

# **Regional Libraries Across Canada: A Kaleidoscope of Services and Governance Structures**

**By**

**Ann Curry, Suzanne Green, and Jessica O’Neill**

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Dr. Ann Curry  
Associate Professor  
School of Library, Archival and Information Studies  
The University of British Columbia  
Email <ann.curry@ubc.ca>

Suzanne Green, M.L.I.S.  
Curriculum Coordinator  
Sprout Shaw College  
Vancouver, B.C.

Jessica O’Neill, M.L.I.S.  
Librarian, St. Clare’s Hospital  
St. John’s, Newfoundland

## **Introduction**

County and regional library systems in Canada have two very difficult management challenges: complex governance structures and large geographic service areas, in some cases areas larger than a small country. To provide further information on these challenges a nation-wide research project was conducted in 2001 that examined the various governance structures in Canada's 89 regional/county systems, librarians' opinions about these structures, the types of services offered by regional systems, and librarian's views on how service delivery across a vast land footprint can best be achieved. The project, comprised of a mailed survey and follow-up interviews with selected respondents, builds on two previous national surveys about regional/county libraries done by the Ann Curry in 1995 and 1997. All three projects were funded by the County and Regional Library Systems Interest Group of the Canadian Library Association (CARLS).

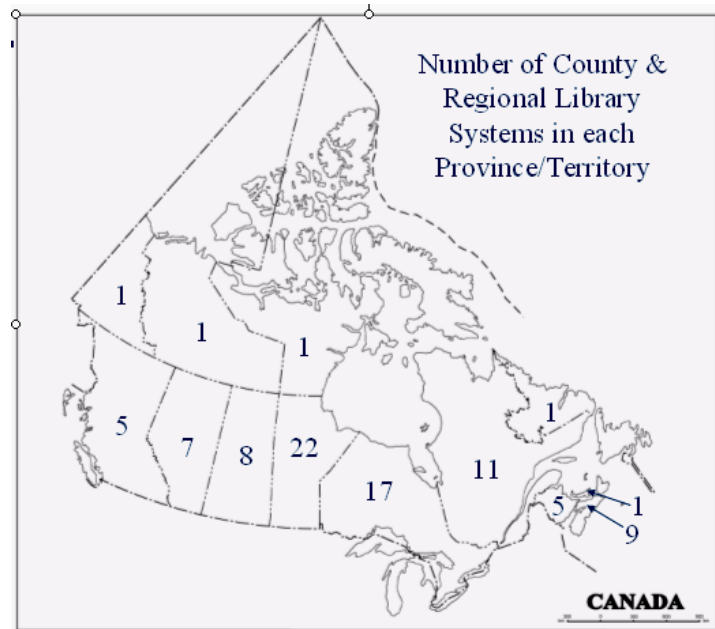
The 1995 survey of Canadian of regional/county library systems was the first research that focused on this type of system – no data prior to this had been gathered. The goal was to collect statistical information comparable to that collected on large urban public libraries by CALUPL (Council of Administrators of Large Urban Public Libraries). The survey provided a general snapshot of governance structures, circulation and funding levels, systems used to transport library materials between service points, and information technology advances (McAllister and Curry, 1997).

Two of the most important findings of the 1995 survey were 1) that no governance “template” exists – governance structures vary widely across the country and differences exist even within provinces, and 2) that librarians considered efficient and widespread Internet access their most important service goal, the key to solving many distance-delivery problems. In 1997, Curry and Curtis conducted a survey that focused specifically on the Internet in regional/county libraries – funding, political/economic alliances, extent of connectivity, staff and user training, and the factors involved in managing a network spread over thousands of miles (Curry and Curtis, 2000). The current survey draws on the 1995 and 1997 research to investigate more fully the different services offered by regional/public libraries, and the variety of governance structures used to regulate and deliver those services. The survey highlights specifically the issue of centralization versus decentralization and chief librarians’ views about how best to manage a system governed by elected officials with disparate political views and limited loyalty to the over-all system. The overall purpose of the survey was:

1. to provide more recent statistics about Canada’s county and regional libraries;
2. to identify issues facing county and regional library systems in terms of governance and provision of services, and
3. to identify specific topics related to county and regional libraries that are in need of further research.

