

SPECIAL COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON
FREEDOM OF ACCESS TO LIBRARIES

Report to Council
Kansas City Annual Conference, June 23-28, 1968

This is the final report to Council of the Special Council Committee on Freedom of Access to Libraries. It is based on a questionnaire on access to public libraries, interviews with several national leaders outside the library profession, and a review of relevant ALA activities for the past four years. Included in the report as Attachments are: (1) the full charge to the Committee, (II) the questionnaire and covering letter, (III) Access to Public Libraries: Report of the 1967 Survey of Librarians, (IV) the interview questions, (V) a summary of the interviews with Negro leaders and with officials of the Research Division of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, and (VI) the Review of ALA Activities.

The oral report to Council is limited to interpretation of the responses to the questionnaire, the Committee's recommendations to the Executive Board and Council, and general comments.

INTERPRETATION OF RESPONSE TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The stated purpose of the questionnaire on access to public libraries was to gauge the readiness of libraries to adjust policies, practices or facilities for the widest use by all segments of society. "Access to public libraries" was defined as the provision of library services under circumstances that promote and encourage equal opportunity for employment and use by all the people.

Has the questionnaire achieved its purpose? Did the respondents understand what was meant by "access"? Did they understand what the questionnaire was all about? On the basis of the information collected and subsequent analysis, it is our impression that the respondents understood the purpose of the questionnaire. They were able to identify problems and made it very clear that they wanted help in solving these problems. They were concerned with "access" from an operational rather than a legal point of view.

While only one-third of the respondents recognized problems in use of public libraries by minority or culturally disadvantaged groups, one-half of the public librarians and heads of libraries in cities over 50,000 recognized such problems; 69 percent of the respondents said that studies should be made; and 90 percent of all respondents indicated willingness to participate in studies of features of library service to minority groups. We interpret these replies as solid evidence of readiness and commitment on the part of trustees and librarians to participate actively in finding solutions to the problems identified and described in the survey report.

In indicating their preferred focus in developing service to special groups, librarians and trustees from the intermediate cities would focus mainly on the business and professional community, those from the smallest cities on students, and one-half of the librarians of the larger cities would focus on the culturally disadvantaged. These responses seem to indicate that in the areas where the greatest number of disadvantaged people are likely to live, there is substantial recognition of the needs of this group on the part of librarians.

Another evidence of readiness was that 65 percent of the respondents replied that there had been a definite increase and change in service to special groups, 1965 over 1960. Further evidence of both understanding and readiness was reflected in the high level of response to all questions and the numerous suggestions made that went beyond the information sought in the survey. Over one-half of the additional comments and suggestions made by 85 of the respondents focused on the need to better understand how to serve minority groups through research on (1) non-users, (2) nature of materials, facilities, location, staff to serve minority groups, and (3) research on library publicity to attract use.

Although not large in number, these additional comments and suggestions reinforce the opinions expressed in the question on features of services which hamper minority use and in the question on categories of research which would be most useful. They also reflect the attitudes and interest shown in response to other questions in the survey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations which follow are timely and cry out for immediate implementation by appropriate units of the American Library Association for, as it is stated in the report to the President by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "Only a commitment to national action on an unprecedented scale can shape a future compatible with the historic ideals of American society."

While our recommendations are responsive to the several areas requiring further study as suggested by the Board of Directors of the Library Administration Division in the Review and Evaluation of Access to Public Libraries, 1964, they are definitely action-oriented and meant to produce more than mere measurements.

1. It is recommended that a study be made to determine location, size, and kinds of library facilities basic to effective service to members of minority groups. Existing guidelines have been judged inadequate and unsatisfactory. The Public Library Association should undertake the responsibility for this study in close cooperation with its Metropolitan Area Library Service Committee.

2. It is recommended that a study be made to determine the adequacy of materials to meet the needs and interests of members of minority and other special groups. It is further recommended that this study be planned and undertaken by an ad hoc inter-divisional committee for maximum results despite the fact that units within the Adult Services, Children's Services, and Young Adult Services divisions have already made commendable efforts in the area of materials and collection development for the disadvantaged and underprivileged. All appropriate units of ALA, including the Audio-Visual Committee, should be represented on this proposed committee. Along with the respondents to the questionnaire, spokesmen for the Urban League and NAACP stressed the importance of adequate and appropriate materials.

