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Commentary

NANCY C. FELDMAN

IT IS CERTAINLY praiseworthy that librarians are addressing themselves to the serious problem of evaluating their services; it is also noteworthy that they do so with careful, even painstaking research and with an earnest awareness of the prominent place of evaluation in today's society.

Attitudes toward evaluation may often be a key to the kind of evaluation employed and may indicate much about the subjective feelings and status position of the group being evaluated. Indeed, the attitude of the group toward evaluation may be even more indicative than the actual evaluation results of the relative security of the group.

When a group is insecure either about its value to society or of society's perception of that value, yet is professionally trained and responsible and sincere in its desire to do well, evaluation is viewed as necessary and justified but extremely threatening. The profession or group being evaluated tends to become acutely self-conscious and overly articulate about philosophy and lofty ideals, and less clear about practical details, realizable aims and methods of attainment. Words are substituted for action, and methodology is belabored and idealized.

I have an unevaluated hunch that librarians are in this position. Knowing that evaluation must take place and approving of it, they are nonetheless needlessly insecure about the results. Consequently they do a defensive and verbose job of evaluating—one that blunts and is ineffectual—rather than one that is piercing and illuminating. I believe this hunch is documented in what is included in this issue; but even if this basic hypothesis of needless insecurity is not valid, the remarks with regard to evaluation may still be of value, independently.

Clear and attainable goals for each different type of library appear to be a prime necessity. Evaluations must be set in terms of how well goals are being set and achieved. When goals are vaguely stated and undifferentiated, evaluation is frustrating and obfuscating; the unclear

Nancy C. Feldman is Professor, Sociology Department, University of Tulsa, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

yardstick of necessity yields an unclear measurement. It would seem that libraries should have reached the point where they would have evolved separate sets of broadly differing goals for each major type of library; academic, research, public school, industry, university, public, etc. Possibly the profession has grown so rapidly and so well that it has not yet seen the need for differentiation within the profession. Or it may be that the profession has wisely obscured this differentiation to facilitate a flow of personnel and ideas within the profession. In either case, for the purposes of evaluation, realistic, pragmatic goals for each broad type of library are essential.

These realizable aims should be articulated on a national level for a number of specific types of library. Such statements should provide assistance and flexibility to the individual library, which can then proceed to differentiate from the national goals to its own goals. The national statement would be the launching pad, the working draft from which locals could work, could deviate and could become more detailed. Then evaluation could be conducted in terms of progress toward clearly stated, measurable, if not quantifiable, goals.

The substitution of broad philosophy for clearly articulated goals signifies a reluctance to become aware of the real, pragmatic goals of the library. As a passionate library lover, I must attribute this not to the lack of library service, but to the insecurity of the library personnel. Relying on us passionate lovers, the librarians have been largely evaluating goodwill—and of that there is plenty. Would there be that goodwill if there were not something very solid behind it? I think not. The challenge then is to ferret out precise goals and then reach them.

There are other evidences of insecurity of librarians in regard to evaluation, an insecurity so great that it could indeed be called a cover-up, were not the evidence of sincerity equally great.

An evaluation serves one of two purposes: it either feeds back into the system, correcting and changing it, or it serves as an outside, justifying report. There is no question that public agencies, as libraries often are, need to produce this kind of justifying report, but this is not a genuine evaluation. The genuine evaluation should contain within it the techniques whereby needed change is fed back into the system. Either these techniques were not considered within the scope of this issue or they were not included. If evaluations are to be worth the time, money, effort and trauma expended, they must be structured to include feedback loops in the very design of the evaluation. The reader of these articles is always left wondering what happened. Are the evaluations gathering dust upon a shelf? Contemporary evaluative

techniques must include in their essence the input back into the system—the change mechanism.

