

# IDENTIFYING AND ANALYZING USER NEEDS

A COMPLETE HANDBOOK AND  
READY-TO-USE ASSESSMENT  
WORKBOOK WITH DISK

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## Chapter 2

### **Laying the Groundwork**

Given the complexity of a community information-needs analysis (CINA), a moderate amount of time spent on the four elements of groundwork enhances results. First, decisions must be made regarding the level and nature of involvement sought from staff, administrators, and community members. Second, essential logistical procedures are established so that work can begin and continue efficiently. Third, initial communication tasks are completed to bring everyone up to speed on the study. Finally, basic decisions regarding an approach to the study are finalized. Attention to these four points lays a firm foundation to support execution of the study.

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#### **INVOLVING OTHERS**

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Study findings often suggest a number of changes and projects. The library staff members who will be called on to implement those changes and finish those projects need to understand the “whys” and “wherefores.” The library director and, on occasion, institutional administrators who will be called on to authorize, fund, and support those changes require the same type of understanding. In certain situations, community members affected or served by those efforts also need to understand some aspects of the study upon which they are based.

Staff, administrators, and community members gain this required understanding in one of two ways. Either the study design and results are explained to them after the fact or they have some level of involvement in the study as it progresses. (The level and nature of that involvement could vary from receiving minimal information to actively gathering data.)

Hiring an outside consultant to run the information-needs analysis and present a report on the findings leads to an after-the-fact approach. Generally consultants involve and inform others, both within and beyond the library, to whatever extent is required of them but no more. Staff and community members may be subjects in the study but are not often partners. Much of the consultants' value lies in the swift efficiency with which they work and the objective authority implicit in their findings. These undoubtedly substantial benefits offset the cost of the consultants' services. When hiring a consultant is not feasible, a similar level of efficiency may be obtained by placing one or two experienced people in sole charge of the work.

On the other hand, another option is available: sacrificing efficiency for the possibility of long-term productivity by involving others in the process. That involvement could move up and down a continuum as needed and appropriate, from simple information to active participation. The long-term products could include any or all of the following: increased enthusiasm and support for implementing change, ability to gather data for other studies (e.g., evaluations or impact studies), ability to analyze data for other studies, and ability to supervise the entire process of running a small-scale study on a departmental level.

Obviously, any involvement of more than the minimum number needed to complete the study entails additional expenditures of time, resources, and energy. The anticipated benefits might fail, in any individual instance, to accrue. The decisions regarding who should be involved, and to what extent, require a great deal of judgment. For example, administrators outside the library interested only in the final report need nothing more. A burned-out staff member interested in a change of pace, on the other hand, may be considered as an investment opportunity. Given training

in how to gather and analyze data, the individual might be a valued partner in the process as well as an advocate for any changes required by the work. When an evaluation study of those changes is eventually required, this burned-out staff member may be both able and willing to handle the task of running the study alone. The judgment to balance potential benefits against time invested and authority shared is essential.

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### GETTING ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

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Regardless of the level of involvement sought, getting and keeping administrative support throughout the process is critical. Without administrative support, librarians risk (a) designing an effective study that is then undermined by uninformed administrators and (b) producing findings that demand change but lack authority. The long-term damage to staff morale can be significant. Administrative support can not be taken lightly and must be carefully nurtured throughout the process. Two mechanisms—a written proposal and placement in the planning cycle—can be used to build this support.

#### *Written Proposal*

A brief written proposal for the CINA may be used to outline the nature of the study, anticipated benefits, and staff responsibilities. A proposal may mention other types of studies (e.g., evaluation) to clarify the purpose of the CINA through contrast. In any case, the proposal briefly lists reasons for the study and states goals of particular interest to the administration. Included also are sketchy notes regarding initial ideas on the process, procedures, and staffing for the study.

The most common administrative expectations may require discussion of the reasons that a CINA is needed instead of an impact study or an evaluation study. Since many administrators are familiar with impact studies and evaluations but not with CINAs, the proposal might need to explain the purpose and role of a

CINA. Librarians working with an administrator who really wants an impact study can point out why the needs analysis must come first. A productive CINA identifies the areas of need so that modifications can be made to service and collections. Only after those modifications are made should an impact study quantify the differences made by the library. Similarly an evaluation study evaluates library collections and services but the CINA must come first. "Quality" must be judged in terms of the standards valued by the user community. Only a CINA can determine what those standards really are.

