



Representing Libraries Worldwide

Small and Rural Libraries Discussion Paper

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Introduction

Three years ago, one of the authors traveled with his wife to a rural Midwestern U.S. town in northeastern Iowa for specialized medical treatment from a nationally-recognized doctor. Twice during the week, he visited the nearby local library. The small though substantial older building with a dated collection was staffed by one librarian and a part-time assistant supported by a total budget of \$60,000 (U.S.) including funds for materials, facilities, and personnel. One computer provided access to the Internet and limited, licensed information through a regional consortium. After leaving the city, they passed by two even smaller public libraries within a 30-minute drive.

Despite huge advances in technology during the last 40 years, he saw little difference between the information services at this small public library in 2004 from that experienced in 1966 at a small cultural center in the port city of Niigata, Japan. Now a thriving metropolis of nearly 2.5 million inhabitants and a hub of information technology like much of Japan, the then earthquake-damaged city lies to the northeast of Tokyo on the Japan Sea side of the island of Honshu, several hours by bullet train from the capital city. In contrast to present-day Niigata, however, decades into the Information Age, large pockets of information poverty sadly still prevail globally in developed as well in developing countries and regions of the world.

Another writer encountered a similar experience in 2006 on his way to the Public Library Association Conference in Boston. Passing through a small town in northeastern Connecticut, he stopped at the local public library. Books were stacked everywhere; it was difficult to negotiate the very crowded aisles. He couldn't find anything because of the poor arrangement. It had no reference section and very few seats, but there was a small and crowded children's area. He could not find a catalogue or finding aid to the collection. The one visible computer was for staff, who during his visit had difficulty logging-in. In addition, two other libraries that he had expected to visit that day were closed, apparently because of lack of funding.

As requested by the Members Council Small and Rural Libraries Discussion Group, the authors developed this background paper to describe information needs of small public libraries around the world. A small or rural library is defined herein as a public or government library administrative unit whose legal service area population equals 25,000 or less. In preparation for the group's upcoming discussion on services required by the OCLC Global Collaborative, this paper purposes to describe the variability in current services quantitatively and qualitatively as well as the information requirements of small libraries.

So, whether in a rural state like Iowa, an urban one like Connecticut, a Japanese metropolis, or elsewhere around the globe, the dilemma is similar: how can small libraries adequately serve their users? Jeff Baskin, Director of the North Little Rock Public Library, succinctly summarized this disappointing state of affairs, "Rural libraries comprising some 80% of the total worldwide are dying. We must find ways to help small libraries better serve the information and continuing education needs of their users" (Baskin, 2005).

After many years of visiting libraries on most continents, former Members Council delegate and President of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Christine Deschamps summarized the situation by saying that most libraries around the world still function in a difficult environment with a shortage of information. As a former member of the OCLC Board of Trustees, Madame Deschamps participated in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2000 and later reported on it to Council. She concluded by quoting Kay Raseroka of Botswana, then President of IFLA, "The World Summit on the Information Society is only the beginning of a process to make sure that people across the globe have the information they need for their lives, prosperity, and freedom" (Deschamps, 2004, §9).

World Library Data and Population Demographics

Description

An estimated 260,000 public library administrative units, more than half of which are in Europe, comprise the worldwide library census. Forty-five percent of the world's population lives in rural areas, ranging from 62% in Africa to 26% in South America. Four countries (Monaco, Nauru, Singapore and Vatican City) are 100% urban. Data on the number of libraries serving exclusively rural populations in the some 200 countries recognized by the United Nations has proven impossible to obtain. Percentages of library's legal service area population that are registered users also run the gamut from a high of 57% in the United Kingdom to 0.4% in Mexico.

Library success factors

Members Council delegate Jamie LaRue (2007) referred to five library success factors that the Douglas County (Colorado) Public Library staff identified:

- visits per capita
- circulation per capita
- programs per capita
- staff per 1,000 (here modified to 25,000)
- expenditures per capita.

These factors were applied to the statistical compilation of 39 countries pulled from the LibEcon database. Europe is heavily represented in this dataset, but Korea, Japan, Canada, USA, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand among others also are included. One success element (program attendance) was eliminated because it was not tracked globally. Success factors for these LibEcon libraries were measured not only for the per capita legal service area but also registered users. Because services per capita for registered users are much lower than for the entire legal service areas, they are probably a better indicator of effectiveness.

- **Library visits** per capita legal service area (LSA) are highest in Finland (12.8) and lowest in Luxembourg (0.1). Visits per capita of registered users, however, are highest in Greece (9.8) and lowest in Turkey (0.6).