Evaluation has come to be a profession in and of itself. Certain disciplines, chiefly the behaviorial science—economics, sociology and psychology—pride themselves on the sophistication of their training and techniques. It seems, perhaps, that when libraries have employed outside evaluators they have relied too exclusively on business evaluative techniques which are often geared to management only and not to delivery of services in close conjunction with management. Moreover, in most cases the librarians have not seemed to avail themselves of the skills of the trained evaluator, particularly of those in the behavioral sciences; they seem to have preferred to reinvent the wheel, to design the survey themselves. This is most obvious in the hesitance to hire evaluators outside the library profession. Why not use trained people? All fields tend to trust the people within their own professions, knowing that these people have been socialized in the same way they have, that they will share basic assumptions, elide common difficulties, and, most of all, that they will be able to exert professional punishment if they go too far. Successful businesses, on the other hand, do just the opposite. They ask for evaluations from the most ruthless and blunt-spoken, secure in the thought that they can take what they want and discard the rest, and that the evaluation will be an in-house affair arousing no public discussion. The latter is possibly an important aspect. If evaluations of libraries are going to be public and political knowledge, then perhaps the gentle, obfuscating techniques delineated in the papers may be a necessary protection. If the libraries really wish to know, they should hire highly trained outside evaluators who will use a variety of spotlights on them.

If the libraries really wish to know, then there will be no resistance to the unobtrusive techniques mentioned. The library's moral hesitation to use unobtrusive techniques is puzzling and unduly protective of its personnel. There is no question that there exists some controversy on the use of unobtrusive techniques, but that phrase covers a wide range of methods and the controversy has not extended to this simple method of asking library personnel questions by posing as a consumer rather than as a surveyor. This kind of personnel testing is widely accepted within business and the professions and, indeed, it is probably the only way that an accurate assessment of courtesy and efficiency in dealing with the public can be made. If there is an ethical problem, it can be obviated by an announcement that the evaluation will be taking place between certain dates. Consumer-posing techniques have helped

many organizations to train and upgrade their personnel and are in no way demeaning to either the professional or nonprofessional worker. They are, however, revealing.

Some cognizance should be taken in evaluating that the library is, in most instances, in a monopoly position. Bookstores, doing without informal borrowing patterns, would appear to be the only competition. Relative use of branches and book buying indices might be utilized, but the special techniques applicable to monopolies should be a part of library evaluation.

Another evaluative technique largely neglected by these articles is that of including nonusers as part of the evaluating group, instead of considering only users as qualified judges or consumers. Such a limitation can be valid only for a service that is not oriented to expansion, such as a highly specialized industry library. This limitation is inconceivable in a public library or school library of any sort. Nonusers must not only be considered a vital part of the evaluator group, but must be sought in an aggressive, carefully selected and categorized manner.

Neither users nor nonusers tend to be creative in response to survey or interview. For this reason, as well as for efficiency in synthesizing and analyzing, checklists are frequently presented, such as: If the following six services were offered, which ones would you use most? Which others would you suggest? This is a responsible technique which often stimulates more creative responses as well as being a good determination of new directions. The use of the in-depth interview is another method that has been proven revealing and indicative, yet was not mentioned in the accompanying articles.

The avoidance of these more sophisticated techniques might indicate either an unwillingness to hear results, an unwillingness to utilize other experts, or an unawareness as to how far the area of evaluation has progressed. I suspect again that insecurity about the public's response has made the librarian subconsciously avoid hardhitting answers at the same time that professional responsibility and awareness has made him attempt evaluation of some sort.

Let us now look at some social trends which will surely apply to library evaluations. The first is the concept of accountability. Libraries must specify to whom they are accountable, and in what ways, before they can judge progress or achievement. The concept of accountability is being widely applied at present to a variety of public services, especially public schools. The burden-shifting of the past—"I could not teach this child to do addition because his parents are getting a divorce"—is being severely and critically viewed, and services are being

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asked to deal with the specific problem at hand. As we see the diminu-
tion of government block aid, we will see more and more local cry for
accountability. The questions asked will be: Is this what we need? Is this
what we wanted? Are they doing a good job? Libraries must be pre-
pared to cope with this on a local level.

Closely tied to this is a tendency to put everything on a dollars and
cents basis—the cost-benefit analysis and social cost accounting being
two notable examples of this. I think we may go too far in putting a
dollar figure on everything. How can the value of a child reading a
book that changes his motivation or his life be determined? It may well
be that libraries in conjunction with like agencies must resist this trend
or at least limit its use to gauging productivity of certain departments
and certain classifications of employees.

Increasing leisure time and the very real problem of what to do with
it will be offering libraries new opportunities in new directions, from
utilization of volunteers and more community activities, to more re-
search capacity in areas of community interest, etc. Responsiveness to
this trend should be a measurable aim as the library becomes a central
facility in the less structured aspects of the individual's life.

