L550: Issues in Public Librarianship
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Literature Review #5:

Library Outreach:
Bookmobile Services

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Like most library services, bookmobile services exist in three dimensions: the practical, the philosophical, and the personal. Practical factors include the vehicle itself, with all its issues of layout, cyber-abilities, upgradeability, and maintenance; choices regarding staffing and collections management (Will you have dedicated bookmobile staff, or rotate librarians in and out of mobile services? Will you give bookmobile staff specialized training and ongoing professional development opportunities? Will the bookmobile have its own separate collection, or share with the main and/or branch collections?); demographic and needs analyses to determine routes and stops; decisions regarding programming offered and partnerships pursued; and finally, ever and always, the need for continual promotion, evaluation, and adjustment, which is even more intense for outreach services than on-site offerings given the changing nature of the terrain. The local population and its needs inevitably change over time, sometimes rapidly, as demographics for age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, housing patterns, and language all remain in flux.

It is a general truism, however, that practical decisions must be driven by philosophy and fueled by personality (if one may be pardoned vehicular metaphors) in order to be effective and result in the most meaningful service. The type of vehicle you choose, the routes you select, the collections you build, the staffing you assign and programs you offer all depend (ideally) on what you are trying to achieve with your bookmobile, and for whom you wish to achieve it. Thoughtfully developed and clearly communicated philosophies and goals of service remain critical to success beyond getting books and other materials from point A to point B, connecting to regular library catalog services, and providing Internet access inside the vehicle. In the personal dimension, staff

attitudes and preparation (both in the bookmobile and at the brick-and-mortar library) must connect in a positive dynamic with needs of people in the chosen service populations.

For anyone interested in bookmobile services, a logical first stop (forgive the metaphor) is the journal *Bookmobiles and Outreach Services*, published by the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship beginning in 1998. Judy Van Acker's "Nuts and Bolts Guide" to bookmobile service (2004) offers an outstanding introduction to practical issues, while Meg Mitchell (2004) provides an excellent historical profile of outreach services. Authors like Damone Virgilio (2003), Pam Henderson (2003), Andy Prock (2003), and Renee Pokorny (2003) stress services to different kinds of populations (immigrant/international communities, preschools and child care providers, migrant farm workers, and English language learners, respectively). Issues of technology, connectivity and automation are covered by contributors such as Claudia Zimmerman (2002) and Tom Walker (2004).

From other sources, Mike Hatchett (2001) offers an enlightening and humorous profile of the process of "Building a Better Bookmobile" for suburban Henrico Public Library in Virginia, while Vandella Brown's profile of the Cybermobile Project serving East St. Louis (2000) provides poignant insight into urban library and technology needs that the bookmobile can meet. Bobby King and Todd Shanks (2000) show how the Memphis/Shelby County Public Library & Information Center took a traditional bookmobile program that was declared "almost dead" by the Deputy Director, and transformed it into an "InfoBUS" targeting immigrant populations. Bernard Vavrek's 1997 Bookmobile User Survey (results published by ALA at

http://www.ala.org/ala/olos/outreachresource/bookmobileuser.htm) has been much cited

and analyzed. The National Bookmobile Guidelines, established in 1988 and updated in

1992 and 1999, also make mandatory reading (http://eagle.clarion.edu/

%7Egrads/csrl/bookmobi.htm). Looking back to attitudes and ideas in the field (gasp)

prior to 2000, John J. Philip's 1992 article on issues surrounding bookmobile service still

serves up food for thought regarding technology and policy matters, as well as the

definition of outreach service and commitment to delivering what people want.

Contributions to Alloway's *The Book Stops Here* (1990) also make for worthwhile

reading.

