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Directing Rural Libraries: A Review of
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Idaho

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Introduction

“There is an assumption that the public library is predominantly an urban institution, and ... that depends on how the word ‘urban’ is defined...” (Sager, p. 5). Furthermore, it can depend on how the word “rural” is defined. Approximately eighty-two percent of public libraries in the U.S. serve populations of under 25,000 (Vavrek, May 1983, p. 966). Idaho public libraries fall in line with the national statistic by being approximately eighty percent rural (*E.D. TAB: Public Libraries in the United States: Fiscal Year 1999*). Whether or not one agrees with the projection that “...most public libraries, even the smallest, will be led by professional managers” (Kirwin, p. 7), the library and information science profession needs to increase its knowledge about those among its ranks who manage the majority of the nation’s public libraries.

Problem and Purpose

A major barrier to the tracking of trends in the management of rural library and information services is the paucity of data. Both quantitative and qualitative data, in this regard, would enable the unmasking or refining of generalizations applied to rural communities of varying sizes and locations. The revival of interest in rural librarianship in the past has brought greater attention to the problems of rural library and information services and has, to a certain degree, enhanced the gathering of data. Examples include the establishment of the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship in Clarion, Pennsylvania in 1978; initiation of a Rural Library Services Committee as part of the Public Library Development at the School of Library and Information Science at the University of Missouri-Columbia; publication of the Rural Library Services newsletter and the periodical *Rural Libraries*; convening of conferences in various regions specifically to address rural library issues; job descriptions in professional journals asking for knowledge or experience in rural library development; and professional library programs which offer an emphasis for rural librarians.

However, in spite of these developments, there is still a great need for research on rural libraries in order to understand their operational environments and to devise strategies capable of handling the library and information service needs of persons in the information age. Although a certain amount of anecdotal literature exists on the rural library experience, as well as a host of statistical and other types of reports done by system, state, regional and national library agencies, “the body of knowledge which constitutes the present state of rural librarianship...is almost totally empirical in nature with little or no theoretical connectors. In other words, knowledge of rural librarianship is comprised of pockets or islands of information, for the most part in the hands of practitioners in the field” (Norris, p. 23).

With such a void in the existing knowledge base concerning rural library and information service, researchers are faced with the task of selecting the components that could shed light on the theoretical implications. One such component of the rural library service conundrum that can be viewed as critical and a top priority in this research agenda is the recruitment and retention of personnel directing rural libraries. As Alice Bryan pointed out years ago in the *The Public Librarian*: "The public library is no exception to the general rule that an institution is as good as its personnel" (Bryan, p. 3).

Virtually no research has been done, however, relating to the recruitment and retention of librarians in rural areas of the U.S. One of the major problems facing rural public libraries is the recruitment and retention of directors. In Moscow, Idaho, the Latah County Library District suspended a third consecutive failed search for a Library Director January 1, 2002. The reason for the failed searches was a low salary. The Latah County Library District had no problems in recruiting for non-administrative librarians during the same time period (*Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, Jan. 7, 2002). In the 2001 ALA (American Library Association) Recruitment and Retirement Survey, the survey identified that finding experienced staff for middle and top management positions is a problem for libraries (American Library Association, 2001). A 2003 Recruitment and Retention Survey of ARL Librarians concluded that salary range was considered an enhancement and a barrier by an equal number of respondents (20 or 29%). In addition, the survey concluded that position responsibilities and salary have a high impact (46%), followed closely by benefits (42%), on the retention of librarians (Stevens & Streatfeild, p.12). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide a review of literature and research that can relate in some way to the recruitment and retention of public library directors.

Public Library Literature

There is little research in the field of library and information studies dealing with rural staffing issues. No research was located pertaining to factors affecting the recruitment and retention of library directors working in rural public libraries. However, the literature and research that does relate in some way to the proposed topic is briefly reviewed here.

Rural library funding shortages are legion. They are of special consequence currently because, along with older better understood expenses like salaries, books, and building maintenance, rural library budget makers need to add items for information technology machinery, communications networks, and software and media collections. Libraries serving populations between 1,000 and 10,000 (a vast majority of rural libraries) had per capita support two or three dollars less than the national average (Chute, 1992, p. 41). The problem of low per capita support and relatively small budgets is fundamentally related to the U.S. tradition of local taxation to support local government services. It also is related to the historically low rate of taxes on rural land, farm equipment, and out buildings. Some rural library districts are poor because their districts are poor. Others are poor because their constituencies, who have the means to do so, choose not to support their libraries. Still, others have funds because they have won solid tax support from middle-income and business constituencies. Then, there are those groups that are in states where some equalization formula serves to provide a solid base of public income that evens out relative wealth and poverty for local library units. In short, there is no one rural library funding problem.

