You Can't Tell The Players Without A Program (Policy)

David G. Fergusson

A good programming policy will do two things for a library: it will provide a general direction in which to take an activity; and the activity, once it is underway, will be explained and supported by the policy. Envision yourself sitting in the library ready to show a highly acclaimed but somewhat controversial film the next evening. Suddenly the film becomes the vortex of a controversy into which all of the vocal segments of your community, including the press, the politicians and the public, are interjecting their two cents worth. *Now* what should be done? Naturally, part of the rational course of action is to explain how your program falls within library policy and, with governmental or board support, to weather the storm.

Unfortunately, if your public library is like most in North Carolina, there is no programming policy nor is there much mention of the subject in your overall policies. A survey of the public libraries in North Carolina (April 1982) shows that while four out of five engage in programming for adults, only one fourth of those have policy statements pertaining to programming. Actually, only fifteen percent have what could legitimately be called a programming policy, and, among those libraries, the scope of coverage of the policies varies greatly. Perhaps it is time for our public libraries to examine their commitment to programming and to define it better in policy statements.

Defining Terms

Before continuing, it might be best to define our terms. Immediately a snag occurs: how to define a *library program.* Programming is something that most libraries do, but they might be hard put to offer a precise definition. In fact, in view of the enthusiastic support for library programs that I have seen during the nine years I have been associated with libraries, I was astonished at the scarcity of information about programming in the library literature.

As an example, it should be noted that until 1981 the subject heading "programs" or "programming" did not appear in *Library Literature.* Instead, we had the heading "cultural programs," which brings to mind some Lyceum-like affair held in a granite Carnegie library rather than a session on how best to attack one's income tax form, a more representative example of what is really being done. No mention of programming policies is to be found in *Library Literature,* but on January 27, 1982, the ALA Council adopted an interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights entitled "Library Initiated Programs as a Resource,"[1] which is timely and the most useful piece available to date. Also noteworthy is an article in the Spring 1979 *RQ* titled "As They Like It: Planning Programs for Adults" by Della L. Giblon,[2] which is the only comprehensive piece dealing with adult programs that I could unearth.

In the three program policies that have served our library as examples, a definition of programming usually appears first. The Free Library of Philadelphia's policy refers to library programming as "an integral step in the continuum of library functions ..." and then wisely stated, "Programming is, in fact, an alternate means of delivery of library information services."[3] Enoch Pratt Free Library's policies state that "programming is the general activity undertaken to meet the broad service goals expressed in the Library's Plan of Service ... frequently understood as the planning, development, and implementation of specific activities or events ("programs") aimed at the achievement of specific goals."[4] Finally, Baltimore County says it is "a means for providing information on a broad variety of topics as well as cultural and recreational benefits to those who attend. Library Planning should be viewed as a service in itself...."[5]

"Library Initiated Programs" says programming provides "information, educa-

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tion, and recreation to library users. Library initiated programming utilizes library staff, books, library and community resources, resource people, displays, and media presentations."[6] Still confused? My personal definition of a library program would refer to any specific activity or event in the library in which staff see that a group of people are direct or immediate recipients of the content or information available. This means that the members of the group do not have to deal individually with the library materials, as they would with books.

Having dispatched programming so simply, how should we define policy? Here are a few succinct definitions:

> Principles and objectives which guide decision making on particular matters and which express broad intentions or attitudes. A general, outline plan of action.—French & Saward[7]
>
> Policies are broad guides to action.—Bittel[8]
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> Policies and objectives are both guides to thinking and action. A policy ... leads to the achievement of objectives and aids in the decision-making process.—Stueart & Eastlick[9]

Most authorities agree on various criteria for effective policies, saying they should be flexible, written, and should coincide with the library's objectives and mission. In *Management for Librarians,* John R. Rizzo stated that necessity is a primary factor. "A good policy is a needed policy, which is one that helps employees to know what is expected ..., prevents problems that are not trivial or that are bound to recur, and helps employees to make decisions and solve recurring problems without having to seek clarification and approval repeatedly."[10]

Although our public libraries do have consistent sets of policies, unfortunately most have not yet felt the need for such a program policy, or, if there is a policy, it does not fulfill the criteria listed above. Following the results of the statewide survey below, some recent incidents will be noted which should indicate that most libraries need such a policy.

I hope it is now clear what a programming policy will involve. One other distinction should be made. A meeting room policy, while necessary and related, does not fulfill the needs of a program policy. While both involve similar activities, usually in the same location, meeting room policies for the most part refer to outside users, while the library is obviously responsible for library-sponsored programs.

Public Library Director's Survey

In order to find out how public libraries in North Carolina stood on the issue of adult programming and program policies, I sent out a questionnaire in April 1982 to seventy-one library directors statewide. The county libraries, regional libraries and a sampling of larger municipal libraries all received a questionnaire. A return envelope was enclosed, and, by mid-June, fifty-eight had been returned, a respectable return rate of 82%. I hoped to find out who was doing the programming and what type, regular or specially scheduled. I also asked what programming policies were in use and whether any libraries had had problems resulting from adult programming.

The first question asked whether the library did adult programming or not. 79% did, and the other twelve out of the fifty-eight did not. The remaining questions were addressed to those who did programming for adults. Question (2.) asked what categories applied to the programs. 14.5% did regularly scheduled programs, 31% did only special or specially planned programs and 54% did both types. Queston (3.) "Who sponsors the programs?" gave these results: library only, 21.7%; joint sponsorship (with another agency or party), 17%; and both, 60.8%.