Given that in 1995 approximately 9.4 million Canadians or 32% of the country’s population relied on county and regional library systems for library service, the lack of research in this area is distressing (McAllister and Curry 1995, 33). By compiling

information on each individual library system, we hope to encourage the development of discourse within the sea-to-sea Canadian regional library community regarding shared problems and possible solutions, and to raise awareness of regional-specific issues within the larger community of public libraries in Canada. (See map below)



## Previous Reports and Surveys

### Governance Structure

Few research or descriptive articles on the key focus of this research - county/regional library governance structure - could be located. McAllister and Curry (1997) had identified two main models of Canadian governance, integrated and federated, but it appeared that some systems did not fit within either model. In an integrated library system, one central authority manages all members by assuming responsibility for all or some of the system's hiring, training, selection and processing of materials, operational procedures, and facility maintenance. The central body may assume additional

responsibilities, such as public relations. In a federated library system, the central body is responsible for coordinating services (often ordering/processing) and autonomy is more decentralized to individual members who often have their own budgets and hire/train their own staff members.

Tom Childers in his study of American public libraries identified two models of governance that he labeled as cooperative and consolidated (Childers 1988, 446). The cooperative system is defined by the author as “the one that allows the individual member library the greatest autonomy,” similar to the federated system, but allows individual libraries even greater independence (Childers 1988, 446). The consolidated system is defined as “one that unifies individual libraries under a single administrative authority” (Childers 1988, 446). Childers’ study attempted to ascertain what benefits might accrue to an individual library that joined a federated system. His conclusion was that individual American libraries did reap financial rewards from joining some form of regional system because this allowed them to qualify for various types of State aid.

Another type of governance structure (or at least a different name) occurs in Tennessee where the county/regional library systems have a structure that they characterize as being “hybrid.” This label is used because the systems include both rural and city libraries and therefore have qualities of both a highly centralized and decentralized nature (Tennessee State Library, 2003)

Many descriptive articles explained the economic necessity that has encouraged libraries in rural areas to join together and noted that the political and governance structures that

have resulted from these financially driven amalgamations were sometimes patchwork entities whose structure depended on the political trends at the time of amalgamation. Some identified the need to provide access to online information as a reason to form some sort of collective with other libraries (Cristenson 1995, 68), while others described inter-library loan programs that were established to help supplement sparse book collections in rural regions (Lange 1980, 590).

The literature revealed the existence of several different governance models with different names given to what appeared to be similar governance structures. The philosophy of Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* – “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more or less” - seemed to be in effect to deal with this complex terminology tangle. In this study, therefore, it was decided not to ask libraries to choose from a list of models the structure that most closely corresponded to theirs. Instead, it was decided that better information about governance structures would emerge if the libraries responded to specific questions about the division of administrative responsibilities and the structure and responsibilities of the library boards.

## **Services to Users & Funding**

### **Funding**

A recurring issue in the research and reports was the insufficient tax base or lack of funding in general that has prevented many county/regional public libraries from providing quality library service (Owen 1984, 29). This problem was evident in the 1970s in both Canada and the U.S., and appears to have continued over the next four

decades. A case study of Prince Edward Island public libraries noted that “public libraries serving rural areas carry a heavier load than their urban counterparts” because rural areas lack other educational and governmental institutions that generally supplement library services (Saleemi 1971, 18).

Studies report that lack of funding has resulted in reduced hours of operation and/or cuts to budgets in the areas of acquisitions, vehicle operations, equipment, and travel. In the South Shore Regional Library in Nova Scotia, lack of funding resulted in elimination of all story hours in the 1980s (Bone 1983, 210). Verna Pungitore, a leading researcher in this area, contends that the drastic results of budget cuts in county/regional libraries are often unknown because librarians in American rural libraries frequently cannot afford to join professional associations and attend conferences. As a consequence, they do not have the opportunity to bring their concerns to the attention of fellow librarians. (Pungitore 1989, 176). According to Somers, budget problems have also resulted in county/regional public libraries not being able to form long term strategic plans because their reliable, consistent funding is uncertain (Somers 1983, 68). This leads to a vicious cycle where decreased revenues lead to decreased service that results in disappointed patrons who are then less willing to advocate on behalf of the library for increased funding (Owen 1983, 30).