Rural libraries apportion their smaller budgets in different ways than larger libraries do. The biggest difference is that rural libraries, with the smallest budgets, spent the smallest proportions of those budgets on staff and more on collections (Chute, 1992). That is not an accident. That is a policy choice. Those libraries are forced to choose between books or staff. The relatively low percentages of total budget spent on staff helps explain the low number of library professionals (with and without an ALA accredited MLS) found in rural libraries. The percentage of total full-time equivalents in rural libraries with an ALA accredited MLS ranges from 2.5 percent for libraries serving less than 1,000 persons to 19.5 percent serving populations of from 10,000 to 24,999 (Chute, 1992, p. 27). By way of comparison, the city of St. Louis Public Library, with 250 full-time employees, has about 22 percent professional staff. To sum up, the boards of trustees of rural libraries have made conscious budget decisions, first to spend less overall on staff, and second, to employ less well-trained staff. In other words, rural libraries have

maximized books and minimized their institutional ability to offer skilled professional library service or management.

Although published in 1952, Bryan's study on the public librarian, based on data from *The Public Library Inquiry*, is still the most comprehensive analysis of the subject. The population-size groups used in this study include 1) communities with more than 500,000 (metropolitan libraries), 2) 100,000 – 499,999 (large libraries), 3) 10,000 – 99,999 (medium-sized libraries), 4) 2,500 – 9,999 (small libraries) and 5) county libraries (varying sizes). Although the study does not specifically address factors associated with the smaller communities that contributed to the findings of her research, they did show corresponding increases in educational levels of librarians along with the salaries and size of population served (Bryan, 1952).

Douglass's 1957 study on the librarian personality gathered background information on the size of home city for librarians selected as participants. He found that approximately twenty-five percent of the librarians surveyed came from places with a population of 5,000 or less, around thirty percent from cities of 5,000 to 50,000, over twenty-five percent from cities between 50,000 and 500,000 and the remaining twenty percent from cities over 500,000. Compared with the figures for the general population at the time, Douglass's figures suggested "the possibility that librarians may be drawn from medium size and moderately large communities to a greater extent than from small or rural communities or from large cities (Douglass, 1957).

An investigation of professional growth and continuing education for librarians, conducted by Stone in 1969, tested possible relationships between the size of the general geographical area worked in and various aspects of professional development. The five categories used relating to size were 1) a large city of 100,000 population or more; 2) a suburb near a large city; 3) a small or middle-sized city of 10,000 – 100,000, but not a suburb; 4) a town of less than 10,000 and 5) the open country. Stone later collapsed these categories into a dichotomy of larger and smaller populations and found that there was a significant correlation between professional development activity and residence in heavily populated areas. The collapsing of the original five categories, unfortunately, masks certain data regarding smaller, rural populations such as those of populations 25,000 or 10,000 and less (Stone, 1969).

McCrossan looked at the educational preparation of librarians working in small public libraries, which he defined as libraries serving population of 10,000 to 35,000, as these were "presumably large enough to employ fully-qualified professional staff members" (McCrossan, 1967, p. 237). Head librarians and other librarians, devoting at least half-time to professional duties, were studied in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan and Wisconsin. Nearly half (48.1 percent) of the head librarians surveyed had a fifth-year degree in library science, compared with 28.1 percent of the other librarians. Librarians with an undergraduate major or a fifth-year degree in library science were more likely to have worked in a larger number of libraries than those with less professional education. There was only a slight relationship (correlation coefficient of +.14) found between the size of communities and professional education of librarians. McCrossan noted that "it is sometimes assumed that professional librarians tend to live and work in metropolitan areas." In order to test that assumption, he compared metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas (using lists of Rand McNally Metropolitan Areas), and found that:

Of the librarians with professional degrees, 57.2 percent were employed in libraries located in metropolitan areas and 42.8 percent were employed in non-metropolitan areas. Of the librarians with less professional education, 41.6 percent worked in metropolitan areas and 58.4 percent worked in non-metropolitan areas. The correlation coefficient obtained (+.15) indicates only a slight relationship between library school education and employment in metropolitan area libraries (McCrossan, 1967, p. 243).