### ***Placement in the Planning Cycle***

Since successful follow-up is the *raison d'être* for a community information-needs analysis, a clear statement of its relationship to the present planning cycle can support requests for any changes later suggested by the study findings. A rapidly growing city, for example, may have a five-year goal pertaining to the strength of local small businesses. An analysis of small-business information needs may provide concrete objectives toward that goal, objectives to which the library could contribute. Fitting the study into the annual work plan so that the results can support an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) or state grant application requires only modest effort.

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### **GETTING MIDDLE MANAGEMENT AND GENERAL STAFF SUPPORT**

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Ideally, both administrative and staff support develop simultaneously. In larger libraries, however, a concentrated exploration of middle management and general staff support must be made with the same careful focus as that given to administrative support. While "administrators" are those with significant authority over resources and policy, "staff" includes those on the front lines—from volunteer shelvers in a public library to online searchers in an academic library. "Managers" include those whose rank falls between that of the library director and the front-line staff.

Effective changes based on the thoughtful, creative input of the entire staff are more likely to take place when most people feel genuinely invested in the process. That requires the librarian(s) instigating the CINA to sincerely involve and listen to those who want to participate. Involvement means, of course, that the staff gain some level of control over or input into the planning process, even if that control or input is extremely minor. The two simplest means of supporting that involvement are to (1) keep the staff informed and (2) give them the opportunity to provide respected feedback.

Those staff members and managers who do not want much involvement in the overall process may well be content with opportunities to learn about progress or give feedback at various stages. Their varied perspectives and relative objectivity can contribute substantially. They also provide flexibility, allowing other staff to weave planning meetings and data-gathering efforts into their regular duties. Those who lack an interest in the study may develop one later but there is no advantage in pushing them to participate.

As with administrators, staff and managers must see the need for the effort and understand the value of the methodology. This generally requires some education and time. Regular staff meetings, one-on-one chats, carefully selected routed articles, abstracts of persuasive readings, special meetings, and workshops can both persuade and inform. Again, the point is not to involve people against their will or to waste a moment in explaining what will only be ignored. The point is to engage those who will use the study as a significant growth experience, developing professional and research skills at a new level.

Brainstorming sessions, useful as a first step, can help in gathering interested staff to generate ideas on the overall process, question types, and study focus. (An alert librarian will also pick up on any staff concerns.) Fully involving interested frontline staff, regardless of job family, builds on the expertise and experience of people with differing perspectives. In a well-run brainstorming session, shelvers feel just as comfortable in revealing the problems they see patrons encounter in the stacks as instructional librarians feel in revealing the topics they want to cover in class but must drop for lack of time.

In extremely large or noncentralized library systems, another means of initially involving an experienced staff is the e-mail or paper questionnaire. This gives people a chance to identify what they'd like to know about their user community. Simply inviting people to list the top three topics they'd like to see covered in the study may be of use.

Being careful not to imply a promise to cover every topic suggested by staff, librarians beginning this process seriously consider staff input. By talking with selected individuals about why various elements are considered important, librarians develop a feel for the concerns and knowledge areas of the whole staff while gathering useful ideas for the study.

Even at this very early stage, patron confidentiality is crucial. For example, a particular professor's problems with the new OPAC might illustrate a point that someone wants covered. In using the professor's information need as an example, neither the name nor any identifying description should be used. Those used inadvertently are not to be repeated outside of the study context. Similarly, staff should refrain from identifying colleagues in any way. With the focus strongly held to users' needs, the essential ethics of research are not too difficult to maintain.

All of these conversations, readings, meetings, and general groundwork can take place over a couple of days or weeks, depending on staff familiarity with such studies and staff cohesion.

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## RESPONDING TO STAFF CONCERNS

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Once staff and managers are thinking about the actual task ahead, some concerns might resurface or new ones may arise. These concerns should not be treated lightly because they can erupt unexpectedly later on in the process, causing great damage. Using the concerns to get a deeper commitment from the administration and more involvement from the staff is quite productive. Common concerns and possible responses are listed. Librarians and institutional administrators who address these concerns must provide consistent responses.