In particular, this study should consider the appropriateness of materials, the availability of materials, non-book materials, needed foreign language materials, and the level and nature of the collection.

3. It is recommended that a study of non-users of public libraries be made to determine characteristics of non-users, user needs, and approaches to minority group service. It was obvious that the respondents felt that through the results of research on non-users it would be possible to understand better how to serve minority groups. Such a study should include an investigation of minority group attitudes and barriers, library procedures, and library publicity and public relations programs. It is suggested that this study be planned and implemented by an ad hoc inter-divisional committee comprised of representatives of PLA, CLA, YASD, ASD, AHIL, ALTA, and ASL.

4. It is recommended that studies be made to determine appropriate educational programs for librarians and in-service training of staff for more effective service to members of minority groups. Respondents to the questionnaire would like to know what knowledge the librarian needs and what skills are essential. They want to know more about the substance, and techniques, needed for effective in-service and continuing education programs and of the availability of such programs. They want to know how to retrain existing manpower. And, in particular, they want to know what library school curricula would be really effective in the preparation of librarians to develop and provide services to the disadvantaged.

It is suggested that this research be planned jointly by the Library Education and Library Administration divisions. It is further suggested that there be consultation with the Ad Hoc Committee on Opportunities for Negro Students in the Library Profession and the Special Advisory Committee to the ALA Office for Library Education.

5. It is recommended that a study be made to determine opportunities for employment and advancement of members of minority groups in libraries toward the end of furthering employment and advancement opportunities in American Libraries. This research could be a landmark study in an area of concern where little has been done in definitive terms. Sixty percent of the respondents felt that some type of survey was the best means of acquiring this information. Policies and attitudes in hiring, staff composition, advancement records, job seekers and openings, library school enrollment and placement of minority group students are among the many factors relevant to the research proposed here. Others include recruitment, library policies, and attitudes.

An ad hoc interdivisional committee should be appointed to plan this study. It should specifically include appropriate representatives of LAD, ALTA, the Committee on Economic Opportunity Programs, and the Ad Hoc Committee on Opportunities for Negro Students in the Library Profession.

COMMENTS

We urge the officers and staff of the American Library Association, the Council, and membership to study carefully the document, Access to Public Libraries; Report of the 1967 Survey of Librarians, by Elin B. Christianson. While the focus is on public libraries, we feel that the report contains much information that is relevant to libraries of all types. We suggest that all units of the American Library Association use the report as a guide for planning both action and study programs as may be appropriate.

We recognize that public library trustees as official representatives of the general citizenry can play a major role in assuring members of minority groups of adequate library service and fair employment opportunities. We, therefore, urge the American Library Trustee Association to assume even more active leadership in the planning and execution of information and action programs which promote and encourage library use by all people.

We urge the American Library Association and its members to take advantage of the cooperation, assistance, and channels of communications offered by national organizations which represent minority groups.

We recognize and commend several units within the American Library Association for their valuable work in the areas of materials selection, collection building, program planning, recruitment, and training. However, many of these efforts are in the first stages of development and it is too early to measure impact.

Therefore, we unequivocably suggest that the development and improvement of library services to the culturally disadvantaged and underprivileged be viewed as a major goal of the American Library Association as long as may be necessary.

We also recognize that whatever the American Library Association achieves is wholly dependent upon the attitudes and commitment of its members. Each of us - and it is up to all of us - has an obligation and an opportunity to help bring self-fulfillment to the deprived and the disadvantaged through relevant programs of library service.

The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders concluded its report to the President with these words: "We have provided an honest beginning. We have learned much. But we have uncovered no startling truths, no unique insights, no simple solutions."

This statement is appropriate for the close of this Committee's report. It is time now for all of us, each in his own way, to do everything possible to shape programs and services that are truly compatible with the historic goals of the American Library Association.

The Committee is deeply grateful to its consultants (Mr. Verner Clapp and Dr. Philip Ennis), to the respondents to the questionnaire, to Mrs. Elin Christianson for her report and analysis of the questionnaire, to the staff of ALA, to officials of other organizations, and to many officers and individual members of ALA who have cooperated and assisted the Committee in its work.

In behalf of the Committee, I recommend adoption of this report. We further recommend that, having discharged its responsibilities, the Special Council Committee on Freedom of Access to Libraries be dissolved and that its responsibilities and concerns be made the responsibilities and concerns of all policy-making bodies and operating units of ALA.

Respectfully submitted,

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