The study's findings partially supported McCrossan's speculation that librarians working in states with mandatory certification for public librarians would have more professional education than those working in states not requiring certification. Other factors considered to have a possible bearing on

educational levels of librarians in a particular state include the wealth of the state, whether or not the state has a library school, and the educational level of the general population.

The finding that younger librarians had, on the average, higher levels of education than older librarians led McCrossan to surmise that future small libraries would be staffed by better-qualified personnel but that “this improvement will not be realized...unless a sizable proportion of the younger librarians with library school degrees remain in small libraries and additional graduate librarians can be recruited.” Although the development of undergraduate programs for educating personnel for work in small public libraries is offered as a possible solution, McCrossan does not see this as the most desirable one. “Since librarians employed in small libraries work in relative isolation with only occasional consultant help from state library agencies or library system headquarters; therefore, they need the best library science education available – the fifth-year program – if they are going to provide good library service” (McCrossan, 1967, p. 244).

Williamson, in 1923, expressed his concern about staffing in rural public libraries:

In the ordinary small town and rural community the uneducated librarian – who does not have a wide knowledge of books and human nature, who does not understand the manifold applications of science to our common life, who is not well informed and deeply interested in social and economic problems, who does not have a real understanding of the problems of community life and organization, who, in other words, has not the education or capacity for community leadership or the special training necessary to make leadership felt through a library service – can be of very little value (Williamson, 1971, p. 133).

Williamson, recognizing that there were many communities too small or too poor to secure the services of a professionally trained librarian, felt that there was but one solution: make the library unit large enough to provide efficient service, such as the county system. Until such systems could be implemented, Williamson called for education, standardization, and certification as means for addressing staffing issues, at the same time, cautioning that “certification will not set aside economic law. Where adequate salaries cannot be paid, certification and a supply of professionally trained librarians will avail little” (Williamson, 1971, p. 134). The program recommended by Williamson in 1923 was one which essentially has remained intact to this day: “secure librarians with college education and professional training whenever that is economically possible; in the smaller places be satisfied for the time being with the best that can be had” (Williamson, 1971, p. 135).

Myers's review of supply and demand issues for library personnel pointed out the increasing numbers of new library school graduates and practitioners who were moving to information-related positions outside of the traditional library setting, and predicted that with shifts of responsibility from federal to state and local levels, the expansion or reduction in library positions would probably become more sensitive to changes in local or regional economics. The lack of comprehensive data on the total number of librarians was cited as one of the problems encountered in exploring the supply issue. In terms of demand, Myers notes that in a study of California librarians, strong correlations were found in public library employment between past employment levels and population size, total expenditures for local and state governments and property tax revenue (Myers, 1981).

Related to geographical issues, placement officers estimated that anywhere from fifty to seventy percent of library school graduates preferred to stay in the geographical area in which their school is located. Libraries located outside of areas having library schools occasionally had recruitment problems, especially in rural areas. Myers speculated that this may have been due to unattractive salaries more than location, but such speculation was not based on formal study. A general concern was that: “With many library schools recruiting and placing students with interest in information manager jobs and other practitioners transferring their skills into nonlibrary areas, library employers may find it difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff” (Myers, 1981, p. 111).

A more recent study on supply and demand in library personnel was conducted by King Research for the National Center for Education Statistics and the Office of Libraries and Learning Technologies. The study provided an overview of the current library employment situation as well as the overall supply and demand picture through 1990, and attempted to describe the non-library information professional market. Findings of interest to this proposal related to the predicted future employment situation by geographical area (King Research, 1983).

In 2003, Pollock (2004) surveyed 368 respondents from the University of Texas at Austin, Texas Woman's University, and University of North Texas graduate library programs in an effort to better understand the goals and expectations of students and to have a better understanding of their perceptions of libraries and librarianship. The 2003 survey mimicked a 2001 survey he conducted. Respondents were asked to list their most important consideration when deciding on applying for a job. The number one consideration when deciding on applying for a job was the work environment. Following that was the geographic location. Salary came in a distant third in consideration. However, the respondents were also asked to list their second most important consideration when deciding on applying for a job. Salary was the number one response. Both surveys asked if the librarian thought libraries have difficulties in recruiting librarians. In the 2001 survey, almost 68% replied that they thought libraries **were** having difficulties recruiting librarians. However, the 2003 survey resulted in 55% of respondents saying that they felt libraries **were not** having any problem recruiting the librarians they needed. For this question, those surveyed were allowed to leave a comment on why they thought there was a problem in recruiting librarians. Of those who left comments, 55% mentioned compensation as a factor.

