

## **LSTA Public Library System Study: a Committee Report**

On July 21, 2003 a committee, established by SRLAAW to provide suggestions to DLTCL for the implementation of the Public Library System Study grant category, met in Madison to discuss the structure and future of public library systems. The participants began by trying to frame the important questions that needed to be addressed by any study of library systems. It was quickly noted that earlier efforts to consider changes in library system rules or structure too easily became bogged down by definitions (or the lack thereof) of effectiveness, and a predilection to jump to potential solutions rather than first establish a common understanding of the purpose of and rationale for library systems. Therefore, the committee intentionally pursued a different approach to developing its suggestions.

### **REVIEWING THE PURPOSE**

The committee proceeded to list the original purposes for establishing public library systems:

- A. To assure access to library services for all Wisconsin residents;
- B. To assist in the development and enhancement of local library services at all legal public libraries;
- C. To promote and facilitate resource sharing among all libraries.

The committee then discussed how successfully systems have addressed these purposes, and whether systems are still needed and for what purposes. The conclusion was that overall public library systems in Wisconsin have accomplished significant benefit in all three areas.

Interestingly, though many of the strengths of public library service in this state would not have been achieved without library system leadership, facilitation, and resources, the methods of providing this benefit and the advancement of technology has created an environment where library systems would not be required to sustain the benefit. For example, while library systems are instrumental in providing shared regional automation, this kind of collaboration could occur without systems and even at a different level. During the Library Legislative and Funding Task Force discussions, for instance, the question was raised as to why there was not a statewide shared automation system. Initiatives such as a statewide library card could actually move forward if a single statewide shared technology network was in place. And of course, we currently have an example of two library systems sharing a single shared automation system. The development of the statewide delivery system is another example where a primary system service has to some extent been moved away from systems to a higher level; certainly systems still support the statewide backbone, but there could be other methods of providing delivery if systems were to disappear. The contracts establishing BadgerLink and efforts by the Wisconsin Public Library Consortium to offer netLibrary on a nearly statewide basis demonstrate that some kinds of library services and resources can be more economically provided at a level above the region and via an institution other than the library system.

## THE UNIQUE ROLE

None of this suggests that the committee believes systems have served their purpose and should be eliminated, or that the systems which now support shared technology and delivery are not doing a fine job. However, it did prompt participants to consider what role is played by library systems that is not and could not reasonably be fulfilled by another agency. The conclusion was that public library systems have a unique value in their ability to offer direct customer services to local libraries that aid and encourage visioning and planning, problem solving, experimentation with new capabilities and philosophies, the enhancement of local library confidence and competence, and peer network development. In particular, systems have made great strides in pulling together the librarians in their regions into support groups that help each library to be stronger and every patron to be better served than would be the case if each autonomous library truly stood alone. It is unlikely that a similar kind of unity and cooperation would have developed if only the state library agency had played this role because the area would have been too large to allow people to feel connected. It is also unlikely that these connections would have sprung up from local efforts, at least not as widely as we have seen from library system efforts.

The committee then took this conclusion and asked if this role might not act as the framework for determining what an ideal public library system might look like if we were starting over with a clean slate. Specifically, the committee looked for factors that contribute to a library system's ability to satisfy this role, with the speculation that a consideration of how the factors relate to each other might result in a picture of how an ideal system would look for the future. If this were a possible and relevant result, the ideal system composition might be a guide for proposing changes, incentives, and new legislation that will help Wisconsin move forward beyond some of the obstacles and issues that have plagued public library systems for many years.

The committee does believe that before solutions can be found and progress can be made, the library community must accept a common understanding of what library systems are to be.

## FACTORS FOR ASSESSING SYSTEMS

The committee developed a list of eight factors that it offers to the process of studying the future structure of library systems. These factors are broken into primary and secondary, with the primary factors being those that are most fundamental to determining the nature and extent of services and tend to be quantifiable. The secondary factors are no less important in a practical sense but tend to be subjective, or evaluative, and speak to quality issues. One way to think about it is to see the secondary factors as dealing with potential, for example, the potential to have constructive relationships and strong leadership. Are there considerations in restructuring systems that might enhance the possibilities of attaining these valuable potentials? For factors 5 through 8 there might be the tendency to think in terms of individual people or existing system conditions. That is not the intention of the committee. Rather, we were concerned with the way characteristics of organizations contribute to certain outcomes.

