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Studying the Community: An Overview

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THE IMPORTANCE of community analysis, which serves as the foundation for governmental planning at all levels, cannot be overestimated as today's societal problems multiply and become increasingly complex. "The more fateful the problem grows of how daily life is experienced where one lives and labors," Roland Warren observes, "the more important it becomes to seek a valid understanding of why things are as they are, so that we may go on to consider how they may become worthy of the best that is in us."[1]

Ironically, libraries have been little concerned with their potentially important role in community analysis, nor have they effectively utilized the products of community analysis in their own planning. Too often the library has not even been considered an element of the community worthy of study by professional planners. Browse the shelves of richly varied books about the American community in any library of more than modest size. Study the analytical documents proliferating from planning and development agencies which abound in every state. How many references can be found dealing with libraries? When libraries are mentioned, how many reflect an understanding of their potentially active and important roles in the community? How much of the substance of these publications has been used in the process of determining the objectives for individual libraries?

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

The full understanding of the communities in which our libraries operate, be they urban, suburban, or rural, is no longer solely the province of professional planners. In addition to demographic factors, an understanding of social and physical indicators and the complexity of community structures is involved. Similarly, public policy is not

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[433]

determined independently by the elected officials, the planners, or the heads of individual agencies working in isolation. In recent years ordinary citizens have begun to participate more actively in the planning processes. Articulate local groups are influencing community decisions as well as the expenditure of funds necessary to implement the community's goals and objectives. As a result, analyzing the community is not a simple process of determining the numbers of people, their gross characteristics, educational levels, economic levels, and racial composition. This information is basic, but effective community analysis involves more. Developing a useful profile of a community now requires a complex range of information. An accurate picture should be drawn to serve as the basis for decisions on goals and objectives. Available funds can then be allocated within a framework of priorities undergirded by substantive information.

In this process, public services such as libraries must justify their financial support on the basis of their ability to fulfill community needs. Funds will no longer be distributed on the strength of what was allocated the previous year, but on the basis of priorities of services to be performed. John Gardner suggests that this process of problem solving will require the research of social structures, the renewal of institutions and the incentive of new human arrangements, and that familiar ways of doing things will be endangered.[2] A writer from the field of public administration states: "Policy, performance, impact and feedback are all products of local administration. From the perspective of the client, they are the real meaning of government and public service. If they are not right, or cannot be changed to suit the citizen's desires, then the faults may challenge his sense of satisfaction with the government and his sense of control over its activities."[3]

Today we see evidence of these processes at work at various governmental levels and from differing societal viewpoints. Citizens are newly aware that something *can* be done about their most pressing problems. Local neighborhood improvement groups form and seek new or improved services. City and town governments attempt to deal with conflicts of interest, to set priorities, and to cope with financial shortages. States establish required planning districts in order to resolve interjurisdictional problems. Community analysis is recognized as essential in governmental management and has contributed to better response to the real needs of individuals and their communities.

Individual agencies and institutions, including libraries, are also being told repeatedly that they, too, must meet the needs of their users. Indeed, their survival will depend on meeting those needs. If they are

not met, other, more responsive agencies will be created to do the job. Individual communities can threaten to withdraw from or refuse to join library systems lest their needs be ignored. Urban and suburban libraries are sometimes in conflict, each claiming a lack of understanding by the other of their particular problems.

State library agencies are also involved in community analysis. They must analyze the patchwork for which they are responsible—a complexity of dense urban, suburban, small city, small town, and unincorporated rural areas. Coherent and acceptable statewide plans which meet the greatest possible diversity of needs are essential. Moreover, these needs are continually changing at all levels. For example, public libraries have historically been most successful in serving children. Today this population is declining and libraries are acutely aware that in the future the need will be to serve an ever-increasing older population. In the past, libraries have served older citizens poorly or not at all. Will senior citizens in the future be served with imaginative creative programs as successfully as children have been traditionally? Would libraries have responded more readily and more effectively to this new need if a continuing process of sound community analysis had been practiced? Would they have anticipated earlier the necessity to refocus if they had been active in the community-wide analysis and planning process?

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY ANALYSIS FOR LIBRARIES

For some time, critics of public libraries have emphasized the necessity for clearly defined goals, and have deplored the vagueness and haphazard formulation of presently existing objectives. Others have said that universally adopted goals are not practical except in the most general sense; instead, each library must develop its own goals, determined by the uniqueness of each community or institution. Assuming the latter to be true, community analysis on the part of the library is critical, and must be a constant process.

The first considerations in attempting to establish library goals usually relate to the people who are now unserved as well as to those who are presently served, and to increasing the population to be reached in the future. It is a cause for concern that many segments of the population are not served by the library. Groups heretofore relatively unserved and unresponsive include the disadvantaged, ethnic minorities, the illiterate and semiliterate, residents of institutions, and the aging. In an attempt to reach these groups,

numerous experiments have been undertaken. These experiences have been extensively described and reported, but little thorough analysis has been involved. The nineteen studies of various aspects of library service in Indiana under the sponsorship of the Indiana State Library do, however, comprise a valuable body of research at the state level.[4] Lipsman's analysis of library service to the disadvantaged in fifteen cities provides a starting point for the collection of data on service to the deprived which will answer questions about the disadvantaged to be served by libraries in the future.[5]

Banfield asserts that many of our library services are already obsolete and are the business of some other public or private agency.[6] If he is right, libraries which fail to reevaluate objectives in terms of current demands may find their support dwindling relative to that of other services.

