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# Federal-State Cooperation for Public Library Data

Kitty Smith

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The information and related services provided by American public libraries in just about every corner of the country are a national bargain. Compared with what it costs the taxpayer to build, maintain, and operate just a few Stealth bombers or space shuttles, the public library's cost per unit of service is certainly a consumer's "best buy." At the same time, public libraries in the United States make a large contribution to the economic health of the nation. On the whole, they constitute more than a four billion dollar industry, and employ over ninety thousand persons. They spend over a half billion dollars on books and other materials to provide information at no charge. Their number of outlets rivals that of the most prolific fast food franchises.<sup>1</sup>

## "If We're So Smart, How Come We're Not Rich?"

Any marketing novice knows that high-quality products that meet customer needs, are packaged to suit the customer, and are offered at an unbeatable price, combined with a distribution system already in place in practically every community, should be in a good position to win the lion's share of their markets. It follows, therefore, that in an age when information and information-related products are needed in every aspect of daily life, libraries might be expected to be at the top of the list of leaders in the information marketplace.

Why is it, then, that public libraries do not receive top recognition and priority from the public at large, and from their elected local, state, or national governments? Why must public libraries constantly struggle just to maintain minimum funding levels needed to operate effectively? Part of the answer may be the scarcity of public information available nationally, or even regionally, about the extent and variety of the benefits of public libraries. Creators of policy, administrators, and citizens must have timely, dependable information if the nation's public libraries are to continue providing superior service. Yet until very

recently there has been little awareness about them on the part of government and the public. It would be an oversimplification to blame the problem on the libraries' failure to "get the word out." Public libraries themselves have not had access to the kind of comprehensive national information they need to manage and assess their operations effectively, let alone to create national appreciation of libraries.

The purpose of this article is to provide details on the background, organization, administration, and activities of the Federal-State Cooperative System for Public Library Data (FSCS).<sup>2</sup> This new, nationally coordinated system holds great promise for providing the comparative data needed by libraries and policy makers into the 1990s and the next century.

## The Evolution of FSCS

The United States government began collecting information about public libraries more than one hundred years ago. In the 1867 legislation creating the U. S. Office of Education (USOE), Congress described the agency's function and obligation to

collect such statistics and facts as shall show the condition and progress of education, to diffuse such information as shall aid the people of the United States in the establishment and maintenance of efficient school systems, and otherwise promote the cause of education.

Instinctively, the young USOE identified libraries as an important component in the "cause of education." By 1876, the agency had compiled an extraordinary fund of descriptive and statistical data. This data appeared in the report on public libraries in the United States, just in time for the United States centennial celebration. It was to be another sixty years, however, until a distinct unit for library services was authorized within the USOE. Appropriations for this unit were specifically "for expenses necessary for the Office of Education, including surveys, studies, investigations and reports regarding libraries."

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In 1937, the heart of the Great Depression, the unit started collecting statistics and assessing the condition of the nation's public libraries. Its findings were most discouraging, especially in the rural localities, where libraries and library services ranged from impoverished to nonexistent.<sup>3</sup> In North Carolina, for example, over two-thirds of the population had no access to a public library facility, and existing libraries averaged revenues of only four cents per capita. Statistics like these, however disheartening, became the primary catalyst for passage of the Library Services Act (LSA) of 1956, and the subsequent Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA). Both LSA and LSCA targeted rural and other underserved segments of the population for development of library services.<sup>4</sup> (According to 1988 estimates, one hundred percent of North Carolina's population had some access to services offered by 347 public library outlets. Total federal, state, and local operating receipts averaged about \$10.40 per capita.<sup>5</sup>)

Almost from the start, these federal grant programs reinforced and intensified the role of the state library agencies. By requiring the individual state libraries to plan and oversee the administration of grants, LSCA provided a model for federal-state communication and cooperation. In addition, the states had a powerful incentive to improve their methods of data collecting. This enabled them to assess the effects of the federal grants program and report to federal authorities. Federal agencies worked with the states to establish and delineate consistent standards and terminology. The major burden of data collection came to rest at the state level, while the USOE library programs office concentrated on the analysis of data from the states. USOE's analyses were used to support federal legislative and executive initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

The mid-1960s were an era of massive social upheaval. Virtually all units of the federal government responded with historic activity. The evolving "new federalism" was reflected in Congress'

