

# TRUSTEE TOPICS

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## EVALUATION AND PLANNING FOR TRUSTEES

### GOAL:

The goal of this Trustee Topic is to emphasize the need for evaluation, planning and then further evaluation which is essential for dynamic library service in all communities. Evaluation is a requirement for the development of budgets, program planning, effective marketing, collection development, service plans, technology plans, and long range and annual plans. A good library starts with evaluation and planning. This Trustee Topic will reinforce this goal and provide resources for trustees to assist in community and library analysis and planning.

### BACKGROUND:

Evaluation and planning are generally acknowledged to be important components of the operation of any organization, including a public library. Yet when a library board undertakes an evaluation or planning project, trustees frequently seek guidelines or a rubric for why and how such a project should be done.

Evaluation is necessary before any planning can be successfully considered. Community analysis is necessary for all library planning. To use the jargon, this external scan – the community – will answer basic questions:

- How did we get where we are now?
- Where do we go from here?
- How will we get there?
- What did we learn from our undertaking that we can apply in future plans?

With answers to these questions based on evaluation, a plan, from the most simple to the most sophisticated, can be achieved.

## ISSUES:

Too many library boards believe they can develop plans using their current bodies of knowledge. Every library should gather quantitative and qualitative information about its community annually. For the library to depend on the opinions of its staff and trustees often means reliance on faulty assumptions or recycles outdated, limited, or wrong information. Additionally, these opinions help create paradigms – comfort zones, patterns or standards – which can become counterproductive.

For planning to be meaningful and effective, evaluation must first be performed. A plan typically requires a needs assessment, a vision, a goal or goals, objectives or action steps, and measurement to determine the significance, worth, or quality of the undertaking so that what has been learned can be incorporated into future behavior, service, or plans. Community analysis, or up front evaluation, provides the needs assessment. The needs assessment will identify what the community wants and requires in the way of library service and programs.

A needs assessment should be both qualitative and quantitative. Statistics such as population and its breakdowns, library use patterns, and other measurements to which numbers can be applied are quantitative. Qualitative needs assessments are more anecdotal, providing specific examples to support quantitative measurements or making an argument more personable. Qualitative evaluation responds to a statement from the Institute of Museum and Library Service (IMLS), the federal agency that administers federal funds through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA): “From all sides . . . libraries are receiving a clear message – to successfully compete for public or private funds in an accountability-driven environment, they must develop evaluation practices that provide a compelling picture of the impact of their services.” Statistics provide part of this equation, but as soon as trustees assert that a number of people use this service or that so many items were checked out, someone asks for specific examples; yet when a trustee claims that this service or program had specific results for an individual or group of individuals, someone says

that is just one or a few persons but what about service to the community as a whole. As a professor at the graduate library school at the University of Wisconsin – Madison once said, you need both.

IMLS has adopted a specific approach known as outcomes-based evaluation, which does not ask what we did do, but rather what has changed because of our work. Outcomes-based evaluation measures the *effect* of a library's activities and services instead of the services themselves. IMLS requires outcomes-based evaluation for all LSTA grants and provides sophisticated techniques, but in reality such evaluation need not be complicated.

#### TYPES OF EVALUATION:

The library trustees and staff may already be collecting information through the normal procedures of the library. By modifying current procedures or simply examining the data in a different way, key evaluation questions might be answered. This is known as *examining existing records*. Existing records might be registration materials, library card-holders, financial records, or usage counts such as library visits, number and type of reference questions, technology uses, and number and type of circulations, including interlibrary loans.

*Structured observation* is another evaluation technique. Trustees or staff may seek specific data consistently through casual conversation, session attendance counts, or even actual participation in programming or services. The observer(s) can focus on project setting, nature of interactions, program or service activities, user behaviors, unplanned results or activities and unexpected behaviors, informal interactions and other aspects of projects, programs, and services.

*Individual interviews* are more formal with development of a set of structured questions consistently asked of key persons. Individual interviews can be conducted either face-to-face or by telephone. This is typically used to obtain very specific information. Designing effective questions, conducting a good interview, and identifying appropriate interviewees are skills required for effective interviews.

*Group interviews* such as focus groups, nominal groups, and work groups can be effective evaluation techniques when trustees feel group interaction is likely to increase the quality of data or when trustees believe this will reach a broader base of interviewees. This discussion type interview should be conducted by a group facilitator so a different person can record comments of participants, consensus of the group on issues, and observations about participant interactions.

*Expert opinion* happens when trustees solicit the evaluation of a professional or a panel of professionals. This may be another library director or a panel of directors, a professional consultant or firm of professionals from the library community or from another field, or university faculty trained to conduct research and reach professional opinions.