### **Common Staff Concerns and Suggested Responses**

<i>Concerns</i>	<i>Responses</i>
<i>"This will be a waste of time; administrators do what they want anyway."</i>	Have an administrator talk with the staff briefly about the importance of the project; get written support from an administrator at various points throughout the process; forward to the general staff all administrators' e-mail notices and memos praising the effort.
<i>"This will just show us what we already know."</i>	It probably will confirm some of what is already known. Some confirmation is likely any time the staff is good enough to build a general sense of users' needs. However, it may also show new directions and will certainly provide depth and detail beyond the general impressionistic level now known. Since the entire staff does not agree about all points of information needs, it will help clear up some areas of confusion. Decisions will be based on data rather than on squeaky-wheel anecdotes.
<i>"I don't know how."</i>	Training, as needed, is part of the process. Individuals will be given the opportunity to learn how to manage the process, gather data, and more. After these skills become part of the regular staff repertoire, they can be used in other projects as needed. The benefits of training everyone who would like to participate are long-term; therefore training is well worth the time it takes to do it well.

Concerns	Responses
<i>"I'm afraid or uncomfortable with handing out surveys or interviewing or doing statistical analysis."</i>	No one will be forced to do anything they find uncomfortable; no benefit comes from requiring people to do that which makes them tense. Likewise, various analytic jobs must be handled by those who can make smooth, rapid progress on them. Training often builds the confidence and interest necessary to overcome some levels of discomfort. Other people get over the discomfort after experiencing the satisfaction of getting to know members of the user community in greater depth.
<i>"We're too busy doing our real job to do this extra stuff."</i>	This project feeds into, supports, and directs everything done in the library. By focusing on the needs of the users, the staff increases the quality of each daily task. That quality is worth the time. This "extra stuff" makes all the regular essentials more effective.
<i>"Okay then, what can we stop doing so we have time to do this?"</i>	Several regular tasks can be dropped, postponed, or reduced for the duration of the study. Some concrete changes must be made. The following task changes might be made for a few months: teach 20 percent fewer classes; postpone implementation of an OPAC upgrade; order only patron-requested materials; have volunteers run story hours. The librarian in charge can also ask for staff suggestions regarding tasks to be temporarily modified. Administrative support for some changes may be essential. When staff are particularly concerned about finding time for the work, a clear schedule can be publicly posted for them to consult.

Concerns	Responses
<i>"This will just show us more things to do that we don't have staff or time or money to handle."</i>	Librarians have long faced the fact that their own success creates more work than their budgets will ever allow them to accomplish. Conducting a CINA does not alter the fact that staff can always identify new services with great prospects for success. The CINA does, however, allow staff to prioritize patron-identified needs. Additionally, the process may identify potential partners who could help provide resources and it may provide data that support a grant application.
<i>"It's too costly. With no money for real raises, how can we find money for surveys?"</i>	This concern can be met on several fronts but may well reflect a deeper problem unrelated to the CINA. From a financial standpoint, it makes good business sense to find out what patrons need, to raise patron awareness of library value, and to identify potential partnerships. A CINA can accomplish all three of those goals with varying degrees of success. While not the primary goal of the study, gathering information ultimately used in grant applications is not an uncommon result. Although successful grant applications and partnerships are not a given, it is possible to plan from the very beginning that efforts to raise money will be included in the follow-up. Also, the out-of-pocket expenses of a CINA can vary widely. Every effort can be made to reduce those costs through donations, the use of volunteers, and making full use of existing data.

## Concerns

## Responses

*"This will be used to evaluate individuals; I'll be evaluated and criticized by my peers."*

Since this concern may not be overtly expressed it is helpful to bring it up. Emphasizing that every effort will be made to keep staff names out of the data often helps clarify the intention of the study. Any patron or staff names mentioned inadvertently will be blanked out before any data are shared out for analysis. Positive comments will be shared with the named staff member who may decide to keep them private or share them with supervisors.