USOE, was held in 1966. The purpose of the conference was to bring interested agencies and persons together to discuss ways of organizing a national system of data collection to satisfy local, state, and national needs for library information. In the same year, ALA published *Library Statistics: A Handbook of Concepts, Definitions, and Terminology*. This publication was a significant improvement in itemizing, categorizing, and defining data for all types of libraries. An eventual outcome of the ALA-NCES association was a 1970 report entitled *Planning for a Nationwide System of Library Statistics*. Two of its recommendations were of particular significance for state-federal efforts: (1) it was essential for NCES and the states to share responsibility for library statistics in a "highly defined, coordinated, and regularized" program; and (2) such shared responsibility meant that training programs at the state and local levels were imperative "for general understanding, accuracy of returns, and compliance."<sup>7</sup>

These recommendations set the stage for a most ambitious project during the 1970s. The Library General Information Survey (LIBGIS) was conceived as a national data program that would coordinate local, state and federal agency efforts into a comprehensive reporting system. Nevertheless, in spite of high initial hopes for its success, LIBGIS never fully reached maturity as a national data system. The project lost impetus in the political and technological mutations of the late 1970s. In the early 1980s shifts in federal spending priorities brought LIBGIS to a halt.<sup>8</sup>

At mid-decade there was still no coordinated, comprehensive national program of public library statistics, although prospects for such a system had not been totally extinguished. State library agencies were still collecting statistical information from and for the libraries in their respective states. Without any real national coordination, however, there were some serious challenges ahead. In an effort to explore contemporary practices in public library data collection, the ALA Office for Research investigated the various instruments used by states for data collection and reporting. Each state library's forms for public library data collection were requested, along with copies of each annual statistical report. The forms and reports were analyzed to determine commonality of data items for possible national and regional comparison. The conclusions of this research were that there were some rather disturbing inconsistencies from state to state. For example, the states were using so many diverse ways to count collection resources of public libraries that fifty-eight percent of these data

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establishment of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) within a reorganized USOE. This legislation institutionalized the compilation, evaluation, and distribution of national education statistics in the federal government. A National Conference on Library Statistics, sponsored by the American Library Association (ALA) and

items were unique to only one state. In the areas of circulation and registration, seventy-three percent of the data items were unique to one state. Results in other areas such as interlibrary loan, income, expenditures, and reference were no better.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than focus negatively on these findings, however, the Office for Research initiated a team effort with the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) and the Public Library Association (PLA) to identify a core common set of data items that could be collected in the same way, using the same terminology in each state.

In 1985, the Department of Education's Library Programs Office and the NCES co-sponsored a very productive pilot project based on the common data elements identified by the ALA-PLA-COSLA group. Fifteen states participated in the landmark data collection venture.<sup>10</sup> Then, in 1988, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988 (P.L. 100-297), appropriating funding that infused new life into NCES's public library data activities. Federal law, for the first time, specifically charged NCES with responsibility for collecting data on libraries. Statistics on all types of libraries were to be included among the ongoing activities of the center. The law also mandated representation of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) on NCES's Advisory Council on Education Statistics. This council's responsibility is to set standards, ensuring "technically sound data, not subject to political influence."<sup>11</sup>

Early in 1988, NCES and NCLIS set up a Task Force to develop an Action Plan for the Federal-State Cooperative System for Public Library Data, as dictated by the School Improvement Amendments. National and state organizations (i.e., NCES and the Library Programs Office of the Department of Education, NCLIS, ALA, the Public Library Association, the Library Administration and Management Association (LAMA), and COSLA) appointed representatives who were interested in and committed to accurate and reliable annual state and national data. In summer, 1988, NCES requested and obtained the cooperation of COSLA in appointing a state data coordinator for each of the fifty States and the District of Columbia.

The *Action Plan*, as developed by the Task Force, includes a universe file (or name authority file) of all public libraries in the country. In addition it specifies system operations, the data items to be collected, definitions, analyses, and publications to be generated, as well as formats for statistical tables. Currently there are forty-one data

items in the system covering basic statistics for: the number of service outlets, number of employees, library income, operating expenditures, size of collections, service hours, services, circulation, and interlibrary loans. Items will be presented by state and by population of library service area.

The *Action Plan* divides labor among local and state libraries and NCES. The local public libraries are responsible for collecting local library information and relaying it to their respective state agencies (usually as part of the states' normal data-gathering practices). The states, in turn, provide training for local libraries from whom they gather statistics, and relay the information to NCES in computer-readable format. Finally, NCES compiles the data submitted by the states for publication and dissemination. NCES is also responsible for training and continuing education for participating State Data Coordinators. At this writing all fifty states and the District of Columbia have named a coordinator. National training workshops for Coordinators were held in Annapolis, Maryland, in December 1988, and in Phoenix, Arizona, in December 1989.

