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ABSTRACT

Major social institutions repeatedly reinforce the deprivation of the urban disadvantaged. Libraries, as the "Universities of the People," must commit themselves to the promotion of a better standard of life for all people, especially the poor. A close look at priorities is especially important if libraries are to pursue their mission in a time of financial austerity. A library should be responsive to the needs of its particular community. A possible alternative to closing branch libraries is to provide equality but not uniformity of service in all parts of a city. (KB)

KEEPING LIBRARIES OPEN

SPEECH DELIVERED AT THE

AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

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Who are the urban disadvantaged? In contrast to the population of other areas, the population of the center city is generally characterized by lower income level, lower educational level, a large percentage of minority groups and aged, and the more socially and culturally underprivileged. But for many poor people, poverty is not just a lack of income. It also involves a deprived and defeatist state of mind, a lack of opportunity, a persistent lack of capability for improving one's own situation, and an inferior or dependent position in society.

However, it appears that major social institutions repeatedly reinforce these maladies -- even when those institutions are specifically intended to alleviate poverty. Consequently, attempts to eliminate programs which provide service or direct aid to the poor are bound to fail in the long run unless they also significantly alter the institutional systems surrounding the poor. Let us examine the role the public library should play in this issue.

For example, today over 70 percent of Blacks are urbanized. Because they were predominately a low-income group, they tended to be concentrated in the inner city as they climbed the socio-economic ladder.

Promise, disappointment, and patience have been the grounds on which Blacks have built their lives in America. The post-slavery

promise of forty acres and a mule, was the first promise that never came through. Political freedom was promised and withdrawn, and is now only painfully being recovered. Economic freedom is still to come.

The history of this experience, with its advances and reverses, has been an enormously absorbing one. Aspects of it have been of the most serious interest and concern to institutions and organizations whose chief task is to dedicate themselves to the search for a final fulfillment.

The social reality in which Blacks have had to make their lives during the 450 years of their existence in the western hemisphere has been one of victimization in the sense that a system of social relations operates in such a way as to deprive them of a chance to share in the more desirable material and non-material products of a society which is dependent in part upon their labor and loyalty. In addition, they are victimized also because they do not have the same degree of access which others have to the attributes needed for rising in the general class system -- money and education.

Naturally, enslavement, injustice, suffering, and humiliation are no strangers to human society. However, in the American Black experience, these evils were institutionalized and made politically and socially acceptable. By accepting slavery for Blacks as pre-ordained

by God, by defending deprivation of civil rights and liberties as resulting from inferiority, and by explaining poverty as a natural, self-perpetuating state, American society made everybody's freedom, everybody's rights and liberties, and everybody's well-being unsafe. None of the deep-seated social problems in the country can be boldly attacked, let alone resolved, if they are not first approached from the angle of Black experience. Of course, the resolution of the contemporary social, economic, and cultural problems of this country, including the problems of equal opportunity for Blacks, as well as for the Spanish-speaking, for American Indians, for other ethnic minorities, for women, the poor, the elderly and all underprivileged, are perhaps the most important factors in influencing the fateful choice to be made by the whole nation with regard to themselves and the underprivileged. But no American can ever be fully free from poverty, oppression, and injustice posing as law, until the American Black community is freed from these evils.

Recent demands by groups that have traditionally had little power -- most visibly the low income minority (for enhanced roles in the shaping of policies that vitally effect their lives) have been widely recognized. The aspiration toward more meaningful democracy, of which these demands are the latest extension, has been a key item of

the social and political agenda throughout American history. Programmatically, the emphasis shifted from the integration of individuals to the equality of the minority as a group with the majority.

On September 28, 1964, in his speech delivered at the 200th Anniversary Convocation of Brown University, President Johnson said that "One great truth" he had learned was that "the answer for all of our national problems, the answer for all the problems of the world comes down, when you really analyze it, to one simple word -- education." Mr. Johnson is not the first President to speak well of learning. The dependence of democracy on popular education has been a recognized fact in our history. But, it was not until the end of World War II that the country began seriously to consider the full implications of that relationship, and later still that it officially acknowledged the carollary proposition that to limit a man's education is to limit his freedom.

