Imperatives for Planning

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A business plan is essential for a successful enterprise. It allows a business to secure funding, target marketing, establish present and future activities, and gauge its success. The same is true for libraries. For the past generation or more, public libraries have been encouraged to plan for future service needs. The Public Library Association (PLA) and the American Library Association (ALA) have developed a succession of manuals and tools to help libraries assess the needs of their communities and chart a course for future development. Since the 1980s, Wisconsin's public library standards have recommended services, resources, and settings that should be available at local libraries across the state. The recommendations in the standards are not meant to stand by themselves; however, they are meant to complement a local planning effort crafted to identify service goals that will allow the library to respond to the unique needs of its community.

Planning for libraries is a process of perceiving the future of both the community and the library and setting a direction for library movement toward that future vision. Planning helps the staff and board understand the situation of their community, set priorities, and establish methods for achieving those priorities. The planning document provides a record of the decisions made during that process. The document also becomes a guide for decision making and action by staff and the board.

An effective analogy for this planning process is the planning of a vacation trip. When planning a trip, travelers know where they are starting from and where they would like to go. The itinerary can be determined—what will be seen, how to travel, when each activity will occur. At the end of the vacation, the travelers can answer the question, "Where did you go?" because a clear destination was specified. Further, if the destination is not reached, they can look back and determine where they diverged from the original itinerary. While this analogy may be an oversimplification, the key elements of planning are present: to determine the library's destination in the future, to decide what the library will do to get there, and to assess how well the library progressed toward that view of the future.

The PLA Model

The Public Library Association has produced several publications emphasizing the necessity of local planning for effective library service.

Since the publication of *A Planning Process* in 1977, several revisions have been issued—*Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries: A Manual of Options and Procedures* (McClure et al., 1987), *Planning for Results: A Public Library Transformation Process* (Himmel et al., 1998), and The *New Planning for Results: A Streamlined Approach* (Nelson, 2001). Each revision introduced new aspects to the recommended planning model. In 2008, PLA released *Strategic Planning for Results* (Nelson, 2008).

Planning and Role Setting introduced the notion of role selection for the public library, defining eight representative role profiles that could be used by planners to describe the essential priorities of the library and guide the allocation of budget, staffing, and energies.

Planning for Results, among other changes, introduced the idea of "visioning"—a concise expression of what is envisioned for the community or how the community will benefit from having a successful library. Previous planning models had been institution-centered, and this new step in the process seeks to create a stronger connection between the library and its community. *Planning for Results* also recast the eight role profiles from the previous planning model into thirteen representative service responses. This change incorporated libraries' experience using the original roles and reflected the growing application of technology in the library environment.

In *The New Planning for Results,* Nelson presents a series of steps to prepare and implement the planning process. The process is shorter in the number of steps involved and in the time required to complete the process (approximately five months instead of nine). Her steps include approaches to prepare, imagine, design, build, communicate, and implement the plan, with guidelines for considering the various service approaches.

Strategic Planning for Results emphasizes a more resilient planning process, resulting in a plan of only four to five years but with specific final objectives, annual reviews, and a resumption of the planning process incorporated into year four or five.

Wisconsin's standards emerge within this national context. The standards expressed in this document recommend a basic level of library service in many areas. However, Wisconsin libraries can benefit even further by applying the planning methods and strategies derived from the PLA models. A local plan for library service offers the best means for evaluating a library's progress to date and setting targets for its future development. A written plan also provides benchmarks for evaluating the accomplishments of the library. Planning for library services at the local level has become a standard for excellence in public libraries.

The Planning Sequence

Planning requires an ongoing, critical look at the current status of library service compared to what it should be in the future. It is a cyclical process of assessment, forecasting, goal-setting, implementation, and evaluation, leading back into a new phase of assessment, and so on. It is also a pragmatic activity that can be undertaken in a thorough fashion or in a more simplified, compressed manner if limited resources or schedule impose constraints on the planning process. There are many approaches a library can take to planning; many strategies a library can apply. The main factor is the importance to create and follow a plan.

Planning, however, sometimes seems to be something more discussed than done. To many it remains an intensive, exhaustive, sometimes mysterious process, something foreign to the library's day-to-day activities. But it need not be so intimidating—virtually every library plans at some level. Preparing each year's budget involves some level of planning and forecasting. Presenting that

Planning is not a one-time activity but rather an ongoing process of measurement, review, and adjustment.

budget to the council is one way of expressing where the library expects to go and what it plans to accomplish over the next year. The activities involved in budget preparation can be incorporated into a larger planning process. A wider field of vision creates a deeper understanding of the community and the library, and that deeper understanding supports the efforts of board members, staff, and other library advocates as they seek to improve the quality of library service in the community.

Typically, any planning model asks four simple questions. PLA's planning models offer variations on these key questions. Still other planning models can be found, produced by other agencies, associations, and experts, which offer still more variations on these same questions. Most planning methodologies ask:

- Where are we?

- Where do we want to go?

- How do we get there?

- Are we getting there?

Where are we?

This initial question involves assessment of the current condition of the library. This is the data-gathering phase of a planning methodology. PLA's original planning process devoted a lot of time and energy to data gathering in an effort to create a clear and thorough understanding of the community and the library. In *Planning and Role Setting*, this step came to be called "looking around," a much less imposing task that suggested a range of activities to assemble information about the library and its community.