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## **Accurate, reliable data will help individual libraries report to their governing bodies and the public in more meaningful ways than ever before possible.**

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The North Carolina State Library was among the first group of nineteen state library agencies to submit FSCS data (in Lotus 1-2-3 format) to NCES in July 1988. The state's participation was made possible through cooperation between the State Library's Public Library Development Section and the Statistics and Measures Committee, Public Library Section of the North Carolina Library Association. Their work resulted in a revision of the annual data collection forms to include the data elements prescribed by FSCS, and revision of the annual statistical report to incorporate concepts such as "output" measures and comparisons of libraries by population of service areas.

In 1989, forty-four states and the District of Columbia participated. In July 1989, NCES, working with the Task Force's Technical Committee, provided each participating state with a copy of "DECTOP" (for "Data Entry Conversion; Table



Output Program"). This new program, developed for use on a personal computer, affords quick and dependable input of data by state personnel and processing by NCES. DECTOP lets states extract the FSCS-required data items from their existing administrative files, input them through a choice of common application software, and edit for errors automatically. When the data has been corrected the states can produce the same tables as NCES for review before submission. The state then uses DECTOP to prepare a floppy disk, which is sent to NCES.

The *Action Plan* also prescribes the development of a universe or authority file identifying public libraries in each state. For this purpose, the Technical Committee and NCES will be supplying the state agencies with "PLUS" (Public Library Universe System), a customized personal computer application similar to DECTOP. Initial use of PLUS is planned for 1990.

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### "Where's the Beef?"

What are the payoffs expected from total participation of the states in FSCS?

1. Public libraries can use the uniform statistics to evaluate their own performance, compare themselves with libraries of similar profile, and set priorities for the future. Accurate, reliable data will help individual libraries report to their governing bodies and the public in more meaningful ways than ever before possible.

2. State and federal library agencies need good data to plan legislation and budgets that are cost-effective and make sense in terms of public need. Statistics are the backbone of the evaluation of grant and service programs.

3. Private sector firms that do business with libraries need dependable statistics to generate useful business and marketing plans.

4. Library statistics are essential to the work of educators, researchers, and media personnel for study and reporting.

5. Library professional associations at the local, state, regional, and national levels count on

library data to develop standards, and present positions on government programs affecting library services.<sup>12</sup>

6. Finally, statistics will be integral to the successful outcome of the second White House Conference on Library and Information Services (WHCLIS), which has as its goal the development of recommendations for the further improvement of the library and information services of the nation. William G. Asp, Chair of the White House Conference Preliminary Design Group, recently described WHCLIS in terms which might be equally applicable to the Federal-State Cooperative System:

"[It] is not an event; it is a process. With library and information services an integral part of a democratic society, the process involves people from every state . . . to discuss issues of library and information services at all levels . . . . It is a dynamic process that identifies user needs as a basis for realistic planning as we approach the 21st century."<sup>13</sup>

With a permanent, coordinated system of public library data collection in place, libraries can make their value known to those they serve and those who provide resources to them. They can answer important questions heretofore unasked or unanswerable: Have our state and federal library programs met the goals they were intended for? Are we getting a fair return in benefits for our tax dollars? What is the quality of service? Is it truly equal and available to all, especially children, the elderly, the poor and others not in the mainstream? Are our libraries really, as Librarian of Congress James Billington put it, "the golden entry point, the point of assurance that there will be democracy in the future"?<sup>14</sup>

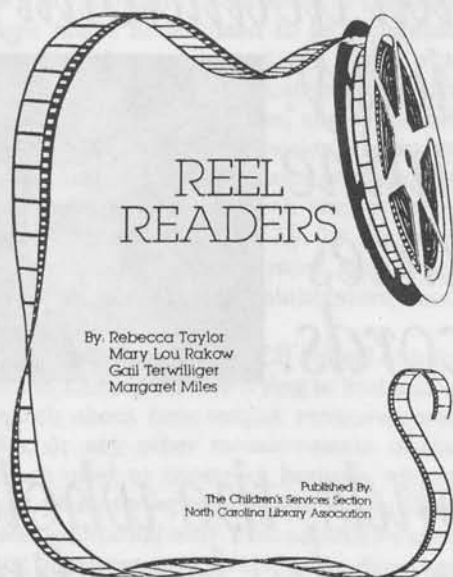
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