

# Value & Vision

## Public Libraries Must Create Public Value Through Renewal and Reinvention

By Eleanor Jo Rodger

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Library circles have been humming lately with declarations of the value of libraries and librarians. These assertions of value are made to comfort, to advocate, and to defend. But public librarians often reflect some confusion in their conversations, programs, and advocacy strategies about what exactly it means to be valuable. Here are some things it does not mean.

**Merely being historic is not valuable.** A private donor may give \$1 million because she loved the local library as a child. That does not necessarily mean your institution is valuable. It just means the library was lucky and she was rich and sentimental.

**Valuable does not necessarily correspond with the library staff's ideas of importance.** Remember how strongly firemen on the first diesel locomotives in the 1950s felt about the importance of their work? It didn't matter. It wasn't valuable any more. Almost every urban library used to have a staff member dedicated to clipping and filing obituaries from local papers. They were good people who did important work. In a digital age, that work is no longer valuable. It can and should be done differently.

**Valuable is not about our professional values;** in the paradigm of the value of public libraries, we are the producers, not the consumers of services. **Our personal sense of what is valuable really doesn't matter much at all unless it matches that of our customers.**

Discussions of value usually arise when overall support for libraries is threatened. The dialogue is back now, in part, because library budgets are being reduced from coast to coast. Money is tight, so again we struggle to understand what it means to be truly valuable.

The first truth is that library budgets are shrinking, but not because funders do not love or appreciate libraries. They do. However, there's not enough public money to go around. If your family income dropped by 20%, how would you feel if one of your five children insisted that her allowance should not be

reduced? Let the other kids' expenses for food, clothing, medical care, and tuition take the hit, not hers. She's more important. That's how we sound to city councils when revenues are down and we say, "Let reductions come from other departments. The library is really, really important."

The second truth is that now, more than ever, **library leaders should be asking, "What can we do to create more public value?"** Note that the question is not about how to get more money, add more services, or serve more people. **Public libraries are valuable because they create public value.** How do they do that?

The thoughts that follow owe much to Mark H. Moore's wonderful book, *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government* (Harvard University, 1995). He clearly and insightfully explains what it means to be a publicly funded manager. It should be assigned reading for every person working in a publicly funded library. But first, a short review of why public libraries get public money at all is in order.

### **Why public money for libraries?**

There are three responses to this question: the sociological answer, the historical answer, and the economic answer. Each is both helpful and true.

As Robert Bellah observed in *The Good Society* (Knopf, 1991), "Institutions are socially organized ways of paying attention." Hospitals pay attention to illness and health, police pay attention to crime prevention, and the courts pay attention to justice. Similarly, public libraries are society's way of paying attention to learning and equity. In the United States we hold both in high esteem, so we fund public libraries with tax revenues.

In many states, public-library law is embedded in or complementary to public-education law, the other place we pay attention to learning and equity. We still sometimes justify public funding by using language about "knowledge necessary to

participate in a democratic form of government,” but I can’t recall the last time I heard a public library director complain about not being able to satisfy the demand for issues-related information.

Libraries came into being as a way to share the high cost of books among many people. Early private libraries went public in order to broaden learning beyond the limited experience of public schools. Reading was the major path to learning, and people understood that most could not afford to buy the number of books necessary to “read their way up” in life. This goal of extending education through private study got the profession embroiled in the famous 19<sup>th</sup>-century debate on whether popular novels were appropriate for collections. To some, fiction seemed a questionable route to learning, and public libraries were about extending learning to all, regardless of financial status.

Public libraries also occupy a specific niche in the theory of public finance. Usually, speakers at professional conferences stop with a tip of the hat to “public libraries as a public good,” without going on to unpack the notion. This casual treatment recognizes public libraries as generally good, but fails to recognize and define the “public good.”

In brief, some community goods and services qualify for public support for two reasons:

➤ *The “clean air” reason.* Everyone reaps the benefits of certain commodities because it is impossible to regulate them. Clean air cannot be purchased by a rich neighbor for his use and remain unavailable to the modest family next door. That’s not the way air works. Therefore, the regulation and cost of clean air are government functions.

➤ *The “market failure” reason.* Other commodities receive public funding because everyone can’t afford to buy them yet we all benefit from everyone’s having them. Vaccinations are one example, schools are another, and police protection a third.