*"Patrons don't know what they want anyway. We need to decide because we have the expertise."*

Two misconceptions are involved in this response. First, some people envision the CINA as a means of creating a patron wish list. A good study identifies a full range of information needs, some recognized as such by patrons but some unrecognized. Second, some staff may fear that anything revealed as a need will be supported without regard for the expertise of the librarians involved in meeting that need. In reality, the judgment of the professional staff is the driving force behind each phase of the process, especially in the final decisions regarding the action plan created in response to the needs identified by the study. The expertise of librarians is not only respected by, but is crucial to, the CINA process.

Each of these concerns may resurface at some point in the process. Individuals may tune out discussions and information on the theory that they will not be involved, only to become interested at a later date. Incidents with patrons, unexpected opportunities, and changes in the information environment may trigger issues for groups or individuals.

### SETTING UP LOGISTICAL PROCEDURES

Once there's a general institutional commitment to the information-needs analysis effort, someone must assume responsibility for getting it done. This can be an individual or a team. Assuming that a consultant is not involved and that staffing levels support it, a team of three is preferable because it allows for a range of knowledge areas, skills, and experiences.

In libraries too small to support a team approach, a needs assessment can certainly be accomplished by a single individual, but he or she must be given any assistance available from the parent institution when there are fewer than four full-time employees to help out. A one-librarian public library, for example, might have only two part-time, support-staff members; the township might offer secretarial services for the duration of the project. A school library might have only one librarian and a few volunteers; the principal might offer release time and secretarial services. So small a library requires the full support of administrators and, where possible, some aid from constituents. For example, the principal's aid is useful in a school setting, but faculty willingness to be flexible about library services for a few weeks could be more valuable.

A one-person approach requires special effort in two other areas besides administrative advocacy: judicious determination of the project's scope and active solicitation of alternative viewpoints. As discussed later in this chapter, determining the focus for the study involves a number of options. Obviously a full team provides the support for a wider range of those options than an individual can encompass. In addition, a special effort to obtain extra feedback during the planning stages is important for the lone librarian. Considered comments from colleagues in other libraries provide practical contexts, insights, and ideas.

Throughout the remaining chapters of this book, the entity responsible for the community information-needs assessment is referred to as a team on the theory that even an individual acting alone will seek out input from others.

### **Forming the Study Team**

Team composition requires three attributes: authority, knowledge, and skills. Authority may be temporary so long as it's sufficient; knowledge and skills can develop from workshops, readings, and training sessions.

#### **AUTHORITY**

Someone must have the authority to make quick decisions on those occasions when team consultation is simply not possible. Additionally, at least one team member must have the authority to get resources needed for the project, such as staff time, copying, access to volunteers, and approval to publicly distribute documents (e.g., questionnaires).

#### **KNOWLEDGE**

Knowledge of three areas must be incorporated into the team. First, knowledge of the study's context is crucial. New librarians will lack a thorough understanding of the library's history. Only long-term staff will understand the nuances of staffing histories, policy changes, service development, community relations, and political connections. The study will be deeply embedded in the history of the library and the community which it serves. Knowledge of that history and a profound understanding of the current situation are essential.

Second, a grasp of data-gathering and data-analysis methodologies is required. Someone may need to train both staff and volunteers and then support them when they need advice during the process. A background in research methodology is also useful when explaining and justifying the data-gathering techniques to staff, administrators, and the community.

Finally, awareness of the changing environment is helpful and, in some situations, essential. Because of rapidly changing technology and telecommunications, many patrons do not even recognize some information needs because they do not know what is possible. When they use a word processor rather than a typewriter,

they see an improvement but they do not know to ask for an integrated workstation. Only someone who knows that a workstation is possible would analyze the data with that option in mind. Similarly, such knowledge is crucial in understanding the needs of the sophisticated patron who expects high-end electronic information support.

#### **SKILLS**

In addition to authority and knowledge, certain skills make a major contribution to the team. The ability to keep on track is essential. It is particularly important in maintaining the distinction between a community information-needs analysis and an evaluation or an impact study. Without the firm control necessary to remain on focus, sliding into the accepted, more common patterns of an evaluation is all too easy. The ability to remain flexible is always required as plans will have to be adjusted to new circumstances and the unexpected. The ability to manage logistics and detail, a basic job requirement in technical services, is valuable over the course of the study. The ability to synthesize varied data into a cohesive set of patterns, needs, and ideas becomes critical in the data-analysis phase. Finally, the ability to understand the users' perspectives, as well as the perspective of the nonuser, serves the team throughout the study. A frank discussion of the varied skills each person contributes to the team builds a unified expectation of individuals' roles.

