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ABSTRACT

This paper explores what the rural library will look like in 2001, and envisions rural information needs and the roles the library will assume to meet those needs. Demographically, the year 2001 will see an aging population, low population growth, and a rising percentage of racial minorities. Key areas of public concern will be the environment and health of the individual. Women will account for most of the growth in the labor force. Business will become more flexible allowing telecommuting, flexible work schedules, and phased retirements. The aging of the population and the growth of minority populations will reshape consumer demands and library markets. Advances in information technology will enable individuals to obtain products, services, and information that are more narrowly targeted at their individual needs. Demographic and technological changes will require more education of library staff. Continuing education, basic skills training, and provision of the Masters of Library Science program in nontraditional locations or with nontraditional methods will be crucial in 2001. Vision, strategic thinking, and planning will be indispensable. Barriers to obtaining further education are geographic isolation, financial constraints, and family commitments. Universities need to use technology to offer accessible education programs. Staff, library boards, and library funding agencies need to recognize the importance of training in a world where knowledge will become swiftly outmoded. (KS)

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RURAL COMMUNITY LIBRARY IN 2001 Presentation by Jan Walsh, Washington State Library

Welcome to the Rural Community Library in 2001. The program is sponsored by the Rural Library Services Committee of the Small and Medium-sized Libraries Section of the Public Library Association. Today we will explore what the rural library will look like in 2001, and envision rural information needs and the roles the library will assume to meet those needs.

In 1949, Charles Francis Kettering said, "We should all be concerned about the future because we will have to spend the rest of our lives there." The end of the century represents a milestone, and the end of a millennium is certainly a time to consider the future and to envision the rural community library in 2001. I feel somewhat secure in gazing into the crystal ball as I doubt many of you will hold me accountable in ten years for predictions which miss the mark, unless they miss as thoroughly as the forecasts for the picture phone in every home and the prevalence of the automat. And perhaps it is dangerous to predict the future, as crystal balls are notorious for having small but significant cracks.

Of necessity, we must use the knowable future as a generalized model of the dominant features of the next ten years; we must translate our understandings of the knowable future into appropriate strategic actions. To plan and to act strategically is to exploit the inevitable forces of change; we must exploit change rather than sit back and let change wash over us, determining our future for us. We mustn't suffer from paradigm paralysis, but must look beyond the center to the fringes of our paradigms. Perhaps the reason that the picture phone did not take off is that most folks would really rather not appear on any video screen as they emerge from the shower, and the automat prediction did not take into account the people connection; we like the human contact of waiters and waitresses. Using the knowable future, I would like to present a snapshot of American people in 2001, not only the people to whom librarians will market their services, but also the staff of rural libraries.

The demographic picture is quite clear. By 2001 our population will have grown to 268 million. There will be 3.5 million more people 75 and older by then. Over 65's will outnumber teenagers by a third; the current ratio is about 50-50. The proportion of middle aged Americans will sharply increase in the 1990's as the Baby Boom generation moves into middle age. Indeed, by 2001, the initial group of baby boomers will reach the early retirement age of 55 and begin leaving the workforce. As a result of this graying of America, the median age of the American people will march steadily upwards. The mean age of the current population is about 35. By 2000, the mean age will rise to 37. Undoubtedly, there will be a maturing and increased sophistication of tastes. This population will be more realistic, more responsible and more tolerant of diversity.

Furthermore, there will be a climate of low population growth in the United States, with an indefinite continuation of generally low birth rates and small families at least through the year 2000. Native born Americans will continue to reproduce at less than the replacement level. By 2000 the percentage of children under 10 will be at an all time low, and the era of a youth-dominated culture in the U.S. will have ended. Births will drop from 3.9 million at the end of the 1980's to 3.4 million by 2000, mainly because there will be fewer women of prime childbearing age.

Population growth, coming to a total of barely 12% over the next 15 years, will result almost entirely from a high level of immigration and from the higher than replacement birthrate of new immigrants. Immigration will account for over a third of our population growth in the 90's and even more as we move into the 21st century. We'll need immigrants as much as they will need jobs. These mostly Hispanic new Americans, added to the high-birthrate population of black Americans, will give the U.S. a steadily rising percentage of racial minorities. By end of the 90's, the number of Hispanics in the U.S. will increase to 30 million. The relatively young Hispanic population will make up 20% of the growth in the labor force in the beginning of the next century.

U.S. population growth will continue to be concentrated in the South and West, those areas where economic growth is strongest. Family households will continue to outnumber nonfamily households. The health of the individual and the state of the environment will have emerged as key areas of public concern,

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and the NIMBY (not in my backyard) movement will have grown at the neighborhood and community levels. Wellness programs will be the norm, and social concerns will be important. Society will be willing to deal with environmental degradation and the deterioration of the public infrastructure, including roads and the water supply system. Pervasive homelessness, lack of affordable housing, racial tensions, and extensive child poverty are some of the issues already gaining increased attention.

In 1991, the U.S. is becoming an economically two-tiered society and the tiers will continue to drift apart. Income inequality among families will increase with two income households gaining and single-parent households falling behind. The increasing gap between those who are affluent and those who are not is projected to continue in the ten years ahead.

Along with the aging of the population and its prosperity will be increased leisure time to enjoy that affluence. We will see sustained booms in leisure travel, the arts and sports that cater to the middle-aged. Demographic trends are favorable to the printed word, which is preferred by older, better-educated people. Another result of our changed demographics will be steady improvement of the workforce, which will be made up of older, more experienced and better educated workers, with a declining proportion of the young and unskilled. An aging labor force will be more productive, with less unemployment and less productivity drag from absorbing so many young employees.