A good public librarian today thinks less than ever in terms of well-established, repetitive, routine, middle-of-the-road services, offered on a traditional, day-in, day-out basis. Parenthetically, we do know, of course, that such services occasionally continue to be offered in spite of the facts that socio-economic and cultural changes have removed most of the need for them. A librarian responsive to the needs and interests of his public should try to study the changing

features of the neighborhood served and to find answers to challenges facing him (and his public) by developing a succession of special programs that provide new and original answers to perceived needs, and so attract and keep alive the reader's interests.

The public library, which is one of the agencies embodying the all important "mandate for learning" of our times, must commit itself to the promotion of social progress and a better standard of life for all the people, but most especially, the poor. Education is obviously the most basic prerequisite for the realization of such goals and for achieving the overall aim of desirable social change.

Public libraries have often been called "the universities of the people". These words have an especially relevant meaning and express an acute need, because knowledge has always been recognized as a form of social power.

The public libraries must not overlook, or neglect, the continuing obligation to those who already come, and those who can be encouraged to come, to libraries seeking service. On the other hand, libraries must also attract and try to serve a far greater proportion of the population than has been reached so far in any community, enabling this group to use library materials to an extent not yet attempted anywhere.

The non-reader and the non-user are frequently found in the ghettos, and as such, have not really been counted, considered, or planned for in the blueprint for flexible quality library service in the past. But public libraries can no longer afford to have a policy of business as usual plus a fringe of outreach service to the disadvantaged or poor minority groups.

As the suburban areas continue to grow rapidly, the inner city may consist largely of the non-reader and the non-user. Who then will we serve? What means will we use to contact and motivate the potential users who will be an ever-increasing source of tax support? How will we serve them? And above all, how well we serve them?

The public library is one of the few institutions in the community that provides an opportunity for continuing education. As such, it should experiment with, and provide, programs that would be of value in this area. We should consider how we can become more effective as an information center. The informational resources of a library can be a clearing house for the total community. There is a vast audience not reached or programmed for, which could benefit from informational resources that are gathering dust. Not only would the poor benefit, so would our professional groups, local businessmen, community institutions, and organizations.

Funding is the pivot around which all activities and plans of libraries for the future turn. The fiscal and financial problems of the country, especially those of most large urban centers, are, in general, too well known to require elaborate presentation here. Where do thse problems leave the libraries? What do they mean for us? Ideally, and in simple terms, we should plan what libraries should do in order to serve the library needs of the community in the best possible way, find out how much service would cost, and then try to secure such funding in the budgetary process. Idealism is replaced by practical realities because we are now approaching a point where we have to ask ourselves how much money is available and how much in terms of needed services, can we provide for the amount available.

With a shirking tax base, coupled with inflationary trends in the cost of energy, materials and personnel, it would be the exceptional library which did not have financial problems. All this leads to the conclusion that the library is, like some other institutions, facing a period of extreme austerity. This austerity necessarily creates a discrepancy between the mission and intended programs of the libraries and the means at the library's disposal for their realization. However, the library must provide its service only under the condition of a positive interaction between the library and the community, resulting

in the community's understanding of and support for, the library. The support of the community, including lobbying for increased funding at the local legislature, is the only real source of strength to the public library.

Problems like insufficient budgets, inadequate physical facilities, and limited staff in terms of talent, training and experience, etc., are going to be with us both in the present and future as they have been in the past. How we envision them in relation to the library's overall goals and objectives are critical at this point for library workers. To wait for the opportune moment when the right amount of money, the right staff members, and the right building all fall into place is like everyone going down to the shore to keep the tide back.

Under fiscal restraint some libraries have had to, or will have to, cut staff, reduce hours of service or even close some branches. When a library has to close facilities, what choices should it make? Should only actively used facilities be kept open and under-used facilities be closed? What criteria is used to measure use? Are we considering internal use as well as external, usually circulation use? On the surface, this solution appears to be justified from the point of view of both logic and efficiency. But let us look a little closer at the clientele, or lack of it, at these libraries.

All of us know that in hard times people need their public library more, not less. They look there for education, information, referral to various sources, for their daily needs. Therefore, in every sense of the word, libraries are now at a crossroad. A choice has to be made between continuing service on the present limited basis and embarking upon a new course in keeping with the demands and expectations of the seventies.