A few surveys exist that provided data on public libraries and librarians in communities of various sizes. These are discussed briefly as they provide descriptive statistics on rural libraries and rural library staff.

In 1974, Drennan and Shelby looked at the library and information needs of those living in geographically remote areas of the U.S. and arrived at twenty-three different implications of remoteness on rural services. Their findings, while not specifically dealing with issues surrounding procuring and retaining professional staff in rural areas, did point out that:

Given the shortage of professionals, the needs for employment and personalized services, and the proven effectiveness of indigenous paraprofessionals, the logical model is a number of paraprofessionals with one professional, the latter responsible for locating information and organizing services, the former for the transfer of information (Drennan and Shelby, 1974, p. 184).

The National Rural Library Reference Survey, conducted by the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship (CSRL) in 1981, sampled 1,111 public libraries drawn at random from the *American Library Directory*, and defined rural as a community with a population of under 25,000. Of the 666 public libraries (60 percent) responding to the survey, around thirty-five percent were located in cities of under 2,500; thirty-nine percent in the population range 2,500 to 10,000; and around twenty-five percent in the population range 10,000 to 25,000. For both population ranges, approximately eighty percent of all funds to operate the public libraries came from local municipalities, townships and counties. Of particular interest are their findings relating to staffing of rural public libraries. CSRL found that libraries on average have between 8 and 9 staff members; an average of 3.34 full time staff; an average of 3.18 part time staff; and an average of 2.22 volunteers. On average, slightly more than 0.8 staff members had a Master of Library Science degree. When they re-surveyed 106 of the original 666 respondents, they found that just over half of the 106 libraries did not have even one master's degree librarian; over one-third had 1 or 2; and fewer than one-tenth had 3 or more (Head, 1984).

Another CSRL survey on rural librarians was conducted in 1982, using the same definition of rural and a random sample of 119 libraries from the *American Library Directory* (Head, 1983). Questions from this study focused on rural librarians' attitudes towards organizations that potentially could lessen the sense of isolation felt by rural librarians. Local library systems and state libraries were found to be two of

the most important organizations for reducing feelings of isolation, while the American Library Association played a minimal role in reducing such feelings (Head, 1983).

Sager (1982) combined and analyzed data from several major library studies on the public library, using the following population categories 1) all libraries (public), 2) 500,000 or more, 3) 250,000-499,999, 4) 100,000-249,999, 5) 50,000-99,999, 6) 10,000-49,999 and 7) under 10,000. In summarizing, Sager noted that, "the most common type of public library (54.2% of 5,431) serves a population of under 10,000." Sager then concluded that in the majority of these libraries, there were "three or fewer FTE employees" ...and that "four out of five of those libraries would be located in rural areas" (Sager, 1982, p. 39).

Rural Literature: What is Rural?

Rural is an inexact term that can mean different things to different people. Attempts at defining rural range from demographic to psychological. In fact, defining rural becomes more of a subjective term than what is defined by any dictionary.

While rural is commonly treated as a single idea (both in research and in everyday conversations) careful reviews have pointed out its multidimensional nature (Deavers, 1992; Miller and Luloff, 1981). Most uses of the term "rural" reflect a mixture of different ways in which a place (or a group of people) can be described as distinctively rural. Drawing on this premise, one can identify at least four basic dimensions of meaning: demographic, economic or occupational, social structure, and cultural.

Demographic

The most obvious sense of what rural means is the demographic dimensions, referring simply to how many people are concentrated in an area, along with where they are located. Rural means areas of sparse populations, either in the small total number of people who live there or in their low density (i.e., ratio of people to available space). Another element of the demographic meaning of rural is location outside the political boundaries of an urban area. People and places located inside the city limits are counted as urban, while everything located outside the city limits is labeled rural. Defining rural in demographic terms depicts it as an objective, numerical, physical attribute of a place or a population, referring only to where people live and how many of them live there (Deavers, 1992; Miller and Luloff, 1981).