Obviously it is rarely possible to choose a team whose members have all the authority, knowledge, and skills ideal for the work. Nevertheless, keeping these elements in mind when choosing the team develops an awareness of missing elements. An effort can then be made to structure work and seek input in such a manner as to mitigate any weaknesses.

### **Handling Decisions**

Once the team has been established, the process for handling decisions must be determined. Must everything be reported to the

administration? If so, does that entail the library administration, the parent institution, or both? Do institutional lawyers need to review any decisions for any reason? For example, in working with minors, do institutional policies, confidentiality, or other ethical/legal elements need to pass through a separate layer of authority?

Who controls access to distribution mechanisms? Is the library director allowed to decide what will be sent to whom on what schedule? Quite often the governing board of a public library or an institutional administrator wants to review, revise, and control such decisions. Given the likelihood that a nonlibrarian's understanding of the study is severely limited, that control can be devastating. A university's library committee should not rewrite a well-designed, pretested questionnaire. A well-planned series of community contacts should not be disrupted pending the approval of a city administrator who is off on vacation. The principal should not insist on signing the questionnaire cover letter when the library director is planning to use it as part of a public relations effort. If possible, obtain written permission to inform administrators of the decisions made by the study team and approved by the library director. Keeping administrators informed without relying on them for permission places authority and responsibility together.

Even if administrators require very little reporting from the team, they should be kept informed of major decisions. Information prepares them so they are less likely to balk later. For example, administrators informed early in the study that the CINA will center on information-technology issues will be better prepared to discuss changes in that area at the study's end.

Informed administrators can also alert the team when a separate library project might impact the study. Sensitive budget negotiations, hiring freezes, and personnel discussions might impact timing of the study but ongoing details might also be affected. For example, giving an administrator the schedule of a planned postal mail questionnaire may prompt team notification of a mailed fund-drive request scheduled for the same time. The two are not incompatible but their simultaneous arrival might confuse and frustrate the public; rescheduling one or the other would increase the odds of success for both. While sharing all of the process with admin-

istrators is recommended, it is absolutely essential that they be informed about anything connected with legal or financial matters.

### ACCOMPLISHING INITIAL TASKS

Once the team and its basic decision-reporting model are established, two initial tasks move the process toward a solid start: conducting a literature review and seeking partners. Both tasks inform and support the next round of decisions. The literature review garners information on the needs of users who share important characteristics with those in the team's population. In addition, the resulting readings can spark ideas and discussions among team members regarding any phase of the process—from instrument design to the final report. Seeking partners, on the other hand, is a concrete, practical step usefully repeated at various stages.

#### *Conducting a Literature Review*

One member of the team looks into recent research and practice literature for insights regarding the information-seeking patterns of the population. In-depth studies of information needs in similar communities may well have been completed within the past several years as part of the continual development in information-needs work. Articles such as the one by Leckie et al. (1996) describe the information-seeking behaviors and needs of engineers, lawyers, and others. Using *Library Literature* (and any other pertinent indexes such as *ERIC* or *Business Periodicals Index*), the researcher looks for informative articles and books.

In some cases, the researcher may be lucky enough to find a meta-analysis identifying trends and patterns in several major studies. Others may find research studies on a particularly crucial aspect of their community's situation; academic medical librarians, for example, would probably be interested in a study of how new information technology affects the information seeking of health sciences faculty (Curtis et al., 1997). Similarly, the federal government and other special agencies sometimes undertake a pertinent review. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's survey

of services and resources for children in public libraries provides a national benchmark as a comparison for local services (Lewis and Farris, 1990).

Of course, major gaps still exist in the research literature. One such gap, as Virginia Walter points out, is in the area of children's information needs in both school and public library settings (1994, 112). Another wide gap looms in the area of rural public libraries. Shilts reviews one of the few existing studies while pointing out how little is known about their users, much less their nonusers (1991; see also Christensen et al. 1995, and Vavrek 1995). The Works Cited and Suggested Readings portions of this book provide a starting point for further study.

