

New Public Library Standards for North Carolina

Editor's Note: Sharon L. Baker, Assistant Professor in the Department of Library Science/Educational Technology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and William Bridgman, Director of the Sandhill Regional Library System, Rockingham, are chairs of the two committees working together to develop new standards to replace the 1976 version of Standards for Public Library Service in North Carolina. Baker is chair of the Statistics and Measures Committee of the Public Libraries Section of NCLA. Bridgman is chair of the Standards Committee of the North Carolina Public Library Directors Association. This short article will be the introduction to the new standards, which will be issued in draft form late this summer.

Why Have Public Library Standards?

The library literature gives three main reasons for standards:

1. Standards help speed library development by: (a) setting minimally acceptable levels of service toward which libraries can strive; (b) helping librarians justify funding increases; (c) aiding librarians in goal setting and in planning for improvement; and (d) assisting in the establishment of new services and the spread of ideas.

2. Standards provide the best professional judgment on what libraries should be doing. Therefore, librarians receive the benefit of expert advice at little or no cost to the individual library.

3. Standards provide libraries with a means of gauging the adequacy of their existing services and collections, and evaluating the effectiveness of current practices.

The level of sophistication in the development of standards has increased over the years, but the reasons for developing this type of tool to aid librarians are as valid today as they were when the first set of public library standards was published.

What Kind of Standards Should We Have?

Traditional library standards, which are generally quantitative and oriented toward resources rather than users, are no longer looked upon with favor in some segments of the public library field. Objections to quantitative standards include the following:

1. traditional standards often lack an empirical base, which makes them at best an informed

guess as to what libraries should do and at worst incorporate unproven assumptions and biases;

2. traditional standards tend to focus on quantity to the exclusion of quality;

3. traditional standards may overemphasize resources based on the not necessarily correct belief that increased resources always result in better service;

4. traditional standards do not always take into account variations in library size;

5. traditional (minimum) standards are often ignored by better libraries since they cannot be used to justify these libraries' needs;

6. traditional standards are often ignored by inadequate libraries because the standards are considered unrealistic given the library's size or funding situation; and

7. the use of traditional standards is not regulated, or sometimes even encouraged, thus their use for the most part has been voluntary and dependent on the willingness of individual librarians to accept and use them.

For these reasons, the Public Library Association, a division of the American Library Association, has consciously chosen since the late 1970s to avoid relying on standards of the traditional quantitative type. Instead, it recommends letting libraries set their own user-oriented (output) standards after analyzing the needs of the communities served. To this end, the Public Library Association published *A Planning Process for Public Libraries* (1980). This document, and the accompanying *Output Measures for Public Libraries* (1982), were designed to guide libraries in setting their own standards. Further refinements of these two documents will be released later this year through efforts of the Public Library Development Project.

Why Then Is the Public Library Community in North Carolina Developing Its Own Standards?

This period of transition between measuring library effectiveness through traditional library standards and measuring effectiveness through library-based measures of output is a critical one.

Many public libraries in North Carolina have not yet converted to using output measures. This may be due at least in part to methodological flaws in certain measures, flaws which the Public Library Development Project is working to correct in the second edition of *Output Measures for Public Libraries*.

Also, some librarians have suggested that standards which focus entirely on outputs (use), with no consideration of resources may also be inherently flawed. This is because there is obviously a level of resources below which a public library cannot operate effectively.

Finally, public librarians in North Carolina have stated that they still wish to use quantitative standards to help obtain appropriate funding for improving services.

The goal of the joint committees in preparing a new set of standards for public libraries in this state is to try to overcome potential problems connected with both traditional input-oriented or resource-measuring standards and the newer output or use-measuring standards. To do this, the joint committee adopted the following goals when developing standards.

1. The standards should, whenever possible, contain measures of both input (resources) and output (use). Thus, the state will benefit from the advantages of having user-based measures of effectiveness which individual libraries can use to measure their own progress from year to year, as well as resource-based measures which will provide more direction for improving libraries on a statewide basis. To achieve this end, the joint committee, when drafting revised standards, will refer to various sets of quantitative standards developed by North Carolina and other states and to *Output Measures for Public Libraries*, both the first edition and the draft of the second revised edition.

2. Whenever possible, the joint committee is setting standards after examining research find-

ings or statistical data showing the level that libraries within the state are currently achieving. This is being done to provide an empirical base for the new standards and to ensure that the standards are realistic.

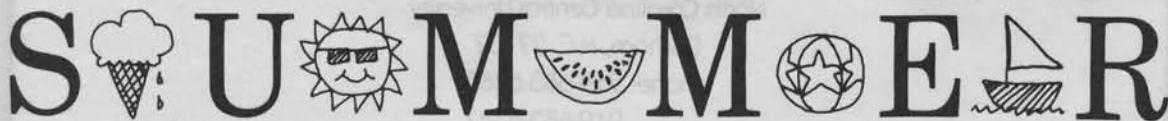
3. Whenever appropriate, the joint committee is setting standards to meet the needs of libraries varying in size. This is being accomplished by breaking the statistical data into four population-size groups to provide a basis for the different standards set. Also, "norms" of both resources and services were obtained from the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship in Clarion, Pennsylvania, to aid in setting standards for the smallest libraries in the state.

4. To avoid the problem of "laggards vs. leaders," the committees are following the example of Illinois, which has developed three different levels of standards: A, B, and C. The C level is an absolute minimum level that all libraries should meet; the A level denotes a high level of accomplishment in meeting a particular standard; the B level is somewhere in between.

5. Whenever possible, the committees are considering both qualitative and quantitative standards. The first state a philosophy of service and thus help guide librarians in goal setting; the second are measurable indicators designed to provide a more objective basis for evaluation.

6. Since the adequacy of standards is often tied to their wording, the joint committee is trying to ensure that the standards are clearly written and include definitions wherever appropriate, so they will convey the same meaning to everyone.

To aid in widespread acceptance of the completed standards, the joint committee is developing standards in conjunction with those who will be using them. Assistance and support are being received from individual public librarians, public library directors, and staff members at the North Carolina Division of State Library.



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