To my mind, the most critical aspect of bookmobile service is the personal

dimension of the people you aim to serve. The fundamental motivation for maintaining

bookmobile service is the commitment to full access to library services for everyone in

the service area; logically, this includes people who can't or won't get to the library's

physical location. The mountain must go to Mohammed. The bookmobile can (and does!)

make a huge difference for day care centers, residents of retirement centers and nursing

homes, schools that lack their own library, English language learners, migrant farm

workers, kids at the park or the pool, and people in every environment (urban, suburban,

rural) for whom the library is just too far away or hard to get to. My own urban white-

collar family took advantage of the library in many forms, including the main branch,

neighborhood branches when we were out running errands, and the bookmobile that

stopped a few blocks away at our neighborhood mini grocery store. From good reads and

movies to literacy and technology training that makes a better life possible, the

bookmobile brings not just the mountain but the world to the people it serves.

References

Alloway, C.S. (1990). *The book stops here: New directions in bookmobile service.*

Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.

Bookmobiles were under fire in the late 1980's as library automation took over but technology did not yet exist to extend it to the bookmobile. Contributors to this volume provide defining profiles of issues in four broad categories: In Defense of Bookmobiles; Mobile Service Administration; Mobile Vehicles and Equipment; Beyond the Bookmobile —Service Plus. The "Service Plus" section is especially helpful for discussing different populations to serve (rural, urban, aging, children, migrant farm workers, the incarcerated, and Native peoples) and creativity for service.

Brown, V. (2000). Cybermobile project. *Illinois Libraries 82*(3), 167-171. Retrieved

November 6, 2005, from WilsonWeb Library Literature and Information Fulltext

(accessed through Indiana University Libraries).

Describes development of the East St. Louis Public Library Cybermobile Project, supported by an LSTA grant to upgrade and expand existing bookmobile services. Demonstrates the intense needs of this decayed urban community, and profiles the decisions made while planning the Cybermobile. Lists the program's achievements in the areas of community, promotion, staff, programs, and partnerships, along with the project's strengths and weaknesses. CD-ROM software on laptop computers represented one of the greatest successes for the project, while connection to the community for promotion was also successful. Weaknesses include the high costs of Internet access that was appreciated but not heavily used; and the fact that printers were used mostly by staff.

Hatchett, M. (2001). There and back again: Or, building a better bookmobile. *Virginia*

Libraries 47(2), 8-10. Retrieved November 6, 2005, from WilsonWeb Library

Literature and Information Fulltext (accessed through Indiana University

Libraries).

Describes the decision-making process and lessons learned while replacing the suburban Henrico Public Library's bookmobile vehicle, comparing the experience to "a Dr. Suess bok". Staff brainstormed "like crazy" when the library administration and board got behind a new

bookmobile, closely examining their priorities and planning how to get the best bookmobile they could. Concludes by listing eleven practical, sensible tips for choosing and designing a new bookmobile, including ways to triple-check that you will first know what you need, and then make sure to actually get what you ask for from vendors.

King, B., & Shanks, T. (2000). This is not your father's bookmobile. *Library Journal 125*(Suppl. 3), 14-17. Retrieved November 6, 2005, from WilsonWeb Library Literature and Information Fulltext database (accessed through Indiana University Libraries).

Summer 2000 Net Connect issue. The Mephis/Shelby County Public Library & Information Center added the InfoBUS project to two other mobile services: JobLINC for employment training and job connections, and Training Wheels for daycare centers and daycare providers' training. A massive project, careful planning resulted in targeting of immigrant populations, specifically English Language Learners.

Mitchell, M. (2004). Outreach to all of us. *Bookmobiles and Outreach Services 7*(2), 47-64. Retrieved November 6, 2005, from WilsonWeb Library Literature and Information Fulltext (accessed through Indiana University Libraries).

Gives a brief history of outreach services, applying principles to contemporary issues (including bookmobiles).

Philip, J.J. (1992). The state of the art of bookmobile service. *Wilson Library Bulletin (66)*9, 31-34.

Lead article in feature on bookmobile services. Hails the resurgence of bookmobiles and the importance of their service to various populations, despite predictions of their doom in the 1970's and 1980's. Gives a brief history of the defense of bookmobiles in those decades, and gives a capsule view of contemporary services and issues.

