

The Pursuit of a Unifying Vision for Wisconsin Library Development

A Report from SRLAAW on Process and Conclusions

With a history of elusive state funding for public library improvement, serious discussion about reasons for the deficiencies and strategies for changing the situation began in early 2000 with a retreat, sponsored by SRLAAW, for various members of the library community. A discussion paper resulting from the retreat was distributed within the library system regions, and meetings were held in some systems to consider principles and themes noted in the discussion paper. Illustrative models of library system organization and service were also included in the discussion paper.

A survey form was provided to public libraries via their system. The survey asked for opinions on which ideas coming from the retreat were most important. Useable responses were received from 197 public libraries, representing 51% of the public libraries in Wisconsin and 67% of the municipal population of the state. Libraries from 15 of the 17 systems responded, as did libraries of all sizes. The survey data was compiled and presented in a session at the WLA Conference in the fall of 2000. Participants of the conference session had opportunities to comment on the process and progress to that point; these comments were recorded by the presenters and brought back to SRLAAW with all the survey results.

It was apparent to the members of SRLAAW that, even with all the information and opinions that had been gathered, the process of devising a vision for the future of library systems and services had only begun. Nevertheless, it is also believed that this is a fitting time to share what has been learned and draw what conclusions we can from our efforts. The conclusions are presented below as recommendations. A committee of SRLAAW was assigned the task of reviewing all the material and comments from this unifying vision discussion and proposing a course of action for the shorter term. The recommendations comprise that proposal.

The committee began by looking at the five most “popular” themes determined by survey responses. The recommendations relate directly to these themes. They are (in priority order):

Access to electronic resources – ranked as the first priority across all population groups; also ranked first in 10 of the 15 systems.

Badgercard – ranked second or third across all population groups; ranking in systems was more varied.

Minimum standards – ranked second or third by all population groups except the largest.

Research & development and 24/7 reference service – tied for fourth place in the rankings. No clear pattern across population groups or in systems.

Recommendations:

1. Access to Electronic Resources

It is clear that the demand for electronic resources is great and that pooling resources can make these needed resources available to more people at a more reasonable cost. BadgerLink has taught us this. Our goals should be to a) optimize the current expenditures on electronic resources being made by libraries and systems and b) make electronic resources available statewide, as is the case with BadgerLink. The following steps will help us accomplish this:

Step 1: Analyze how much money is being spent by public libraries and systems on specific resources. (This could also be done for schools and academic libraries, if there is an organization to undertake the task.)

Step 2: Determine unmet needs, i.e., what products libraries want but can't afford or can't justify given the predicted amount of use.

Step 3: Contact vendors about statewide and regional licensing.

(Use WPLC model for getting quotes.)

Step 4: Determine the optimal "cooperative configuration" in regards to both funding for and licensing of the resources.

We recommend that the public library systems compile this information and that a committee be formed to analyze the data and contact the vendors. DLTCL would be invited to participate in this process. We also recommend that funds for enhanced electronic resources be taken from system aids, prior to distribution of the funds to systems, to assure statewide access. Improved system funding would be needed to make this practical.

2. Badgercard

The crossover borrowing problem may be minimized by shared systems once loans are netted out for both walk-in and interlibrary reserves placed through the shared technology. It can be argued that, with only a few exceptions, we currently have a statewide access program, though cobbled together it may seem. It is volatile and library customers often get caught in skirmishes, but it works in the vast majority of libraries in the state. Finally it seems that Badgercard, a mechanism to provide compensation to individual libraries for nonresident use that is not already provided in the law, cannot occur without new funding.

We recommend that when systems get full (13%) state aids, that a new system mandate be created to require statewide open access, i.e., public libraries in each system have to agree to allow borrowing from any resident of the state. We also recommend that *Wisconsin Statute 43.12* be revised to specify that counties shall pay at least 70% of the cost of service provided by libraries in any county to their residents who do not pay a municipal library tax.

3. Minimum Standards

We recommend a statutory change to revise system membership requirements to mandate that libraries meet certain minimum standards, that the standards be developed by 2002, and that libraries be given three years to meet them. This effort would need to be done cooperatively with WLA, DLTCL, SRLAAW, and the library community generally.

4. Research & Development

We recommend that systems collaborate with each other and with other institutions, using existing state aid funds and grant monies, to implement some R & D projects that can benefit all Wisconsin's libraries.

5. 24/7 Reference Service

We recommend that a committee be formed to investigate the feasibility of providing 24/7 reference service via existing or new services. The committee would need to be a joint effort of WLA, SRLAAW, etc. The committee should also consider how the public would be informed of the availability of such a service.

6. Rethinking System Structure

We do not have any recommendations on system structure at this time. The initial reason for considering a change in structure was to have alternatives for freeing up existing monies, if new state aid funds were not forthcoming. It is possible that the structure of systems might change as a result of trying to accomplish some of the service goals described above. We think system boundaries should be allowed to evolve as needs and resources change.

Afterword

At this point in time, given the process we have followed and the opportunities that have been made available to practitioners to suggest and comment on these issues, we feel we have obtained adequate data to propose these recommendations which, in a sense, outline a five year plan for addressing needs and moving forward with library development. Those people who were interested responded to the survey, with a few exceptions where communication was not effective. These recommendations, however, are not the end of the pursuit for a unifying vision. Frankly, the pursuit has been an ongoing effort in this state for many years. There will be more discussions and more opportunities for proposing and sharing ideas. SRLAAW will welcome the interest and effort of any group to contribute to the vision. We hope our effort will generate positive outcomes: that was the sole purpose for undertaking the endeavor.

SRLAAW Committee, February 22, 2001: Rick Gustafson, Kate Huston, Karen Krueger, Rick Krumwiede, Shannon Lang, Milt Mitchell, David Polodna, Tom Strange.