### **Transportation of Materials**

The literature also reported the means by which many county/regional public libraries serve geographically isolated users by using bookmobiles, books by mail, and other similar outreach services. One example was Mailbox Library, developed in 1974 to

provide library service to remote northern Ontario communities. This innovative initiative was developed as a less expensive alternative to setting up and maintaining small community libraries (Jones 1975, 146). Amy Owen maintains that only large systems can afford to operate outreach services that transport materials over long distances to remote customers, and therefore she advises small rural libraries with widely dispersed users to join some type of regional system (Owen 1983, 29). The literature reveals that outreach services offered by regional systems have changed over time as budgets have tightened. In 1983, for example, the Atlantic Provinces *Library Association Bulletin* noted that Newfoundland had phased out bookmobile service in favour of books by mail in order to cut costs and that Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were following suit (Somers 1983, 68).

### **Information Technology**

The use of information technology in county/regional libraries was also a focus of this research study, but no research or reports on this topic other than that of Curry and Curtis (2000) could be located. This study examined how Canada's county and regional libraries were implementing Internet access, how they used the Internet and what impact the Internet would have on library service. The opinion of the responding library directors was that the Internet is "an enhancement we cannot afford to be without," despite its overwhelming cost (Curry and Curtis 2000, 100). Long-term funding for Internet services was identified as a key issue in 1997 for county and regional public library systems. In this study, survey questions explored whether providing Internet access and funding the associated costs of technology and telecommunications remained an issue in

2001, but the primary technology focus examined the issue in the context of centralized or decentralized responsibility for funding and training.

## **Methodology**

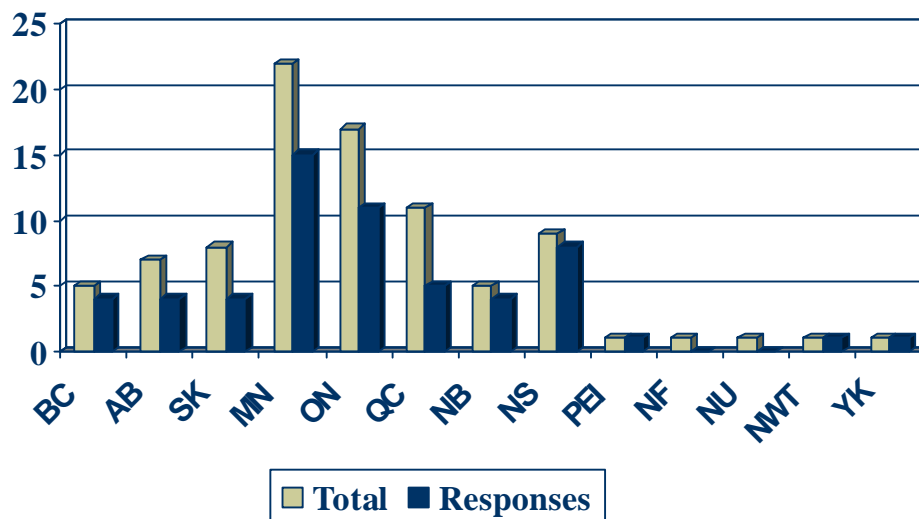
Part one of the project was a survey that was mailed to the 89 county and regional libraries in Canada. As no up-to-date list of Canadian county/regional libraries exists, this population was identified by modifying the list of 92 libraries that Curry and Curtis compiled and used in 1997. An Internet search of all library homepages provided information regarding address changes, names of new chief librarians, and system amalgamations and dissolutions. As a final check for accuracy, the list was subdivided by province and mailed to the corresponding provincial librarian with a request for confirmation.

The results of the two previous studies of Canadian regional/county libraries (McAllister, 1997; Curry, 2000) were consulted when the survey instrument was developed for the present study in order to incorporate issues raised in that research. Also, executive members of CARLS were contacted to identify specific areas of interest to county/regional librarians. The survey had two principal sections. Section one gathered statistical information: number of staff, number and type of branches, circulation totals, population, and division of financial responsibility for building and maintenance fees. Section two examined governance models and how the library board and chief librarian operated within their model.