The library as an educational institution has an obligation to keep the door of opportunity open, not to shut it. While many do not respond to our programs we must be sure that all at least have the opportunity to do so. We cannot disregard our basic goal of providing service to all. This means, somehow, making the library, particularly branch libraries, useful to those it presently does not serve and convincing these non-users that we have something worthwhile to offer them.

The role of the library as a community center is somewhat more emphasized in the branch libraries, where the surrounding community is often looking for a place where its interests can converge and crystalize and where answers can be sought for their particular problems.

Last October, the District of Columbia Public Library began to keep hourly statistics in all the public service agencies, both the central library and branches, to tabulate head count (all who walk in the door), occupancy count (those remaining in the library for an hour or more), circulation, telephone calls, and meeting room use. From these statistics, the activities in branches, other than circulation, have emerged. For instance, the branch libraries with large circulation have, at least in relative terms, lower head and occupancy counts than the libraries, mostly serving the underprivileged areas, with lower circulation figures. I am sure that such data would further strengthen the argument that, in spite of the disproportion in circulation figures, the overall service role and utilization by patrons tends more toward relative equalization than would appear at first glance. There seems to be a different pattern of use of the buildings since fewer people visit low circulation branches, but stay longer in them.

The library should be ready to respond to the values and aspirations of the community it hopes to serve. It should provide concrete programs and services based on community needs. This means, in some cases, modifying traditional patterns of service; in other cases, it means developing and using completely new methods if service is to be effective. More importantly, it means remaining flexible and

open to all possibilities.

The objectives of the public library should be social objectives, and the library should be firmly committed -- through its pursuit of such objectives -- to desirable social change. The library is by definition outside of party politics, but this does not mean that it should not be committed to, and should not actively advocate, the achievement of social goals that would end the evil heritage of poverty, of socio-economic and cultural deprivation, of disease, unemployment and under-employment, crime, drug abuse and so on.

For example, instead of developing the so-called "balanced" collection, the material must be related to real life situations, and needs within the experience of the individuals served, and must be written at an appropriate reading level. Format and organization of the material are also important if people with limited reading ability are to be attracted to libraries. Newspapers, pamphlets, magazines and paperback books are usually to be preferred to hardbound books. Subject areas to which disadvantaged adults relate strongly are employment skills and opportunities, consumer education, health, self-improvement, legal rights, family life, Black heritage, and awareness.

It is of paramount importance that the library recognize the need to keep its facilities open in the poor sections of town and in minority neighborhoods, in order to give these less mobile, less afluent citizens a place to come for information and materials to help in their daily lives. All segments of the population need the library's services, but they are of utmost importance to minority groups. Many strategies have emerged: One policy is to provide equality of service in all parts of the city but not uniformity of service. We are finding that cut-backs should be borne equally by all branches throughout the city. In addition, the library offers free meeting room space for their activities as well as free library-sponsored programs.

It should be pointed out that an audio-visual approach can be a more effective way to enrich the lives of those with less education and those less accustomed to using libraries. However, the economically deprived cannot afford to own the equipment necessary to use the audio-visual materials. The library can play a big role in this regard by having on hand all of the necessary equipment.

The multi-media approach itself is based on the personality of the modern library user who, at least in an urban setting, grows up in an environment fully permeated with information and other data transmitted through a variety of media in picture or sound or in a combination

of both, and to whom printed materials may often appear to have only secondary relevance. The fact that the potential library user is poor or otherwise disadvantaged does not change, and indeed increases, this reliance on the multi-media approach.

The decision to continue library service to disadvantaged neighborhoods is a matter of social value. The general community is concerned about the disadvantaged, and the library must continue to be a part of the community effort at human renewal. The measure of a library is not solely how many people use it, but whether a significant number find it a source of opportunity and value.

Therefore, our facilities must be available to our target constituency. In other words, our motto might well be that of a London theatre which became famous because it stayed open all during World War II. It was "we never closed." Remember Booker T. Washington -- "It's not the success that one attains in life, but the obstacles one has to overcome to achieve that success."

I feel that it is worth the effort and firmly within our responsibility.