- **Circulation** per capita LSA is once again highest in Finland (20.7) and lowest in Mexico (near zero). Circulation per capita of registered users, however, is highest in Canada (49.7) and lowest in Portugal (0.6).
- **Staff per 25,000** per capita LSA is highest in Iceland (31) and lowest in Mexico (1). Staff per 25,000 per capita of registered users, however, is highest in Mexico and Turkey (203), and lowest in Malta (7).
- **Operating expenditures** per capita LSA are highest in Denmark (\$69.67) and lowest in Mexico (\$.57). Operating expenditures per capita of registered users is also highest in Denmark (\$190.13) but lowest in Romania (\$5.24).
- **Consolidated success factors.** By totaling all four of the above success components for each country by LSA, Denmark comes out on top (113.21) and Mexico last (1.99). By totaling all four components for each country by registered users, however, Mexico and Turkey are tied virtually for first place (351) and Portugal is last (25.84).

In addition, per capita income is highest in Denmark for both the legal service area and registered users (\$67.26 and \$183.56 respectively). Income is lowest in Mexico per LSA (\$.51) and in Portugal for registered users (\$3.66). Materials expenditures per capita LSA are again highest in Denmark (\$9.98) and in Switzerland for registered users (\$32.73). Turkey and Mexico are tied with the lowest amounts in each category. (See Attachment 1 for a detailed global breakdown.)

U.S. Library Demographics

Out of 7,185 libraries (NCES, 2006), small and rural libraries comprise 78% of all library administrative units in the United States. The Midwest (85%) and New England (83%) comprise the largest percentage of libraries, the West follows at 70%; the South trails at 61%. Percentages range as high as 98% in Vermont and Maine to as low as 4% in Maryland (not including the District of Columbia and Hawaii, which have no libraries in this category). It should be noted that the data for U.S. libraries are much more detailed than for the global community because more granular data is available. (See Attachment 2 for a breakdown of the Census regions.)

Related to the percentage of total population served, however, the figures are almost reversed; small and rural libraries serve only 17% of all people in the United States. This is another variant of the classic “80/20” rule: in the United States, small and rural libraries comprise 78% of the all libraries yet serve only 17% of the population. Small libraries in the Northeast serve only one third of its total population base; the Midwest serves one fourth. The South (10%) and the West (8%) serve considerably fewer people number-wise and percentage-wise. Ranges for population of legal service area in this group run as high as 90% in Maine to a low of .4% in Maryland and an almost equally low 1% in Florida, North Carolina and California.

As for the density factor, states with the lowest number of libraries per 100,000 inhabitants predominately are in the Midwest (18.7), closely followed by the West (16.2). States with an unusually high factor of libraries per 100,000 people are Nebraska (51), Alaska (44), Kansas (40), and Vermont and Iowa (32), all having relatively large rural populations.

Quantitative success factors

The success factors mentioned above in the international arena similarly are applicable to the states and regions of the U.S., with the following results. Unlike for the global library data, program attendance per capita is available for the United States.

- **Library visits** per capita are highest in the West (6.2), followed very closely by the Midwest (6.0). Ohio and Alaska have the most (8.6), Arkansas has the least (1.9).

- **Circulation** per capita is highest in the Midwest (9.4); Ohio ranks first (16.8), and Mississippi is last (2.2).
- **Program attendance** per capita shows little variance nationwide, ranging only from 0.2 to 0.4. However, it should be noted that this factor for small and rural libraries is equal to or higher than the figure for all public libraries in each corresponding region.
- **Staff per 25,000** also exceeds, in general, the regional norms, with the one exception of East South Central. Because these libraries comprise 78% of the library population, it seems reasonable that they would have more staff. New York stands out with the highest ratio in this category; Maryland and South Carolina are tied for the lowest, with slightly less than 0.1. (Maryland has only one public library serving fewer than 25,000 people.)
- **Per capita expenditures** are lowest in the South, and rather consistent elsewhere; they are the highest in Ohio and lowest in Tennessee.
- **Consolidated success factors.** Adding all five components for each region, the East North Central region ranks highest (72.29), followed very closely by Pacific (71.69). West South Central ranks last (33.72), far below its closer competitor, and the South Atlantic (40.23). It is noteworthy that library performance as measured by these consolidated success factors does differ significantly in many cases. Therefore, based on performance factors variability, the authors concur with the Douglas County Library staff and postulate that the proposed success factors are a useful measure of library outputs.

Moreover, the authors recognize a substantial difference between similar per capita figures when the population size varies dramatically between, for example, a large town and a small village. In what we call the “critical mass factor” of small and rural libraries, similar per capita expenditures for library services materially disadvantage the small library user in a less populated region because of low, aggregated funding, resources, and staffing.

Other quantitative factors

Per capita revenue and total materials expenditures in each region for these rural groups are slightly under the regional per capita for all libraries, except in the West. Per capita revenues are lowest in the South, and rather consistent elsewhere. Like total expenditures, per capita revenue and per capita materials expenditures are highest in Ohio and lowest in Tennessee.