Pokorny, R.E. (2003). Library services to immigrants and non-native speakers of English: From our past to our present. *Bookmobiles and Outreach Services 6*(2), 21-34. Retrieved November 6, 2005, from WilsonWeb Library Literature and Information Fulltext (accessed through Indiana University Libraries).

As the title implies, gives a history of outreach to immigrants, and then profiles current programs.

Prock, A. (2003). Serving the invisible population: Library outreach for migrant farm

workers. *Bookmobiles and Outreach Services 6*(1), 37-51. Retrieved November 6,

2005, from WilsonWeb Library Literature and Information Fulltext (accessed

through Indiana University Libraries).

Makes a very strong (and heartbreaking) case for the extensive needs of migrant farm workers, and the ways that bookmobile services can reach them.

Van Acker, J. (2004). How to initiate a successful bookmobile service: The nuts and bolts

guide. *Bookmobiles and Outreach Services 7*(2), 19-36. Retrieved November 6,

2005, from WilsonWeb Library Literature and Information Fulltext (accessed

through Indiana University Libraries).

Thoughtful analysis of the necessary components of an effective bookmobile program, beginning with gathering community data and defining the mission, and ending with a commitment to change and evolve. Includes an extensive and extremely useful Reference List.

Virgilio, D. (2003). Service to the international community. *Bookmobiles and Outreach*

Services 6(2), 7-15. Retrieved November 6, 2005, from WilsonWeb Library

Literature and Information Fulltext (accessed through Indiana University

Libraries).

Analyzes the ongoing InfoBUS program of Memphis-Shelby County Public Library & Information Center (see King & Shanks, 2000), assessing impacts and projecting future directions. Initial usage statistics were very strong, but staff felt they were not developing a strong enough connection to the diverse needs of the people they aimed to serve. They brought to the library an ALA Library Administration and Management Association (LAMA) training presentation on "Planning and Marketing Library Serices to Culturally Diverse Communities". The project remains committed to evaluation, adjustment, and training.

Henderson, P. (2003). Read Rover: We rove to the kids. *Bookmobiles and Outreach*

   Services 6(1), 15-18. Retrieved November 6, 2005, from WilsonWeb Library

   Literature and Information Fulltext (accessed through Indiana University

   Libraries).

   Describes the Read Rover program of Baltimore County Public Library,
   which targets preschools and child care centers and their staff. Read Rover
   emphasizes emergent literacy techniques and the connection between early
   connection to print and later success in school. Read Rover librarians hold
   programs for children as well as training sessions for staff. The program
   has been so successful that there is now a long and growing waiting list for
   its services—an obvious weakness, as Henderson sees it: we need more!
   Too many are being missed!

Walker, T. (2004). Automating the bookmobile. *Bookmobiles and Outreach Services*

   7(1), 61-73. Retrieved November 6, 2005, from WilsonWeb Library Literature

   and Information Fulltext (accessed through Indiana University Libraries).

   Presented orally at the 2003 Great American Bookmobile and Outrech
   Services Conference in Worthing, Ohio. Based on the author's experience
   with the Charleston (SC) County Public Library bookmobile, provides
   technical details for choosing the right type of automation environment for
   your library and goes on to outline policy considerations for circulation,
   holds, patron records, terminal specs, electronic security and privacy,
   barcodes (and a brief discussion of RFID), connectivity, etc. A thorough
   treatment illustrating key principles.

Zimmerman, C. (2002). Technology and the bookmobile. *Bookmobiles and Outreach*

   Services 5(2), 53-65. Retrieved November 6, 2005, from WilsonWeb Library

   Literature and Information Fulltext (accessed through Indiana University

   Libraries).

   Gives a layman's history of technological developments and current
   choices, explaining how they work—with the caveat that technology
   changes quickly. Each library should keep its technology plan under
   review in order to respond to new developments.