In this initial phase of a planning process, planners establish benchmarks to use in designating and attaining planned goals. Information is gathered about the community—census data, economic reports from the community planner or chamber of commerce, forecasts from a regional planning office, or projections from the school district. Information is gathered about the library—annual report data, user or community surveys, circulation system usage reports, and corresponding data from neighboring or peer libraries. Planners may examine larger societal trends that might have an impact on the services the library needs to provide. Finally, public input in the form of surveys or focus groups can be included. Planning committees often include stakeholders from designated constituencies in the community.

Planners also may utilize a technique often used in strategic planning efforts—listing and discussing Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats in the library's internal and external environment (sometimes referred to as a SWOT analysis). After this analysis, planners can identify the crucial strategic issues for the library. Planners need to address these crucial issues when they develop library goals and objectives.

These standards constitute one tool that planners may apply in this phase of a planning process. By examining these checklists, planners can produce a snapshot of the current condition of the library and possible areas of needed improvement.

Where do we want to go?

The second question involves forecasts and projections. The participants in the library's planning process define a planning horizon—two years, three years, five—and express in broad terms how the library should develop over that period. This phase corresponds to the steps in the PLA planning model that formulate a community vision and mission statement, identify the most suitable roles or service responses, and set goals for the library. Working from the baseline information assembled during the data gathering phase and public input, planners set the overall desired course for the library.

Again, the standards can be used as one tool to chart a course for the library as part of its larger planning process. A review of this document may highlight areas where the library does not meet the recommended standard, and that may become an area to address in the library's plan.

How do we get there?

In response to this third question, planners craft an action plan. After visioning, selecting roles or service responses, and writing the mission statement, a library planning group sets service priorities. These are translated into written goals and objectives that describe the ends or targets desired by the library and indicate a direction in which the library should move. The library's objectives will be measurable or verifiable and are time-specific. They provide the basis for evaluating the library's progress. To aid libraries in setting measurable targets, *Output Measures for Public Libraries* (Van House et al., 1987) presents key measures of library service. *Measuring for Results: the Dimensions of Public Library Effectiveness* (Joseph R. Matthews, 2004) emphasizes approaches in assessing the library's outcomes—the economic and social impact or benefit that the library's services provide to the community.

Implementing the plan developed by the library's planning committee requires designing activities and detailing the strategies to carry them out. Writing the planning document is one visible result of the planning process. Dissemination of the library's plan includes presentations to public officials and at promotional activities. The plan becomes useful information in the political process of garnering resources to carry out the library's plan.

Are we getting there?

Reviewing and recycling complete the planning cycle. Once it is adopted, the plan becomes a benchmark, a means of assessing whether the library is on course. Planners routinely and continually evaluate the degree to which the plan's activities have advanced the library's priorities, as expressed in its written objectives. This evaluation effort occurs in two ways. The first is a monitoring process, which goes on throughout the year to assure that the library is not unintentionally straying from the established priorities. Second, a more formal evaluation occurs

at least annually to answer the question, "What progress was made by the library?" In each service and administrative area, the key question is, "What difference did the library make?" This evaluation step ultimately begins to answer the question, "Did community residents receive better service?"

Any evaluation also includes assessing the process used in developing the plan (including the costs), the impact of the planning process on service and staff, and the community's response to the plan. Questions raised may include, "Was the plan useful?" and, "Were the resources chosen appropriate?" This step allows the library to think about how it all worked. Revising the plan and the process in order to improve services is the end result of this step.

Local Choice and Planning

There is no one, single, best way to plan. Differences in communities and libraries will—and should—be reflected in the process, the strategies, and the techniques used by different libraries, as well as in the final planning documents developed by different libraries. As the PLA planning model has evolved over the years, this flexibility of approach has become one of the hallmarks of the planning process.

Periodically seeking additional input helps to ensure that the library considers the community's needs in its planning.

In some communities it will be appropriate to undertake a thorough, rigorous process. The process may involve a large citizens' committee. The committee may undertake several surveys to gather information about the community. The committee may also conduct numerous interviews with representatives of various groups within the community. As a result of assembling this information, the committee may recommend a major revision to the library's mission statement and a long list of goals and objectives, all of which may be presented in a comprehensive report to the council and the community.

In other communities a more modest approach may be suitable. In such a community the library board and staff may determine there isn't the time, budget, or staffing to support a more elaborate process, or perhaps the library's previous plan emerged from a more exhaustive effort and the new plan is expected to be more of a course correction than a wholesale revision. In this instance, the planning committee might consist of board and staff only. Data gathering may be limited to existing data and reports readily at hand. The planning report may be a much simpler document.

An important key to planning for libraries is that an individual library can set its own pace for the process. The process incorporates this flexibility with the hope that all public libraries can plan for improved library services that are appropriate for the communities they serve. No library is too small to plan, because each community deserves the good service that results from effective planning.

Determining who should facilitate the process is another consideration. On the one hand, a local community leader garners respect and can encourage the involvement of other key members of the community. The downside is that such people may have set opinions about the community or library that can impinge on their effectiveness. They also may not have the necessary skills to coordinate and carry out the planning process. Professional facilitators or consultants have

advantages in that they have necessary training skills and experience to conduct the process, they generally are more neutral in their approach, and they can bring out important information from the group. On the other hand, they generally charge fees for their services and may not be aware of public library and community issues. Each library should consider the various factors to determine the appropriate person to facilitate the planning process.

The final written planning document is not the only product of the planning process. It is the process itself that also changes the library. Involving community residents and library staff in the planning effort helps to assure that the established goals are achievable and will be carried out. Lines of communication opened during the process can remain effective channels of communication for future community-based planning. Broad community participation in the library's planning effort tends to foster broad support for the library's goals and the continuing improvement of library service.