What Alvin Toffler has described as "ad hocism" will surely affect
library organization and hence evaluation. Ad hocism is an extension
of the task-force type of organization wherein a staff and materials are
assembled for a particular project, existing only as long as that project.
As libraries move into this type of administration, evaluative techni-
ques for the particular project will have to be instituted and, addition-
ally, techniques for deciding whether ad hoc projects are worthwhile or
too disruptive to ongoing services. As libraries seek to reach more
publics, ad hoc projects will probably become increasingly important,
and libraries will be evaluated on their ability to react quickly and
flexibly to new community needs.

Communities, too, are becoming more aware of their needs and of
their desire for an increased sense of community. This desire, how-
ever, is increasing at the same time that federal funding is decreasing,
making the community face the fact that needs are hierarchical, that
one may displace another and that all can be listed by priorities.
Libraries will fit in somewhere on this list of priorities, and must in turn
become attuned to priorities within their own system. Is reference as
important or more important than the children's story hour? In a less
affluent but more self-conscious world, these are the kind of questions
an evaluation should answer. There are many kinds of scale
methodologies currently in use in the behavioral sciences which should

be of help here. The important thing is that libraries recognize the comparative nature of needs within government agencies and community services and within the library itself.

The impact of technology upon libraries, as well as upon every other facet of life, is one that must not be overlooked. The universal card, easy reproduction of materials, fascimile transmission, research print-outs and decentralized terminals are all technically—and often financially—available, but we are slow to adjust our habits, our patterns and our thinking to them. Libraries should include in their evaluations a searching series of questions as to where technology should or should not be adopted, where it is feasible and desirable and where it is not. When faced with a change in our thinking, the first reaction is that technology is not needed. This reaction should be rigorously and ruthlessly challenged. As we all know, technology is coming—and for libraries much of it is already here.

Decisions of this nature will necessarily involve libraries in long-range planning, another notable trend. There were no questions in any of the evaluation papers that dealt with this aspect of the library, yet as in all other fields long-range planning is essential. Services, referrals, acquisition, and every aspect of the library depend upon long-range planning; it would seem that an evaluation would ask searching questions in regard to the library's image of its future. Many evaluations now include an evaluation of a five-year plan or a three-year plan for every operational aspect. Increasingly we are recognizing that the future does not just come, that we do not need to accept trends but that we may shape them, that we may choose among alternatives, never with whole knowledge, but with at least some effect. In some way, libraries must come to grips with where they wish to go and how they are going to get there.

As we become more involved with future planning, there is growing realization that a small managerial group or a professional elite cannot plan or execute its plans without public participation. Recognition of the place of the public, its role and its capacities, should be part of any organization and any evaluation. How is the library allowing for public input into its decision-making and its evaluation? This is the kind of question that will be asked in the years ahead.

At the same time that libraries are reaching out broadly to new publics, to the whole public, specialization is advancing rapidly. As stated above, librarians cannot be experts in evaluation and should not be expected to be. This trend toward specialization will have impact on the libraries in a variety of ways as projects and roles emerge for the

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nonlibrary specialist in a library setting. Evaluating where the professionally trained librarians can be used best and where other training is more valuable will become an important decision. Evaluation should give the library administrator the decision-making tools.

And finally, there is the new word, ambience. What does the library feel like? What does it say to the public, or to each of its publics? The physical equipment of the library is not just books, but how the chairs are arranged and the provisions made for comfort. These are the intangibles that have made libraries magic places for generations of Americans. As a little girl in a small town library, my ambition was to start with the *A* shelf and read everything through the *Z* shelf. The atmosphere of the library made me spend hundreds of afternoons there curled in a pseudo-colonial maple chair in front of a gas log fire. My tastes may be more sophisticated now, but that atmosphere has never been surpassed. A variety of atmospheres is necessary for a library—and the physical appearance and ambience (two separate things) should be evaluated along with the number and quality of books on a shelf, for it is with this ambience that millions of us have been so hooked, have fallen so in love with libraries that we will never get over it. Dear librarians, please do not be so insecure; you can take a real evaluation, you will show up well—and you will learn a great deal.

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