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Introducing the Colorado Libraries Volunteer Managers Council

by Catherine C. Childs and John Waite Bowers

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This account, covering the Colorado Libraries Volunteer Managers Council's (henceforth, the Council or CLVMC) formative period from the first meeting in January 1993 through the end of 1996, formally introduces the organization to the Colorado library community by briefly describing its rationale, its structure and norms, its objectives, and its projects. Documents used were minutes of meetings and results of an informal survey completed by eleven members including four of the five founders still affiliated with Colorado library volunteer programs and most members who reliably attend the monthly meetings.

Rationale

Though some large libraries in Colorado and elsewhere restrict volunteers to nonessential tasks, smaller libraries often would be unable to operate without the help of these unpaid workers. As both public and philanthropic funds become more restricted and more widely dispersed among a larger variety of agencies, volunteer workers assume increasing importance.

Every volunteer ultimately requires a paid supervisor. In the largest libraries, the job of managing volunteers usually is a full-time one, often occupied by an individual whose educational/vocational background is not as a librarian. In midsize and small libraries, the task of supervising volunteers usually becomes a function added to the other role(s) of one or more librarians or other staff members.

Full-time volunteer coordinators may be somewhat marginalized in one way or another within their own institutions. Those institutions are concerned primarily with information storage and retrieval. But volunteer coordinators are not concerned with budgets, books, periodicals, audiovisual materials, or programming, though they develop volunteer positions to fulfill needs of those functions. Rather, their concerns are with human resources and relations.

Some library employees manage volunteers as a partial or part-time assignment. These managers may be naive about human resources and relations generally. Chances are, the supervisory role has been thrust upon them, not actively or even willingly sought. They are likely later to complain of inadequacies in their on-the-job training as volunteer managers.

Whatever their own status within a library, volunteer coordinators know or soon discover that the role, though often satisfying, can be perilous. Volunteers, like other people, generate conflicts both with each other and with their supervisors, sometimes require insurance or at least knowledge about the lack thereof, often have transportation and other logistical problems, occasionally prove unsatisfactory and, understandably, almost always desire recognition for work accomplished. They must be recruited, interviewed, oriented, assigned, trained, and retained (or, rarely, dismissed, if possible without hard feelings). They want to perceive themselves as contributors to necessary enterprises who perform useful tasks in social environments comprising worthwhile people. Some of them might be discontented unless they increase their knowledge in the course of their training and duties. An official representative of the library must deal with these exigencies if the library expects to maintain a cadre of effective volunteers.

Recognizing that volunteer coordinators in Colorado libraries often lack local support systems and even rudimentary information and communication among themselves, two volunteer supervisory affiliated with large libraries--Terry Nelson of the Denver Public Library and Eileen Dumas of the Aurora Public Library--decided in late 1992 to test the organizational waters. They called a meeting of individuals who managed library volunteers in the metro Denver area.

Structure and Norms

Nine individuals representing as many libraries answered the call for an organizational meeting at the Denver Public Library. Besides Nelson and Dumas, those attending included Catherine Childs of the Boulder Public Library, Nona Colby of the Adams County Library System (Thornton), Julia Dees of the Arapahoe Public Library District (Castlewood), Lesley Haynes of the Douglas Public Library District, Donna Johnson of the Colorado Talking Book Library, Ann Tomas of the Adams County Library System (Northglenn), and Midge Trueman of the Arapahoe Public Library District (Koelbel).

A round-table discussion of local volunteer systems revealed that about half the libraries represented at the meeting employed an individual either full- or part-time exclusively to recruit, coordinate, and retain volunteers. The initial meeting also established a number of organizational precedents, all of which have persisted as explicit or tacit norms.

The Council is collegial, not hierarchical. It collects no dues and has no officers. Members volunteer for secretarial tasks, and they have been performed from time to time by Ann Tomas, Midge Trueman, Belinda Goebel of the Louisville Public Library, Darrell Chayne of the Englewood Public Library, and others. Members volunteer also for ad hoc assignments, both temporary and long-term. The Council's experience has been that the relatively loose structure permits, even encourages, a salutary exploitation of members' diverse skills and interests.

The Council meets at 9 a.m. on the second Wednesday of the month, each time at a different library selected from among potential host sites volunteered by their representatives. In general, decisions of the Council are by consensus. Formal votes are rare.

Meetings typically open at the initiative of the host. They often feature both agenda items announced in advance that relate to the objectives of the organization or to specific projects and sharing of work-related and relevant personal experiences. The tone is decidedly informal, and conversations often involve positive recognition and personal concern for members both present and absent.

Beginning with nine members, the organization at the end of 1996 had a mailing list of twenty-three. The typical meeting has an attendance of nine to twelve members, most of whom are regulars representing libraries close to Denver, plus a resource person or two who might present specialized information or be involved in an organizational project. A number of members on the mailing list have attended only one or two meetings, and some have attended none. With the exception of Mary Lou McNatt of Dayton Memorial Library at Regis University, all regulars at the end of 1996 represented public libraries, though the

Council welcomes members from libraries of all types.