Once the team has made some decisions regarding data-gathering methods (see chapter 4), it is useful to repeat the literature review with an eye for studies utilizing similar tools in similar settings. Team members can write to the authors of such articles asking for copies of their data-gathering instruments. Sometimes it is productive to telephone or e-mail them to discuss the process and ask their advice. Some librarians who have been through the CINA process and written up the results for publication are quite willing to converse with colleagues just beginning that effort.

Similarly, check the World Wide Web for instruments, readings, and colleagues of potential value. Some library and information school faculty Web sites include bibliographies for their courses on different types of libraries and research methodologies.

### **Seeking Partners**

As the team researcher works on readings and Web sites, another member knowledgeable in local politics identifies potential partners for the team to consider approaching. Even at these early planning stages, partners have a good deal to offer, including ideas, supplies, access to subpopulations, and staffing. Partnering with academic computing, for example, may give a university library team ideas about the problems experienced by remote-site users. Public librarians partnering with a copier service could get questionnaires supplied at cost. Partnering with the P.T.A. may pro-

vide a school library team with a cadre of volunteers for a telephone interview campaign. The politically savvy team member identifies either the broadest range of potential partners or a few strong possibilities.

In choosing among potential partnerships, the team considers contact timing, reciprocity, and influence. The ideal timing of that first contact with a potential partner varies widely. Those who contribute critical ideas need full involvement early in the process. Those who contribute practical support in the data-gathering stage require a brief contact initially, but the vast majority of their work comes later. In school libraries, for example, site-based management of school districts may make it possible to involve faculty, parents, and administrators on a variety of timetables. Administrators and master teachers may identify major concerns in the planning stages while active parents provide data-gathering support by distributing questionnaires.

Reciprocity requires consideration not only of what the partner can give the library but a look at what benefits the partner receives. Thinking about potential benefits for the partner helps the librarian shape an effective approach. Benefits vary greatly: a business benefits from publicity, volunteers may enjoy the satisfaction of participating in a worthwhile community effort, and university faculty may meet some of their service obligations.

Influence involves far more nebulous issues. What expectations are raised by inviting an individual, group, or organizational unit to form a partnership with the library? Will members of the county genealogical society expect to influence questionnaire design or study results if they volunteer to canvass the general population? Conflicts of interest may develop in arenas of mutual interest. School librarians interested in curriculum-design issues pertaining to information-literacy units, for example, may both partner with and conflict with faculty on that topic. Someone on the team needs the tact and political savvy required to move a relationship into a partnership.

## MAKING INITIAL DECISIONS

Building on the background work in research and partnerships, the team moves on to four initial decisions regarding the purpose, focus, use of consultants, and end product of the study. Clearly any of these decisions may be revisited later but both staff and administration benefit from the direction provided by these first decisions.

### *Purpose*

As mentioned earlier, any of several purposes may lie behind a community information-needs analysis and they are not equally valid. Different groups or individuals may have different agendas; therefore, open acknowledgment of, group discussion on, and strong consensus regarding the study's purpose are critical. Poor reasons for the CINA generally tie in to an individual's strongly held opinion or belief. A top administrator may hope to prove that a long-cherished plan will solve some ongoing problem, or librarians in each of two departments may hope to raise the priority given to their own work, or a middle manager may hope to gather data to support a budget request. A study whose purpose is based on the ego or agenda of a staff member is doomed to failure. The purpose must be to gather substantive data on community information needs, not to gather data supporting an extant plan.

Of course in some situations no hidden agenda lurks but no clear, viable purpose is discernible either. Information-needs studies, like Mom and apple pie, are sometimes seen as just plain "good" so that an administrator may order one on general principles. In that case, the team must choose or at least prioritize among the broad purposes for the study.

- Do it to help everyone get a vision of where the library is going in the next few years. A user-centered focus for the library's general direction is a powerful antidote to the feeling common in libraries these days that technological storms obscure what little vision is possible.