Libraries are publicly funded because they support life-long learning for all people. The benefits of continuous learning extend, in theory, to entire communities. If the information contained in books, videos, and the Web was available only to those who could pay for it, our communities would be poorer.

In the world of public finance, libraries are “a publicly funded distributor of private goods” whose use benefits both individuals and entire communities. One reason why we have

troubling public debates over what is appropriate or not in our collections or on our computers is that publicly funded goods are meant to enrich the community. Providing access to even legally protected pornography is a hard high-water mark to defend in terms of community enrichment.

To sustain a stream of public funding, however, we must add value in return. Since every public library offers an entire portfolio of services (story hours, business reference, Internet classes, and so on), each service or product must submit to the test of whether it creates public value.

### ***The public-value triangle***

How can we tell if a service, product, or institution creates public value? The library staff often informally equates “public value” with “it’s really, really, important to somebody.” Recently, one major urban library had a terrible time trying to shed a 16mm film collection, with the issue going clear to the city council because it was “really, really important” to a small group of people. This commonly held notion is easily understood, but it’s not the whole picture. Developing a more comprehensive theory of public value increases our choices of which products and services to begin, continue, reduce, or eliminate.

### **A strategic triangle of value**

Mark Moore writes that there is a “strategic triangle” to help us conceptualize public value. We must ask whether our organizational purpose (or each service in our portfolio) is

1. publicly valuable,
2. politically and legally supported, and
3. administratively and operationally feasible.

**Public value.** How do we know if something is publicly valuable? One downside of offering free services is that we do not get the feedback loop that price and use provide to private-sector businesses. If a business spends \$100 to create a product that people will only pay \$5 for, clearly something is wrong. If it spends tons of money to create thousands of widgets and only five people want them, something else is wrong. Such simple clarity is not available to the public sector.

Along with other publicly funded institutions, libraries have tried to address this in a number of ways, all reflected in our experiments with planning and evaluation over the last three decades.

One early effort to address the value question involved adopting a goals-and-objectives framework for management. If we accomplish the objectives that move us toward our goals, this is valuable. But this is valid only if the goals and mission are valuable. Doing the wrong things well does not create value.

We've also tried the quantitative approach, with forays into both program evaluation and economic analysis. Reference evaluation, studies on the cost-effectiveness of fines, and a host of other tools have come along to help us think more analytically and better understand how to manage our work.

Customer service and satisfaction have also entered our professional tool kit as devices to measure value. The ultimate customers for government services whose satisfaction must be tended are the taxpayers and their representatives who authorize and appropriate support for them. That's why the incredible satisfaction ratings that public libraries receive must be cherished and protected, whether or not everyone uses them.

Our clients are those whom we serve directly, and their satisfaction is important too. It matters that we work to help them expect what we are legally authorized to provide. Unlike private-sector enterprises, however, libraries cannot add a service simply in response to a demand. It's more complicated than that.

**Political and legal support** has both long- and short-term dimensions. Long-term support is contained in the authorizing legislation. Years ago, lawmakers decided states should enable public libraries to exist by legislating the conditions under which they can be governed and supported.

Substantive changes in the law, such as qualifying provisions about services being provided freely, must be subjected to discussions about whether a majority of the people agrees to the new terms. When they do, laws can be changed. This is why skillful public library leaders pay a good deal of attention to state legislative activities.

Short-term support usually revolves around annual appropriations debates. If a public library has aligned at least a part of its services with the stated concerns of political leaders, the chances of funding support increase as long as they are in power. This doesn't mean selling your virtue or neutrality. It simply means letting appropriators know

that your literacy program is graduating 500 people a year, of whom 75% become wage earners.

If libraries have taxing authority, the short-term political approval comes at the polls every five or seven years when taxpayers let you know whether or not they think you are doing important work in the community. Generally speaking, talking about the difference your services make in the lives of all children in the community is popular with these folks, whether or not they have children or ever use the library. Unfortunately, compassion fatigue abounds in the states when people are asked to fund services for the poor, but it hasn't yet surfaced with children's issues.

**Administrative and operational feasibility** is the third corner of public value to examine. This is not about effort; it is about results. In evaluating a service, the library must ask what difference the service is intended to make and whether it has the proper financial and human resources. Many children in our community may desperately need pre-literacy skills so they can enter kindergarten ready to read, but does the library have appropriate staff with knowledge of early-learning design?