The organization's name has evolved from "Metro Libraries Volunteer Coordinators Council" to "Metro Libraries Volunteer Management Council" to "Colorado Libraries Volunteer Managers" to the present designation, "Colorado Libraries Volunteer Managers Council."

Objectives

At the Council's meetings of July 14 and August 11, 1993, members wrote and formally approved a "mission statement." The statement has served the organization well, for though it is seldom explicitly invoked it has tacitly guided CLVMC's projects and activities:

The mission...is to promote volunteerism in public libraries in Colorado.

Our goal is to share ideas and resources with other professionals on the productive use of volunteers to further the goals and missions of our respective library systems.

Our specific objectives are:

- To promote volunteerism through publicity about our volunteer programs and stories about volunteer success.
- To develop a prototype volunteer policy manual.
- To research the legal, financial and insurance ramifications of volunteerism.
- To develop volunteer training manuals and materials.
- To develop and promote volunteer recognition programs including a calendar of annual volunteer awards.

The informal survey asked respondents to rate the Council's performance on each section of the mission statement as well as on the mission statement in general. Ratings could range from 1 ("not at all well") to 7 ("extremely well"). Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for all ratings. [Table not posted here.]

As the table shows, member approval of the Council's "sharing ideas and resources" function and of its performance on the mission statement generally are very high and, as the small standard deviations indicate, nearly unanimous. In addition, ratings of "promoting volunteerism" generally and of "developing a prototype manual" are well above the scale's midpoint. All other ratings hover near neutral. As the relatively high standard deviation shows, highest disagreement about the Council's performance was on "developing and promoting volunteer recognition programs." Possibly, the items is ambiguous: "Recognition programs" may mean to some respondents programs in recognition of individual volunteers and to others programs recognizing volunteerism generally. In fact, the Council has undertaken and completed several impressive projects recognizing library volunteerism in the abstract.

Projects

The Council has been remarkably active. By its third meeting in March 1993, it had accomplished two projects: to pool individual library policies on health and liability insurance coverage for volunteers and to accumulate a pooled set of application and record-keeping forms. Examination of the minutes reveals about fifteen projects undertaken during the Council's four-year history, nearly all of which have been completed. Among the less ambitious enterprises that have consumed appreciable amounts of Council attention:

- Two representations, one involving a workshop program, the other a *Library Volunteers Make Things Happen* tee-shirt and an informational brochure, at Colorado Library Association conventions.
- A project to exhibit the Council's message on King Soopers plastic bags (completed successfully in August 1994).
- The mission statement.
- A logo for the Council.
- A grant proposal to support the projected *Handbook*, unfunded so far.
- A breakfast to honor a departing member.

The more ambitious projects have included, the *Handbook*, a *Directory of Public Library Volunteer Opportunities*, and a web site.

The *Handbook* or *Library Volunteer Policy Manual* or *Volunteer Mosaic*, though not completed, has been extensively outlined and exists as a topical notebook. Two chapters have been written, and a bibliography has been compiled, primarily by Preston Driggers of the Douglas Public Library District and Eileen Dumas. Meanwhile, one member of the Council has co-authored her own manual (1), and possibly CLVMC should be credited with a stimulative role.

The *Directory of Public Library Volunteer Opportunities*, compiled with the help of a Boulder volunteer, lists tasks performed by volunteers in fifty-seven front range cities and towns. It is twenty-eight pages long and has been distributed to many Colorado libraries.

The web site <http://www.aclin.org/libraries/volunteer> is available through the Douglas County Public Library. According to its introductory material, the site was "developed under grants from the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications and Information Administration." A browser can select from items on the following menu: history; membership (includes names of volunteer coordinators at various libraries, phone numbers, sometimes fax numbers and email addresses); meeting schedule; public library volunteer opportunities (a version of the *Directory*, mentioned earlier); and highlights on library volunteering (references to recent articles, mostly local, about library volunteers and volunteering).

Conclusion

CLVMC has proved a valuable resource to its members and to the Colorado library community. In open-ended responses on the survey, members unanimously reported that they place a high value on the opportunity to share feelings and frustrations as well as information with like-minded others and to undertake and execute projects in the service of library volunteers and volunteering. One member reported on the survey that CLVMC is her most valuable (though least expensive) professional organization. Other members, in addition to mentioning the group's informational functions, expressed appreciation for the Council's "moral support," for the opportunity to "share struggles as well as successes," for its tolerance of "venting." One member reported that she comes away from meetings "re-energized."

CLVMC hopes to expand its formal and informal role in the community of Colorado libraries by sponsoring projects and programs, by encouraging new members to join the existing Council, and by urging full- and part-time library volunteer managers who are geographically or functionally distant from the Front Range to form their own chapters. Interested readers may get in touch with individuals mentioned in the article or with the senior author.

Notes:

(1) Bonnie F. McCune and Charlezine "Terry" Nelson, *Recruiting and Managing Volunteers in Libraries: A How-To-Do-It Manual* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 1995), viii plus 174 pages.

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