Again, many questions must be answered. Are services which are thought to be obsolete in libraries now performed better or more efficiently by other agencies? If so, the transfer is reasonable. Are there other library services which should replace those becoming obsolete? For example, public libraries are currently examining their roles as suppliers of information and referral services. Information needs are widespread and varied. Indeed, new independent agencies providing information services are springing up daily. Is the library at fault for not anticipating the need for these services? Would better community analysis have helped libraries revamp traditional reference functions so that they could become information and referral services in the broadest sense? How much would such a change cost in terms of staff retraining, added materials and other out-of-pocket expenses? How much use of the new services could be anticipated in comparison to those traditionally provided? Numerous libraries are now initiating community information services, some are modifying existing departments, and others are starting new information and referral centers separate from traditional reference departments. In any case, no one knows the volume of use to expect or what the costs will be. Can the information needs of the community be served more effectively through the library than through new agencies? Within each library the decision must be made whether to expand present services or to set up a new department, or whether the service should be centralized or decentralized through branches.

New adult education services are also being considered by libraries as the forces of change emphasize the importance of continuing education for large segments of the population. Recent studies have

found that less than one-third of the people desiring continuing education have an opportunity to engage in adult education.[7] Most of these do not want to or cannot return to school. They are potential "adult independent learners." Can libraries satisfy the needs of these people? What segments of the population would avail themselves of such services? Again, what would be the cost to libraries? In this case, the College Entrance Examination Board is conducting such an analysis as a pilot project so that individual libraries will have a basis for determining the practicality of providing such a service if the community analysis reveals that this is an unmet need. Data are being collected which will help the libraries; however, better methods of measuring the effectiveness of library services are urgently needed. A beginning has been made by DeProspo and others at Rutgers.[8] The process of planning, programming and evaluation promises to insure better financial control and to provide the data so necessary in this era of accountability.

THE EXTENT OF LIBRARY PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

A survey of the general literature on community analysis indicates that almost no attention has been paid to libraries. A search of the literature yielded only one chapter in one book in the entire field of community studies and planning which deals specifically with libraries.[9]

In the past ten years, federal library funds (LSCA grants) have been variously used for surveys and plans at the state level.[10] These have been library surveys rather than analyses of communities which provided the rationale for the service's existence. Every state but one has had either a statewide survey, state plan, or surveys of individual regions, counties and cities. Until recently, most surveys tended to analyze the services of the library. Limited analysis of the communities being served was included. In the early 1970s, many of these surveys were conducted by library consultants and by professional research firms. Most surveys described the level of library development at the time. There was little provision for continuous updating.

More recently, concentration has been on the techniques of planning and evaluation, including community analysis. Self-studies have been conducted in some libraries. State libraries have been encouraged to adopt the CIPP (Context-Input-Planning-Program) model for planning and some have adopted the process as a result. Widespread

adoption of this process is significant since it does originate with the "context" or environment in which the service is to be rendered.

A few of the large urban libraries have commissioned surveys and studies yielding a body of library planning information which has had an influence on other libraries. All of these recognize the necessity of beginning any evaluation of libraries with a study of the communities they serve. These include: Lowell Martin's studies of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore,[11] the Chicago Public Library,[12] and Tucson Public Library;[13] John Frantz's study of the Brooklyn Public Library;[14] and the Arthur D. Little study of the San Francisco Public Library.[15] The Indiana studies mentioned earlier comprise the major work done at the state level. More recently, some new techniques for systematic analysis of libraries at the local level have been demonstrated. The Rutgers study by DeProspo and others mentioned earlier promises to provide a methodology applicable to various types of libraries and useful in libraries of all sizes. Unfortunately, only the early phases of the original project were funded. These techniques are now being further applied in statewide demonstrations. In addition, Newhouse's in-depth analysis of library use in Beverly Hills[16] will be useful to other libraries; the study done for the Denver Urban Observatory on public library use in Denver may also prove of interest.[17] Robbins examines the relationship between the library and the community from another angle.[18]

OPPORTUNITIES FOR LIBRARIES TO ENGAGE IN COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

There are three avenues which a library may take to realize the benefits of community analysis. First, it can hire a consultant. With a competent consultant, this approach will produce results most quickly. It may also be productive in the long run if part of the project serves to educate the staff to continue the process of analysis on an ongoing basis. A second alternative is to conduct a self-study. This approach may take longer and even be more costly if a thorough job is done and the project includes staff training by an expert. It strengthens staff competency which will be a continuing advantage. Finally, a library can participate in community analysis with other community agencies, including governmental planning units and citizen planning groups. Regional planning agencies now serve almost all standard metropolitan statistical areas. These are logical agencies for libraries to approach for assistance and to join as members. Marilyn Gell, a library planner with the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments,

reports: "It is time for libraries to see themselves in this role, to think about cooperating with non-library officials and to affiliate themselves with these regional councils. While other forms of library cooperation have been extensive, and at times effective, it is this political element which has been overlooked. It is significant that of the over 300 regional councils in the country, only three (Denver, Baltimore, and Washington) have any involvement with libraries."[19]

In summary, libraries involved in community analysis will realize both direct and indirect benefits. Planning and goal setting will be based on total community needs from the widest perspective—not from the tunnel vision of the library. Change can be managed more responsibly; that is, the need for change can be better anticipated in time to make positive adjustments. The library will acquire new advocates among planners, governmental representatives and citizens in the process of the community analysis. A broader understanding of financial needs will result. The library will also gain a better understanding of the activities and problems of other agencies and organizations. Cooperation will thus be more natural and practical.

The importance of community analysis and libraries cannot be overestimated. The papers in this issue of *Library Trends* provide a substantial introduction to the topic by experts from librarianship and other disciplines. It is hoped that this will provide every library administration with the stimulation and information necessary to get started.

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