Not having the resources to offer a service need not stop a library permanently. Many libraries have acquired resources by collaborating with other institutions, hiring skilled staff, or securing specialized funding. Tending this leg of the triangle simply requires being boldly specific about what it will take to offer the service and securing it before it's launched. Because of well-meaning efforts to meet all public needs, my hunch is that there are many marginal programs that limp along on good intent and the dogged efforts of dedicated staff. A valuable public library would either do it well or pull the plug, releasing the resources for use elsewhere.

The skillful public library manager stands in the middle of the triangle, reaching outward for publicly agreed-upon value, upward for political and legal support, and downward for organizational capacity. Within the triangle, there is a great deal of freedom. If any of the legs don't touch the others, there is trouble. Sometimes the other legs can grow to compensate. For example, a lack of political support can be compensated for by substantive expressions of public value from either taxpayers or users.

## **Enhancing public value**

For public libraries to continue to be valuable, they must tend the triangle with a commitment to reflection, listening, and flexibility. There are many ways to do this.

► **The first step is to look at each service in the current portfolio and ask a core set of questions.** Who uses it? What difference do we want it to make? How do we know what difference it makes in people's lives? What does it cost? It's one thing to know that 10,000 children participate in summer reading but quite another to know what the encounter means to them. In my limited experience, few libraries know these things about even their major services. These questions also point to a lack of both applied research in our profession and the skillful borrowing of relevant research from other professions.

► **The second step is to identify feasible, value-added enhancements to our existing services.** This might mean changing an after-school homework program to require registration and regular attendance (for example, a minimum of three afternoons a week) rather than operating it on a drop-in basis. It might also mean requiring parents to report on school attendance and grades. With these two changes in place, we could demonstrate that youth who participate in the program have better attendance (a predictor of staying in school) and improved grades. Our resources could focus on serving kids in ways that get results, rather than in more casual offerings.

► **A third step is to listen to political leaders and to community residents in systematic ways to better understand their agendas and concerns.** Assign senior staff to monitor each city council member and summarize their individual concerns. Read the minutes of economic development commission meetings as well as those of the chamber of commerce and social agency groups. What are the community leaders' concerns? What would they identify as major community problems or opportunities? How could the library help?

Market-research tools such as focus groups and surveys can provide structured ways of listening to the community at large. We often do this, but we usually only ask about library use. I don't know a library that has asked about what issues and concerns the interviewee believes will be major for him or her in the next five years. It's a mystery to me why we still organize library subject departments around the scope of books rather than user queries. I view it as

encouraging that a few urban public libraries are beginning to break out, cluster, and market services designed to help people with questions about health and health care.

**Please note that this step is about listening to our communities, not talking to them.** There is a huge difference. The late Betty Jane Narver, trustee of the Seattle Public Library and chair of the Urban Libraries Council's executive board, taught us the difference between advocates and players. Advocates go out into the community and say "library, library, library." Players go out, listen, and then say "economic development, child safety, literacy. Here's how we can help." There is no question about who is welcome at more tables, or who is more valuable.

► Finally, **step four is to search fearlessly for trends that will affect our perceived value and to take early steps toward realignment** (the first triangle leg). Will it make sense 10 years from now to talk about devoting many resources to reference service when almost everyone goes to the Internet first for information? There will be trends in political and legal support (leg two). Had we been paying attention, we could have predicted much earlier the concerns of legislators about what kids are exposed to on the Internet.

### ***New challenges and opportunities***

What's next? Looking at organizational capacity (leg three), there is certainly good news and bad news. The good news is that our new, younger staff have wonderful sets of skills with technology, marketing, and a host of other non-traditional areas . . . and they are more diverse! The bad news is that anticipated retirements will create a void of experience in the organization of knowledge, the management of local politics, and the personal relationships with community leaders - holes that won't easily be filled. There are, of course, many more.

Donald A. Schön wrote in *The Reflective Practitioner* (Basic Books, 1983) that the essence of professional practice is in naming and framing the questions, for therein lie the answers. If we merely ask, "How can we get more money?" and focus all our attention there, we'll miss the creative challenge of continuous reinvention.

Renewal and reinvention will come if we keep asking, "How can we become a more valuable public library?"

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