- Do it to gather data for making a decision that must be made and could be better informed. Staff cuts, new branches, or consolidated branches may be required by external forces. The CINA becomes a tool for gathering the data necessary to make those inevitable decisions more effective and palatable.
- Do it as a reality check on the assumptions everyone uses in making all those cumulative daily decisions. Complacent, acquiescent, or even disgruntled staff might be reinvigorated and challenged by a CINA, particularly if it explores their most basic assumptions from a patron's perspective.
- Do it as a means of better handling general changes in the library that are either happening or expected. A public library might develop an extensive Web site to serve a large number of home-bound adults and home-schooled children in the community. Exploring the information needs of both groups would guide that ongoing change.
- Do it to establish a baseline to keep track of changing community or environmental trends. Many public librarians find themselves serving communities with rapidly changing demographics. Perhaps an influx of young families with high computer expectations followed the opening of a new IBM plant in town. Perhaps the sudden availability of reliable telecommunications service providers makes remote-site access to the public library more of a patron expectation. A CINA not only provides information for current services but can also provide a baseline—useful, when combined with future CINAs, in tracking trends.

Certainly other general purposes are possible, given individual circumstances. After the team determines the primary purpose, a focus can be determined.

### *Focus*

Five key elements might serve as a focus. Most teams select one, but some teams will choose two or even three elements. This is

the time to think honestly about how much time and energy is available for the CINA. As always, good librarians can envision more than is realistically possible to do so a viable focus becomes a touchstone. Any efforts to expand or redefine the study are compared with the focus in order to stay on track. The five common foci are:

- subpopulations,
- specific topics,
- environmental changes,
- library responsibilities, and
- an overview.

Choosing any one of them does not exclude the others.

#### **SUBPOPULATIONS**

An open-minded examination of underexamined subpopulations may provide a focus for the study. Certainly some subpopulations require greater understanding than others. Patrons who are on the edge of nonuse merit study. For example, a public library with high attendance at preschool story hours might notice that those same children rarely return to the library after entering public school. Those children and their parents are on the edge of nonuse in that last year before first grade. They use the library minimally and might become strong users if the right changes were made, therefore they merit more work than an arbitrarily demographic subpopulation such as pet-owners.

Obviously, any library team should consider their nonusers and why they do not use the library. Academic libraries often focus efforts on the research faculty. They are strong and powerful users but are far outnumbered by students. A study of that large but underexamined subpopulation, the students, could be quite revealing. How many public librarians have seriously delved into the needs of their young adult patrons? The team must face rationalizations for *not* studying a subpopulation. Choosing to study a subpopulation does not mean that the remaining population will be

ignored; it does mean that a concerted effort to examine those needs will lead the study.

#### **SPECIFIC TOPICS**

Some specific topics may require in-depth exploration. Technology presents opportunities, raises user expectations, and creates service challenges for librarians. As a specific topic, therefore, technology often provides an excellent focus for an information-needs analysis. The results improve service and can sometimes be incorporated into grant applications.

Another useful topic, patron information channels, builds a deeper understanding of the library's place in patron information seeking. What other individuals, resources, and organizations are utilized by patrons and why? Thinking about other information resources leads the team into a fresh examination of basic assumptions about the "best" way to serve their patrons.

#### **ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE**

A specific environmental change (e.g., new growth in the community) may require particular attention. No community stands still; evolution is the norm. Understanding those ongoing developments allows the library to stay ahead of the curve. When the broad purpose of the CINA is to understand environmental change, the specific focus might be the reading interests or educational needs of the community. Are more members of the public library population looking for financial and medical reading matter than traditional user profiles lead the staff to expect? Do teaching assistants need extensive instruction on information retrieval strategies from their college library?

#### **LIBRARY'S RESPONSIBILITIES**

Fourth, a segment of the library's responsibilities (e.g., services or collections) may face new challenges or opportunities. In developing a long-range plan for equipment expenditures or service ex-

pansion, library administrators might need a CINA's hard data to inform their decision making. Specific responsibilities worth study include remote-site access, document delivery, off-site reference support, personalized reference service, and instructional services.

### OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY NEEDS

The single most common focus is a broad overview of the community's needs. This is particularly useful when no baseline data from a previous analysis exists and no large-scale changes are in the works. Examining the full population on a broad range of expectations, issues, behaviors, and information-seeking situations requires that particular attention be paid to sampling and instrument design to avoid the "kitchen-sink" syndrome in which everyone's pet topic is thrown into the research design.

### Consultants

After the study's broad purpose and specific focus are in place, the team may again consider hiring a consultant for part or all of the process. A good consultant can help with several elements, including research design, staff training, data gathering, data analysis (both statistical and narrative), grant applications, and logistical support. It is obviously quite efficient to place responsibility for all of these elements into the hands of someone who is not meeting the daily demands of running the library.

Using a consultant to run the entire study has the added advantage of giving the team an "out" by having an "objective" uninvolved person make all the decisions. No one can claim that personal relationships or self-interest influenced decisions. (Of course, the team is still responsible for making the major decisions that direct the consultant's work.) A consultant can certainly provide credibility with the staff, community, and administrators.

In some cases, winning a grant to fund the process can mitigate the great expense of a consultant. Some consultants will apply for a grant as part of their contract.

### End Product

Whether or not a consultant is used, the team next considers the end product of the CINA and how it will reflect the purpose and focus of the study. Will the study produce a quiet, internal report for the information of staff alone, a set of concrete recommendations for administrators regarding the budget and services, material for a public discussion of the findings, or some other item? Team discussion of this concrete goal provides a forum for ironing out any lingering conflicts in purpose.

The team prepares a brief planning report for staff, managers, and administrators explaining: what the study is expected to accomplish (possibly involving a goals-and-objectives format), what the end product will consist of, and who, at a minimum, will see it. This document informs staff of the team's key decisions and clarifies any administrative goals for the project. (The case studies include examples of such documents.) For example, when the dean of a university library system plans to merge two libraries, then the document makes both the dean's decision and the CINA's purpose clear. It states that the CINA is being conducted primarily to support the many decisions middle managers must make as part of that merger process by analyzing community information needs. In such a case, only the dean and middle managers may see and act on the full report but an abbreviated version may be made available to the full staff. Concise, up-front statements regarding these major initial decisions mitigate staff concerns and provide the team with a focused beginning.

### SUMMARY

Since it is not an end in itself, the community information-needs analysis must ultimately be placed in the context of the budget, the library's mission, the parent institution's mission, and the general information environment. The team's decisions throughout the next phases will incorporate those realities more fully. All of this decision making moves quite rapidly with no need for extensive

discussion and massive documentation. While important, these broad questions must launch the process, not hold it back.

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## CHAPTER 2 READINGS

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### Involving Others

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- Parrish, Marilyn. 1989. Academic community analysis: Discovering research needs of graduate students at Bowling Green State University. *College and Research Libraries News*. 8 (September): 644–646.

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### Literature Review

- Babbie, Earl. 1998. *The practice of social research*. 8<sup>th</sup> edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. {See chapter 6.}
- Powell, Ronald R. 1997. *Basic research methods for librarians*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Greenwich, CT: Ablex. {See 205–210 for a number of specialized resources.}

### Readings which Illustrate the Value of a Study

- Clougherty, Leo, et al. 1998. The University of Iowa libraries' undergraduate user needs assessment. *College and Research Libraries*. 59 (6, November): 572–584.
- Westbrook, Lynn. 2000. Analyzing community information needs: A holistic approach. *Library Administration and Management*. 14 (1, winter): 26–30.

Zweizig, Douglas L. 1992. Community analysis. In *Keeping the books: Public library financial practices*. Jane B. Robbins and Douglas L. Zweizig, eds. Fort Atkinson, WI: Highsmith Press: 225-238.

#### **Grant Resources**

Barber, Peggy, and Linda D. Crowe. 1993. *Getting your grant: A how-to-do-it manual for librarians*. How-To-Do-It Manuals for Librarians, number 28. New York: Neal-Schuman.

*Big book of library grant money, 1998-99*. 1998. Chicago: American Library Association.

National Guide to Funding for Libraries and Information Services. 1999. 5<sup>th</sup> edition. New York: Foundation Center.

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#### **Meta-analysis Example (useful in a literature review)**

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