The only service area in which this group is above the regional norm for all libraries is that of print materials. The Midwest has the highest rate, with 5 print materials per capita, but the range runs from a high of 7.7 in Kansas to a low of 2 in Tennessee. Anecdotal evidence suggests that small and rural libraries may discard less than all public libraries as a whole.

E-usage per capita is highest in the West (1.4). The range runs from a high of 2.5 per capita in Alaska to a low of .4 in Maine and Mississippi. This low usage in Maine presents an intriguing case of libraries serving 90% of the state’s population apparently without relying heavily on e-resources. Reference transactions per capita show the similar lack of variance as program attendance, ranging regionally from 0.6 to 1.3. The region with the highest reference transactions per capita is East North Central (1.0), and lowest in East South Central (0.5). Individual states per capita reference transactions are highest in the District of Columbia (2.0) and lowest in Alaska (.5). (See Attachment 3 for a detailed breakdown.)

Small and Rural Library Information Needs

D.J. and V.M. Hobbs succinctly summarize and evaluate U.S. progress toward universal telecommunications service and advocated going beyond telephone connectivity to meet rural information needs (Hobbs, n.d.). They drew the following conclusions:

1. Information “have nots” are disproportionately found in rural areas and central cities;
2. Native Americans in rural areas proportionally possess the fewest telephones, followed by rural Hispanics and rural Blacks;
3. Black households in central cities and particularly rural areas have the lowest percentages of PCs;
4. Among those households with computers, Native Americans and Asian/Pacific Islanders were least likely to possess modems;
5. The single most disadvantaged group, on the basis of age, were those householders under 25 years of age, particularly in rural areas;
6. Although senior citizens (55 years and older) surpass all other groups with respect to telephones, rural seniors rate lowest in computer penetration;
7. Generally, the lower the level of education attainment, the lower the level of telephone, computer, and modem penetration.

Because of diminished telecommunication and computer penetration, at this point the backbone of information service to rural areas is still the public library. The library is instrumental in fulfilling the two most important information needs of rural America: education and technology (Sanchuk, 2004). For many rural residents, libraries remain the sole provider of free Internet access (Flatley, 2001). The rural library is a major contributor to solving the two largest problems caused by the digital divide: education for adults and access. “Libraries provide the most extensive network for public Internet access and are an important source of computer assistance.” (Mossberger, 2003, p. 48.)

Yet rural libraries are faced with a challenging dilemma: how to provide its users with sufficient access to current and credible information at the same time dealing with shrinking budgets and shortage of staff (Rosser-Hogben, 2004). **So, a major question for the Members Council Small and Rural Libraries Group is then, “How can these small libraries better provide the information services needed by their users in rural areas around the world?”**

The data suggest two areas to explore.

1. Maximizing the power of collaboration. The small and rural libraries cannot improve their financial and service plights alone; for most vendors, it is simply too costly to sell products and services to these small individual libraries. Leveraging the cooperative efforts of consortial arrangements could collectively enhance and strengthen their services. The library would thus function as partner or collaborator in providing services at a more local level. Some examples of types of collaborative efforts already under way by consortia and other groups (not necessarily OCLC) that address the issues of education and technology are as follows:

- Group catalogs—libraries in one region would be able to access the collections of other public libraries in its region. The recently developed South African national catalog is a case in point, but thousands of smaller groups of two or three libraries have banded together for a similar purpose.

- Group purchases—for reference products and e-content, for example, libraries could participate in an OPLIN-model in Ohio, which allows access to all databases to every public library in the state at a reasonable and accessible cost
- Virtual reference services—a shared knowledge base provides ready access to questions and answers; participation in a local/regional network of libraries that agree to answer questions for each other makes better use of staff resources
- National bibliographies—in some countries like the Netherlands and Finland, the national libraries provide the infrastructure for access to information through its national catalog
- Resource sharing—the ability to share resources expands the availability of local resources
- Web presence—a library website, including access to its collection, will help drive traffic to the library and increase usage
- Improved technology—programs like public access computing expand technology to many citizens who normally would not have access to it. Communicating through electronic networks facilitates interaction with other libraries and learning resources.
- eLearning programs—Web-accessible programs, available at low or no cost, provide education opportunities and promote the role of the public library as a learning commons.

2. Facilitating and promoting efforts to digitize local collections. All libraries, no matter what size, have unique collections. Digitizing those special collections will increase not only their contribution, but also their users' access to such information as local history, genealogy and other unique content. Digitization efforts can often get started with very little up-front investment and are scalable depending upon resources.

Discuss ways in which the OCLC Cooperative can enhance collaboration to provide improved access to resources, and can facilitate digitization services for small and rural libraries.

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