Referring to policies, question (4.) asked respondents to check if the library had: a specific programming policy, 4.2%; a reference to adult programming in the general policies, 21.2%; no policy, 74.4%. In actuality, one of the libraries claiming a specific programming policy did not have one, so only one in forty-six programming libraries had a specific policy. The five libraries answering question (5.), which asked what type of programming policy they had, all indicated a policy dealing with content or mission rather than procedures, which fits our definitions of a policy.

Question (6.) which asked whether the library had ever had "a 'problem' or 'incident' with a library program for adults," indicated that four libraries, or 8.5%, had experienced such problems. No libraries restrict who may be admitted to programs, although Cumberland County Public Library states in a film series flyer: "All of the above films are intended for mature audiences." And finally, of the forty-four libraries answering question (8.), regarding who is responsible for program content, 7% said the adult services head or programming head, 29.4% said the library

director, 16% said the director and staff, 32% said the staff, 4.5% said the Friends, 2.2% (or one library) said the Friends and the director, 4.5% said the director and the Board, and 4.5% indicated that the "library" made the decision.

Some Examples

Perhaps the reason that many librarians and ALA emphasize the need for policies is that, when a problem does occur, it is often a big problem. For example, in Charlotte the County Manager wanted to close the library to keep a radical group from meeting at a meeting scheduled by a legitimate parent group. In this apparent meeting room policy incident, the director did not close the library, and the meeting was eventually held with two people attending. The two other noteworthy incidents which occurred are outlined below. The first took place in a library without a policy at the time, and the library received criticism from many directions. The second happened in a community where the library did have a specific programming policy and eventually emerged image intact.

In January, 1981, the Head of the Audio-Visual Department at the Forsyth County Public Library had scheduled the French film "La Cage Aux Folles" for showing as part of the regular Tuesday night film series. Although R-rated, the film's language and visuals seemed no different from much of the current TV fare. It was booked because it had received critical acclaim, including two Oscar nominations, and because, as one patron said, there had never been a foreign film shown commercially in the five years he had lived in Winston-Salem. The day before the showing, the local paper ran a probing story titled "Gay Movie Being Shown At Library,"[11] an inaccuracy in itself. This touched off a series of telephone calls from readers, politicians and others, many indignant. Later (Tuesday morning), the showing was cancelled.

Over 100 people showed up only to be greeted with the cancellation. Library Director Bill Roberts explained that the film did not fit in with a series meant to be suitable for all ages. This understanding could be construed as a policy. Again, John Rizzo says policies may be widely held opinions, but "it is usually better to have policies in written form, especially when they address concerns that repeatedly arise, or when serious problems could arise in their absence."[12] The library eventually realized this, and, in September 1981, the Library Board adopted a film policy. This incident was viewed by many to be an intellectual freedom issue, and it should be noted that the press, while exacerbating the problem, provided no support at the time of the incident. The library's policy may have to stand alone. When the simple, supportive, and fairly liberal film policy, which included the "Freedom to View Statement," was passed, the *Winston-Salem Journal* said in an editorial:

> The controversy regarding the library's film policy—or lack thereof—prompted the library's board of trustees to appoint a 10-member committee to devise a clearly defined policy to govern the film series. The plan that was subsequently recommended and adopted by the trustees on Wednesday should help make controversies such as the one this winter less likely to occur.[13]

Forsyth County is currently drafting a more general programming policy, as are two other libraries, New Hanover County and Wake County.

Onslow County Public Library is currently the only library in North Carolina with a specific programming policy. The policy is short but does include the following sentence: "It is the goal of the library to cooperate and co-sponsor programs with county agencies, community organizations and the business community whenever possible."[14] In doing so, the library sponsored a series on women's health shortly after adopting the policy. The clinic in town with the most expertise in the area also performed abortions. They were asked to participate, and the Right-to-Life group in the area became very upset, although no program in the series was to deal with abortion. The director at that time, Patsy Hansel, received letters from one opponent and was supported by the Library Board in her decision not to cancel the program.

The week the head of the clinic was to give the last program, someone called and threatened, "If you let that abortionist speak at the library, we'll kill him." He spoke nevertheless without incident, although the audience size was perhaps enlarged by the addition of a number of plain clothes detectives. The library received no criticism for holding the series; the Library Board was very supportive and reiterated its support for the policy.[15]

Conclusion

It is evident that many of the problems which may arise in connection with an adult program have to deal with intellectual freedom. Librarians, and library users as well, often

associate many library services with books, which offer one of the most private methods of idea exchange available. They must realize that programs, while also providing information and idea exchange, do so out in the open, in public. Therefore, the policy should take into account this increased visibility and include ALA's "Library Initiated Programs as a Resource" or something similar in intent.

By developing a programming policy, the library is also making a positive move to define what it will do. In fact, if your library is opposed to adult programming, it may be beneficial to include something to that effect in your general policies. Copies of policies are available from the four libraries mentioned in this article where policies are in effect. Support of Library Boards and Friends groups is important, especially since many Friends groups play an important part in their library's programming. Finally, when it comes to planning and organizing effective adult programs, Della L. Giblon's article in *RQ* is extremely helpful.

References

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