The draft survey was pre-tested with a group of ten respondents who provided comments and suggestions for improvement that were incorporated into the final version.

To ensure that all Canadian systems could participate, library directors in New Brunswick and Québec received a French translation of the survey in addition to the English version. A response rate of 65% (58 of 89 surveys returned) was achieved from the initial mailing and one reminder mailing in 2001. At least one response was received from all provinces and territories except Newfoundland.

### Response Rate



Part two of the project involved telephone interviews in 2002 with eleven chief librarians (CEO's) of regional/county systems – one from each territory/province that answered the mailed survey. The purpose of the interviews was to provide clarification of survey answers and more in-depth information on the efficacy of different governance structures. Respondents were chosen based on their survey answers: those selected represented all

three different governance structures revealed by the survey results. All those interviewed were assured of the confidentiality of their answers, where appropriate.

## Results

The following statistical table shows the characteristics of the respondent library systems.

In some cases, the numbers can be compared to those compiled from the 1995 survey (McAllister), but the differing populations in the two surveys must be considered in all cases.:

Table 1

	<b>1995</b>	<b>2001</b>
Total population served	5,858,105 (63)	5,914,791 (58)
Average (mean) population per system	92,986 (63)	107,542 (55)
Circulation per capita	High: 14.54 Low: 2.13 Mean: 7.13 (56)	High: 15.66 Low: 2.7 Mean: 7.22 (53)
Average (mean) number of branches	20 (62)	22 (58)
Total number of public library branches	1,210 (62)	994 (58)
Total number of bookmobiles operating	23 (63)	19 (58)

It appears that in the six years since the 1995 study that the population served per system has increased, that circulation per capita has risen slightly, and that the average number of branches per system has also increased.

Additional statistics gathered from the surveys provide a more complete picture of the type of libraries within systems, levels of staffing, and the ownership and maintenance responsibilities of library buildings.

Table 2

Total public/school combined libraries	108
Total school libraries	123
Total other libraries (book deposits, books by mail, business info centre, college, “community libraries”, headquarters, video by mail, visits to sites, homebound service, youth outreach, public library/Access PEI)	66
Location of headquarters	Separate building: 32 In branch: 24
Average (mean) number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff	42.78 (51)
Number of staff	High: 776 * Low: 2 Mean: 81.30 (56)
Percentage of systems whose member municipalities provide free building facilities	64%
Percentage of systems whose schools provide free building facilities	19%
Percentage of systems whose member municipalities provide building facilities and charge the library system rent	22%
Percentage of systems who own their own building facilities	28%
Percentage of systems whose member municipality provides free cleaning and maintenance	41%
Percentage of systems who pay for cleaning and maintenance	48%
Percentage of systems whose service points pay for cleaning and maintenance	19%

\* Some libraries include volunteers when counting the total number of staff system-wide.

School libraries and school/public libraries remain an important part of regional/county library systems across Canada. Of 58 responding systems, 24 have both public and school libraries as members. Of these, 21 include among their members one or more combined school/public libraries, most of which are located within a school building. Within these 21 systems are a total of 108 combined libraries,. Inclusion of school libraries as system members has a considerable influence on governance and funding structures: the survey

responses and subsequent interviews with library directors in multi-type library systems revealed that tax structures and governance representation are much more complicated and problematic in these systems. Problems arise because the public library and the school library have different needs and regulations regarding such things as staffing, union agreements, censorship/intellectual freedom policies, security, and acquisitions timetabling. Despite these difficulties, the continued existence of multi-type library systems and the comments of interviewees show that these partnerships remain a viable way to deliver service, particularly in rural areas.

Thirteen of the 58 responding systems provide service using one or more bookmobiles, and fourteen systems have service outlets or innovative service delivery modes additional to branch service. These include book deposits in retail outlets, public institutions such as senior's residences, and college libraries; books/videos by mail; business information centers in non-branch locations; homebound service; and outreach to youth centers.