Women will account for most of the growth in the labor force between now and 2000 -- two thirds or more of it. An increasing proportion of women will be college educated, at a time when older, less well-educated men will be taking early retirement -- another productivity plus. More and more agencies and companies will permit, even encourage, employees to telecommute to the office, working at home and keeping in touch with headquarters via modem. Telecommuting will help accommodate the many women who wish to combine a career with child-rearing. In addition, the number of temporary employees, home workers and self-employed will grow.

Technology will permeate the barrier between work and home, producing an indeterminate workday and bringing consumer services such as shopping and banking into the home. Training and experience in computers will be taken for granted in the 2000's, and college educated people will be in plentiful supply.

The growth in fringe benefits has slowed in the 80's and 90's, but will accelerate again in the early 2000's as organizations and companies find themselves competing for highly skilled workers in a tight labor market. Early retirement options will continue to be taken by a majority of eligible people, and there will be great concern about the soundness of all retirement systems. These systems will be severely strained as the Baby Boomers begin to reach age 65 after 2005. Business will increasingly offer older workers flexible work schedules and phased or flexible retirements.

Some predict that a new corporate "elite" of highly educated "gold collar" knowledge workers will emerge. The aging of the population and the growth of minority populations will reshape consumer and library markets. Advances in information technology will enable individuals to obtain products, services and information that are more narrowly targeted at their particular ethnic characteristics, economic status and personal preference. Many forecast that technological "haves" and "have nots", also known as "knows" and "know nots" will develop in society.

We will find that rural America will continue to lessen its dependence on agriculture. Thus the occupational profile, income level and consumption patterns of rural areas will align more closely with those of the US as a whole. Multiple job-holding for farmers is already becoming a way of life. The motives of many newcomers to rural America will be principally those of escape. Add to this a romantic yen for "back to the land", small community life, a slower pace of living, and lower cost of ownership. Increased affluence, combined with improved and cheaper transportation, has opened up even remote rural areas to recreational development. In addition, retirement and the exploitation of energy reserves will be major factors behind rural population growth.

With so much change occurring not only in the demographic areas but also in the technology with which librarians work, there will be an even more critical need for education of library staff. Continuing education, basic skills training and provision of the MLS program in nontraditional locations or with nontraditional methods will be crucial in 2001. It is predicted that the technological boom will take off in a steep upward curve, and knowledge growth will be exponential -- meaning that it will double and redouble, not simply add to what we already have. The means of accessing information will be changing so rapidly that knowledge will become obsolete with increasing speed. Therefore, staff at all levels will have a critical need for retraining and continuing education on a frequent and regular basis.

Seventy-five per cent of those directing libraries which serve populations of 25,000 and less do not have the MLS degree; at the very least, it is critical that the staff acquire and maintain basic skills. However, in 2001 there will also be a crucial need for librarians to acquire "soft skills," to be able to identify and solve problems and to engage in strategic thinking, planning for and creating the library's future. The need for vision will be acute. According to the proverb, where there is no vision, the people will perish. In the resource scarce environment of librarianship, vision, strategic thinking and planning will be indispensable. The library staff must be innovative and entrepreneurial. This suggests that acquisition of the advanced degree will be requisite for those in leadership positions. Education is an issue which the professional library community must address, as the quality of library staff at every point of service will contribute to the quality of library service in the nation.

There are currently a number of circumstances which create potential barriers to both the provision and reception of training, c.e. and MLS programs in rural areas. The obstacles most often cited are those of geographical distance and isolation. The library staff is far from the sites where, traditionally, continuing education and formal education classes are provided. Many of the staff are unwilling or unable to travel far to access education.

Furthermore, most public libraries, including rural libraries, are struggling to obtain adequate financial resources. Often, with such financial constraints, continuing education, training and formal education are far down the list of fiscal priorities. This focus must change in the twenty-first century, since skills will become obsolete quickly in most professions, including librarianship.

A large percentage of rural library staff are part time employees; many hold down two jobs. They usually have family commitments which create a barrier to attendance at traditional courses. It is predicted that, in 2001, the workplace will provide more flexibility with job-sharing, flextime, telecommuting and so on. As most agencies adopt these practices, we can hope that rural libraries will adapt to using them as well.

Currently, relevant courses are rarely, if ever, offered in rural communities. I predict that by 2001 we will have the technology and the capability to provide distance education to most rural areas. We will be capable of presenting rural library staff with the opportunities to obtain the MLS degree, to access basic skills training, or to upgrade and maintain their skills with continuing education.

The challenge to universities which offer the MLS program is to move beyond the traditional walls of higher education by offering accessible educational programs and by utilizing the technology for the provision of quality distance education. The hardware will be easy; the commitment to changing focus will not. Those in universities must not suffer from paradigm paralysis.

The challenge to staff, to library boards and to library funding agencies is to recognize the importance of training in a world where knowledge will become swiftly outmoded. Keeping up with the change and growth ahead will call for fast footwork. The leeway for adjusting to change is already shrinking year by year, as the speed of technological development picks up and as product cycles shorten. Too many believe that training is a cost, not an investment, that it takes away from "real work." Furthermore, accounting theory does not put human assets on the balance sheet. We tend to pay more attention to the maintenance of physical capital than to the continuous enhancement of human capital.

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While hard assets are critical, the relative neglect of "soft assets" is going to be even more detrimental in the future as skills become outdated at a pace which we find difficult to envision. One of my favorite quotes is from Derek Bok, a president of Harvard. He said, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."

Management has to believe in learning, provide time for it, reward for it, and engage in it itself if continuous learning is to take place in the work environment. The best investment libraries will make in the next fifteen years will be in their people; successful libraries will treat their staff as an economic necessity. Librarians must be flexible, willing to cast aside the "way we've always done it". Our future direction of our profession may depend on our willingness to be paradigm pioneers.