*Journals or logs* are often suggested for small rural libraries. The library staff, trustees, or independent observers are asked to keep a record of anecdotes, observations, personal reactions, comments and/or frequency of specific activities relating to the project, program, or service. Although the information is usually subjective, it can easily be accomplished and can occasionally become a self-reflection tool for trustees and staff when they understand the experience from the points of view of community members rather than from personal experience. This is the “I didn’t know that!” syndrome.

*Questionnaire surveys* are often the first form of evaluation trustees think of, but for several reasons are less effective than other means of qualitative evaluation. Surveys that collect accurate, objective data are not easy to design. Neither is designing effective, objective questions a simple task. Surveys typically get a low rate of return. Surveys only gather data about the questions asked, overlooking feedback from stakeholders. Survey results can be nebulous or can be manipulated to reflect a partisan point of view. Survey questions can be written to elicit a desired response rather than an objective one. Nevertheless, surveys are relatively inexpensive, confidential, and are easy to analyze and summarize.

A community analysis and needs assessment is basic to planning to know the community and address its individual needs. The trustees and staff should become familiar with the demographic and economic data of the

community and its cultural, recreational, educational, and information resources. The library needs to understand what the community has and what it lacks before defining the library's role in the community.

## INTERNAL EVALUATIONS

Of course, internal evaluation of the library staff, collections, physical facilities, technology, and services is necessary. The library board and staff should periodically review the current strengths and weaknesses of the library. Every service and every area of the collection and every area of the library should be included in this review. What assets does the library have that can be built upon? Is there a handsome facility, a friendly staff, a good genre fiction collection, a strong Friends group?

What strengths does the library need to develop? Is there a too-small video collection, poor signage, inadequate Internet hardware or skills, an outdated reference collection, an invisible interlibrary loan program, poor public relations?

In order for trustees to be well-informed and make good decisions, the library director should periodically have an interview with every staff member, including custodial staff, to determine what they need to do their job better. They should not be told to limit their desires to what the library is in a position to fund. Rather, the director should gain a full picture of staff needs. This also serves as a good vehicle to discover and solve problems, though it should not replace staff meetings and staff evaluation. The library director should also review the entire physical facility on a regular but unscheduled basis.

Questions that should be asked about the library include:

- Is the library building friendly, welcoming and barrier free?
- Does the library have an inviting reading area with comfortable furniture?
- Is the library overcrowded?
- Is the library making good use of the available space?
- Is the library in good repair?
- Are the restrooms clean?

- Is the signage large and clear?
- Are the staff members genuinely friendly?

It is good practice for the trustees and director to regularly ask users to make the same site review. Even a good library staff can become so familiar with a building that they miss a problem.

## DEVELOPING A PLAN

Systematic planning is essential to excellent library service, yet it is an area that allows a library board to set an individual style. While research can be helpful, the board should not feel obligated to accept tools or procedures that seem unnatural or unhelpful.

Regardless of the terminology used, all plans should include four parts: 1) a section of needs, to answer the question where are we now? 2) a set of one or more goals, answering the question where do we want to go? 3) a set of action steps to achieve the goals and answer the question how will we get there? and 4) an evaluation to determine how things have changed and to use for the needs of the next plan.

Plans take two forms: 1) long range, or strategic, plans; and 2) an annual plan. The long range plan should be based on the external scan – up front evaluation or community analysis – and the internal scan – the library evaluation. It should identify problems, deficiencies, community needs and desired services and programs, and it should highlight solutions to these concerns and issues. An annual plan should be a yearly update of the long range plan. It should include goals achieved and those needing to be addressed in a coming year. Together, a long range plan and an annual plan should be helpful, not only in accomplishing goals for the library over an extended period of time but also in preparing budgets to achieve these goals.

A small library rarely has a lot of money or time to spend on planning, and again an elaborate procedure is not usually necessary. But a written set of planning documents can be of great benefit to the library, even if they are merely outlines. However, such a project will be largely wasted effort unless it is an organic document, meaning one that is regularly reviewed,

updated and re-issued to the staff and board. Modern word processing has made it possible for library planning documents to be more current and more useful.

On the basis of comprehensive and current information, library trustees and staff need to consider what their top priorities are and what top priorities they want to develop in the coming fiscal periods. Important issues to discuss as priorities might include:

- the needs of the facility;
- the need for a building or renovation program;
- possibilities for more effective board functions;
- improved relations with local government and community leaders;
- staff compensation and benefits;
- the need for increased tax support;
- possibilities for grant funding;
- a long-term program for community fundraising;
- the need for an endowment or foundation;
- special needs for staff training;
- coming needs in library technology;
- special needs in collection development;
- possible partnerships with community agencies and organizations;
- the need for practical advice from library consultants or other specialists; or
- the evaluation of recent major projects or resolved problems.