Economic

Beyond mere demographics, the idea of rural also has an economic meaning. It may imply something about how the people in the area make a living. We stereotypically think of rural as a place where people tend to live off the land and depend directly on the exploitation of natural resources. In its traditional meaning, rural is treated as a synonym for agricultural. Note that this defines rural in occupational terms, applying it to less technologically developed communities where the economy is simple, non-industrial, and labor intensive. While this obviously refers to farming, it might also include mining, fishing, logging, hunting, or tourism as primary subsistence occupations (Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990).

Social Structural

Another common meaning of rural includes social structural considerations that reflect the distinctive character of social life and social order in rural communities. In social structural terms, the defining attributes of rural life are intimacy, informality, and homogeneity, that is, everyone knows everyone else, knows someone who knows them, and they are pretty much the same as everyone else. By virtue of the smaller numbers of people in rural settings, social connections are more immediate (face-

to-face), more intense or primary, and more complete (based on knowledge of personal biographies rather than formal role positions). Because of the greater familiarity, rural social order is maintained through informal mechanisms of social control rather than through formal mechanisms and legal institutions (MacLeish & Young, 1942; West, 1945; Vidich & Bensman, 1958).

Cultural

The fourth component of the common meaning of rural is cultural, referring to distinctive sets of attitudes, beliefs, values, knowledge systems, and behaviors that characterize the people living in rural areas. Viewing rural as a cultural phenomenon that goes beyond geographic or demographic conditions has much intuitive appeal. However, defining rural in cultural terms complicates the attempt to do systematic research on rural events. First, it makes the idea of rural rather subjective and difficult to study objectively because the idea of culture is notoriously difficult to quantify. Moreover, it limits by definition issues that might otherwise be regarded as matters for empirical investigation (MacLeish & Young, 1942; West, 1945; Vidich & Bensman, 1958).

Other Disciplines

The fields of medicine, mental health, and education have also been concerned for many years with the recruitment and retention of practitioners in rural areas.

Medicine

With 20% of the population of the United States residing in rural areas, only about 11% of physicians practice in rural communities (Brooks, Walsh, Mardon, Lewis, and Clawson, 2002). A key factor in the decisions that graduating physicians make in regards to where they will practice has been studied thoroughly (Rabinowitz, Diamond, Markham, and Hazelwood, 1999; Looney, Blondell, Gagel, and Pentecost, 1998; Fryer, Stine, Vohjir, and Miller, 1997; Stratton, Geller, Ludtke, and Fickenscher, 1991). These studies were consistent in their findings that rural practicing physicians had a positive association with a rural upbringing.

Mental Health

More than 85% of 1,669 federally designated mental health professional shortage areas are rural (Bird, Dempsey, and Hartley, 2001). Holzer, Goldsmith, and Ciarlo (2000) found that few psychiatrists, psychologists, or clinical social workers practice in rural counties, and that the ratio of these providers to the population worsens as rurality increases. Furthermore, the data suggests that rural social service professionals exhibit higher rates of burnout compared to established norms, as well as lower levels of job satisfaction compared to recognized norms (DeStefano, Clark, Potter, and Gavin, 2005). A qualitative analysis by Paul Mackie and Tiffany Berg (2005) found that challenges in social work practice included agency and coworker conflict, lack of resources or funding, isolation, poor income/job insecurity, burnout, conflict with clients, and dual relationship conflicts.

Education

Although attention has been given to a variety of rural educational concerns, the heart of the system is the teacher. A survey of teacher mobility found that teachers leave communities because of geographic isolation, weather, distance from larger communities and family, and inadequate shopping. The study also found that teachers stayed in their rural jobs because of their principal, spousal employment in the community, and satisfaction with the rural lifestyle (Murphy & Angelski, 1996/1997).

Conclusion

Because there is little research in the field of library and information studies dealing with rural staffing issues, the review of the public library literature may be useful in determining a framework for any survey of Idaho 's public library directors and trustees, defining population-size groups, and in determining the types of questions to ask and how to categorize them. The concept of "rural" is a key element in the overall framework when eighty percent of Idaho 's libraries are considered to be in rural populations. It may also be very useful to explore the various meanings and applications of the term rural. In doing so, one may find that further exploration of the definition might be needed in order to define what rural means in regards to the study of Idaho 's public library directors and trustees. The review of other disciplines in the context of recruitment and retention of practitioners in rural areas is important because it takes us outside of the profession of library and information science and gives us an opportunity to see how those disciplines have studied the problem, how they have developed their studies, and the results of their studies.

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