user response as measured by volume of circulation and quantity of reference work is relevant, the trend was steadily upward. But what of the quality of service preached in the standards? Efforts to judge quality directly in library service are rare. In fact the various standards statements themselves stress the elements that prepare for service rather than the quality of performance. A New York evaluation in 1964 found more different titles available to people, more interlibrary loans requested and supplied, and more local staff with knowledge of reference sources than prevailed before systems were established.[19] A Pennsylvania restudy in 1936, ten years after a previous statewide appraisal, found 900,000 more Pennsylvanians with access to service, centralized district resources discernibly stronger than ten years earlier, and a functioning research materials network.[20] Cause and effect cannot be established, but the national standards appear to have been part of growth at that time, a kind of proclamation of what was occurring if not actually one of the growth factors.

Unknown either to library administrators or to the revisers of the standards, public libraries stood at a watershed by the mid-1960s, with many about to take two long steps downward, first in decreased use and then by 1970 in such severe restrictions of funds that vital components of service (hours, book purchases, staff) had to be curtailed. The two feed upon each other; reduced funds lead to decreased use, and decreased use leads to reduced funds. City libraries had often cut the budgets of branches when use turned down; now the principle is being applied to whole library systems by city fiscal authorities, who look over the various municipal services to establish priorities, even as the city library authorities look over branches. Whether any document as such could have made a difference is questionable. Certainly a virtual reissue of the previous standards had limited effect. The 1966 document had little to say even concerning the aspect of service to which an intensified concern was being directed—reaching poor people in the in-

ner-city areas. Having been inspired once by the statement in its earlier form, and having exhausted it for both planning and budget purposes, library officers found little in the reissue in 1966 around which to organize a new mobilization. Instead voices began to be raised for a new formulation of goals for the public library.

## What is a Standard?

The dictionary defines standard as: (1) a goal or model, as in "the standard bearer"; (2) a criterion of adequacy, as in "the prevailing standard"; (3) a norm or midpoint, as in "the standard of living"; (4) a minimum level, as in "bring up to standard."

What does it mean as applied to libraries? On a scale of ideal goals on one end to minimum adequacy on the other, where do public library standards fall? And wherever they fall, how have they been established, and what is the authority behind them?

There are no simple answers. The documents themselves in every case make some reference to "minimum standards," suggesting that they denote bare adequacy. But in view of the fact that few if any libraries achieve all the measures, they must be above the minimum, unless we have no adequate public libraries in the country. The emphasis upon "minimum" in the statements was in part an effort to meet the criticism that as soon as any library comes up to the level prescribed, it may be considered by the city fathers as having all it needs, in which case standards would be counterproductive. By terming them "minimum" the situation is kept open-ended.

Where do public library standards fall on the scale, if not at the bottom? A cynical answer would be "at whatever point the traffic will bear," or more politely, "somewhere out ahead of where they are now, but not too far." In reality the last comment is not too far off the mark, for each of the compiling committees looked at the prevailing situation, focused its gaze toward the upper part of the scale, and recorded what it saw. The 1956 group reports explicitly that it tentatively set standards and then checked them against a sample of recognized "better" libraries.

Thus the existing standards for public libraries tend more to indicate what can be achieved rather than what should be achieved. This opportunistic approach accounts for the fact that some of the criteria (number of staff, for example) tend to move up as each revision is made, even though no changed circumstances are documented as the reason for the increase; the previous standard having stood for some

time, and having been reached at least in part, it simply becomes time to move it up a notch or two. This approach also accounts for the disillusioning experience of some libraries that struggle and come up to standard and still find that they cannot accomplish what they seek to do, indeed not even what the standards document itself says they should do. The existing criteria can be viewed as norms of what libraries above the average are doing now. They tell the administrator whether he is doing as well as his neighbors, not whether he is doing as well as he should.

One comes back to the judgment of those who compile the criteria as the basis for their suitability and authority, this judgment checked and confirmed by the official group that approves and sponsors them. Existing standards for libraries represent the "wisdom of the seers." Librarians assert from experience that certain measures should be achieved to have a "good" library. It follows that these measures carry more weight among other librarians than they do among nonlibrary authorities and the public at large.

What other basis is there? The answer is a foundation of clear and explicit objectives and a functional prescription of what is needed to achieve objectives—in other words, "program" standards to go along with program budgeting. For an agency aiming at self-fulfillment on the part of varied individuals, this is most difficult to accomplish. Objectives have not been sharpened or made functional; they are still stated in the same inclusive and general terms—self-education and recreation. Just what concrete resources in materials, staff and services are needed to achieve these objectives has not been determined objectively. The problem is perpetuated by the fact that libraries, among all public services, may be least emotionally disposed to seek a program basis for planning and budgeting, even less than schools, parks and hospitals. There are only self-pronouncements by librarians concerning the standards which public libraries should achieve, and even these seem to be losing impact on the profession and on government officials.

## Directions for the Future

This is not the place to try to map the future of the public library, but it can be said that some new sense of direction is needed and that standards could be an element in helping to find the way ahead. The starting point is not revision of the existing national document. Standards have been effective to the extent that they rest upon fresh concepts suited to the conditions emerging at the time they are issued.

Such fresh concepts must be agreed upon before meaningful measures can be formulated.

All previous standards statements have reflected a general rather than a focused sense of what public libraries are for. They have been based on the three legs of education, information and recreation, which interpreted broadly enough might encompass most phases of American life other than manufacturing and trade. What kinds of education, what forms of information, and what levels of recreation would be provided have not been defined, either in the national standards or in individual library programs. The public library seeks to do almost everything. In practice it provides a wide range of services, each to only a fragmentary extent, and each utilized by a very small portion of the population. It is a kind of five-and-ten-cent store in the world of ideas and expression, purveying a little of a lot.

This eclectic policy was tolerable—perhaps even best—in a period when the vitalizing values of the society were not being questioned and when more public money could be expected as the years went by. However, the policy has to be reconsidered when both intellectual leaders and government officials are asking why we maintain each public agency and how much support it should get.

Under the previous conditions librarians alone were able to select goals and specify standards. A wider social and governmental base is needed for the next formulation. At least three sectors in addition to professionals should join in the endeavor: citizens in general (perhaps in the form of library trustees, although they often do not represent the people at large), political leaders and government officials, and the most prescient of sociologists and social theoreticians. It is conceivable that such a congress of views could see through to the social role of the public library in the next decade.

Useful standards can be formulated; reasonable measures of achievement can be devised, if one knows what they are being devised for. Previous statements of public library standards attest to this. But a crucial step must be taken first, and the test of public librarians and friends of public libraries in this next period is whether that basic step is taken.

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