If evaluation tells us where we are now, then a summary of the library's priorities, both short and long range, and how they will benefit the library's services should tell us where we may go from here. These form the needs assessment of a plan.

A set of goals, from one to several, can now be established. They should come from among the library's priorities. The goals should be realistic, achievable, and relevant or meaningful to the community. Most small libraries have a combination of the following priorities, but do not exclude others:

- staff development;
- building program and/or building maintenance;

- recreational print materials;
- print, video and electronic information with the skilled reference staff to use it;
- resource sharing;
- community information;
- children's services and programming;
- adult programming;
- lifeskills and hobbies;
- senior interests and eldercare; and
- local history and genealogy

The board of a library also must decide what the library will *not* have as a priority. Small libraries will serve certain roles, but they are probably not research libraries – they take care of such local needs through interlibrary loan, resource sharing, and good electronic searching skills. There may be some areas which simply are not priorities, while some libraries may have very specialized priorities. Likewise, there will always be services that the library will have as lower priorities but these should be the result of careful consideration.

Good reference service, including effective access to electronic information, effective interlibrary loan, and effective use of system services is so basic to modern library service that they must be considered a priority in every Kansas public library.

From among these priorities, goals for long range and annual plans can be developed. Regardless of the final written product of these plans, an arrangement should be made to make planning an ongoing process. Unless a crisis or sudden opportunity requires an immediate updating of the plan, the plan should be updated on an annual basis.

## A LONG RANGE PLAN

The library's long range plan should include a review of the current strengths and weaknesses of the library. The benefits of a long range plan include:

- Allows rational justification of the budget with governing authorities
- Helps assign priorities to library programs

- Motivates both board and staff
- Gives clear measures of success
- Encourages coordination and accountability
- Assures enough lead time to undertake projects effectively
- Leads to steady growth by encouraging yearly evaluation

## AN ANNUAL PLAN

An annual plan will address not only the regular duties, tasks, and routines of the library but should also include specific projects that address the goals of the long range plan. The benefits of an annual plan with specific projects should include:

- Summary of data supporting the library's needs
- Summary of desired outcomes, whether personnel, collections, services, programs, or facilities
- Identification of objectives necessary to implement the project
- Timetable for achieving objectives
- Cost projections for implementing the plan
- Assignment of tasks to complete the plan
- Provision for evaluation and reassessment.

## EVALUATION OF PLANS

Evaluation is as necessary during the implementation of a plan through to its conclusion as it was at the outset. Evaluation as the plan unfolds and is completed tells the trustees what has changed because the plan was implemented, what was learned from the undertaking, and what needs can be applied to future plans. A decade ago the authors of *Evaluating Library Programs and Services: TELL IT!* made an observation that is as valid today as it was then: "The purpose of evaluation is not to prove, but to improve. The emphasis in any evaluation is on what can be learned in order to improve services in the future. In fact, it might be useful to think of evaluation as synonymous with learning." The less individuals feel defensive during evaluation, the more likely they are to use evaluation as an effective tool. When evaluation is used effectively, the library's programs retain their vitality and the library services improve over time.

The evaluation should use similar types of evaluation as those mentioned earlier in this Trustee Topic to determine what changes have occurred. Contrary to common thought, this is not an evaluation to determine to what degree the plan was successful. Most people learn more from their mistakes than from successes. The key to evaluation during the duration of a plan is to determine what the results are, how things have changed, if there were any unexpected results, and what goals of the annual plan and the long range plan have been achieved and what new goals from the set of priorities can be added.

#### ACTION STEPS:

Trustees should recognize the importance of evaluation and planning to the overall operation of the library. They should read any previous plans, evaluations, annual reports, or other documented expectations or accomplishments of the library, if any. These documents are part of the existing data that can first be evaluated. If none exists, trustees should begin to develop an evaluation, a long range plan, an annual plan, and a follow up evaluation.

A thorough planning process, perhaps including a board retreat, should be undertaken. It must be realized that this is not something that can be done quickly; instead, it is a long, thoughtful, time-consuming process. Yet it is well worthwhile.

If assistance in the planning process is needed, trustees can contact consultants of the regional library systems or at the Kansas State Library for facilitation. These consultants have been trained in evaluation and planning techniques and can provide valuable outside expert opinions.

Once a community analysis or external scan has been accomplished, priorities identified, and goals set, action steps can be implemented and the plan's evaluation can be initiated. Any plan is only as good as the people who perform its action steps. It must also be re-examined on a regular basis, and it must be flexible. No plan is written in stone; it must be written and implemented to change in a rapidly changing world. The question is not "Will we change?" but "How will we change?" Proactive change, the kind that takes place because of a far-sighted library board, is

much preferable to change by reacting to pressures from outside the library, without focus or relevancy, change by drift instead of by plan.