### What About Funding?

In any discussion of factors that effect library services, one would immediately insist that the availability of financial resources must be one of those factors. Accordingly, the committee

started its list of factors with funding, but not far into the discussion decided that, while funding is significant and fundamental, it also has the tendency to limit inventive thinking because it is used to define possibilities. We do not believe that should be the case in a study of public library systems. It is also possible that as a result of a study of systems the current and proposed system aid formula could be changed if needed to equitably support any change in boundaries.

What our library systems have been able to accomplish has certainly been determined to a great extent by funding that has failed to keep up even with inflation. Limited funding, though, is almost inevitable for public agencies, so our success or failure cannot be seen as dependent exclusively on funding. These concerns led the committee to remove "funding" as a factor for any potential study. It will always eventually become a part of the discussion of how any visions come to fruition, but it should not be where the investigation begins.

### Primary Factors

1. Geographic Extent: this factor speaks to the physical size of the system. Is it too large to be able to maintain service over the entire area? Is it too small to gain the economies of scale?

What are the limits to geographic extent and how have current rules and requirements contributed to the size of existing systems?

2. Number of Member Libraries: this factor speaks to the size and mix of membership of a regional system. Does the composition of members contribute to efficiency and balance within the area, offering both breadth and depth of resources and range of environments that accommodate the needs and preferences of all types of users?

3. Population of the Service Area: this factor speaks to the demands and special considerations brought about by the number of people for whom services must be developed. This factor shares some characteristics with geographic extent though they do not always lead in the same direction.

4. Demographic Patterns: this factor speaks to the way people move within and outside of the system area. In what direction is the typical flow of travel? Do people live in one location and work in another? Do system boundaries relieve or exacerbate crossover and non-resident borrowing issues because of the demographic flow of the population within the region? For planning and networking purposes, system boundaries should mirror the residents' library usage patterns.

### Secondary Factors

5. Strength and Effectiveness of System Leadership: this factor speaks to what characteristics of leadership are most likely to result in strong and responsive library systems, and which elements of structure might attract people with the needed leadership skills.

6. The System's Rapport with a Larger Library: this factor speaks to the value of a constructive relationship between the library system and the most resource-rich library in the region. While it can be argued that the requirement for a resource library has outlived its relevance, there are still tangible benefits from the system having an active partner in the provision of services to the broad range of member libraries.

7. Cost Effectiveness of System Operations: this factor speaks to the degree of benefit that can be derived from the way in which limited resources are used. Does system structure lead to or prevent duplication of expenditures so the state gets the most bang for the buck? The intention here is to look beyond whether a given system's business practices are efficient to a larger view of what kind of system composition will assure the best use of resources for the state.

8. Ability to Provide and Enhance a Peer Network: this factor speaks to the benefit provided by people with similar challenges working together to help each other, and specifically to the library system's role in uniting these potentially isolated practitioners so that the benefit can be realized. As noted above, the committee sees this as a valuable role that uniquely belongs to library systems. So, what membership mix allows the most successful peer network development?

#### THE NEXT STEP, PLEASE

As you read through the list of factors, it surely struck you that some of these factors impinge on others. That is precisely what the committee observed. And it is central to what the committee thinks further investigation must include. Throughout our discussion, we moved back and forth through a range of methodologies for studying these issues and gathering data. Frankly, by the end of our talking, we had not selected a specific approach to achieving the next step, and some were not convinced that another study, regardless of who performed it, would necessarily take the Wisconsin library community very far. It was also not certain that we needed a new, concerted data gathering effort to lead us to the answers. Besides the outlining of the factors and the certainly that we need to better understand how the factors intermingle to affect the nature and meaningfulness of library system services, the closest we came to a consensus about process is that we are also certain that strong leadership will be needed to move beyond our current situation. That leadership should probably come from the Division for Libraries, Technology, and Community Learning, and probably needs to come in the form of statewide visioning. Achieving that common understanding of what library systems should be, as noted above, will require the determination and decisiveness of an umbrella institution, like DLTCL, that can look at the broad view of how all the state's residents can best be served by cooperative efforts of the various libraries which are drawn together regionally by the library systems. The committee strongly recommends, then, that DLTCL take up the challenge to provide this leadership. It can begin by utilizing the factors defined above to assess where we are as well as where we should be heading.

Respectfully submitted by the SRLAAW committee, July 30, 2003:

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