Who should provide the physical space for delivery of services is sometimes a question within the regional/county library system. Should the individual community being served provide a building and maintain the premises, as that community's board member is "on location" and can best oversee the space? Or should the library system itself purchase or rent facilities for the various service locations, as experienced centralized management should be able to secure the most appropriate geographical and physical location for a public library and can better ensure that facilities are of the same standard throughout the region? As can be seen by in Table 2, in the majority of the library systems surveyed

(64%), member municipalities provide free building facilities, while in 22% the member municipality provides the building, but charges rent to the library system. Deciding who assumes responsibility for cleaning and maintenance may also be problematic: as can be seen in Table 2, that responsibility is almost evenly split between the central library system and the individual system member.

According to an Ontario regional/county library CEO, she much prefers that her member communities build their own libraries, as this process engenders a greater sense of community pride and ownership. However, she has been frustrated several times in her career by communities who waited until the library “literally disintegrated” before planning a new facility.

## **Governance**

Questions regarding governance concerned the following themes:

1. Structure,
2. Division of responsibilities (in particular administration of programs and services),
3. Number and types of library boards,
4. The process by that a person becomes a board member, and
5. The responsibilities of each board.

## **Structure**

Three different governance styles, similar to those described in the literature review, emerged from the data. The first is a distinctly centralized model where headquarters’

staff assumes responsibility for most administrative duties in all locations and performs most “background” library functions such as materials selection, weeding, processing and cataloguing. The second style is a more decentralized model where branches (or other types of service points) are more autonomous, particularly regarding administration; headquarters provides minimal support and supervision. The third style is a hybrid of these two models in which responsibilities are shared almost equally. In most cases, this third model has headquarters providing some basic system-wide services, while branches are responsible for provision of local services. Of the 58 libraries surveyed, 23 systems were centralized (44%), 6 were decentralized (12%) and 23 were hybrids with shared responsibilities (44%). Six of the systems surveyed chose not to answer this question, likely a case of Humpty Dumptyism in that these systems had yet another variation of governance that did not fit the words in the survey question.

### **Administration of Programs and Services**

In addition to gathering general information about the structure in place in county and regional library systems, the survey also gathered information about the division of administration responsibility for specific programs and services. The table below summarizes the results, with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of responses for the specific question on a type of program or service.

Table 3

<b>Type of program or service</b>	<b>Centrally administered</b>	<b>Administered by branches</b>	<b>Shared administration</b>
Budgeting and accounting	43 (56)	8 (56)	5 (56)
Grant applications	39 (51)	8 (51)	4 (51)
Payroll	42 (55)	8 (55)	5 (55)
WWW access	28 (53)	18 (53)	7 (53)
Statistics gathering	31 (54)	13 (54)	10 (54)
Union catalogue	37 (42)	1 (42)	4 (42)
Staff training	28 (56)	15 (56)	13 (56)
Staff evaluation	29 (54)	15 (54)	10 (54)
Staff hiring	28 (54)	11 (54)	15 (54)
Summer reading programs	23 (54)	21 (54)	10 (54)
Materials selection	33 (56)	9 (56)	14 (56)
Collection weeding	25 (56)	16 (56)	15 (56)
Materials ordering	44 (55)	6 (55)	5 (55)
Cataloguing	43 (54)	6 (54)	5 (54)
Media relations	28 (54)	8 (54)	18 (54)
Promotional materials	30 (53)	9 (53)	14 (53)
Friends of the library	6 (34)	23 (34)	5 (34)

As can be seen by the figures above, the manner in which administrative responsibilities were divided varied considerably from system to system: however, when respondents were asked whether they felt their particular system of division functioned well, the majority (94%) said it worked well or very well. The most frequently centralized programs and services were budgeting and accounting, grant applications, payroll, materials ordering and cataloguing. From the comments received, it appears that centralization was the most economically feasible way of providing these particular services.

It appears that children’s programming is becoming an area of contention in Canadian public libraries for several reasons, possibly because tight library budgets are responsible for decreased funding for children’s specialists and for sparking debate regarding the necessity of professional (MLIS graduate) involvement in children’s programming. For these reasons, and because children’s programming encompasses a broad range of services, several questions in the survey were focused on this particular administrative area.

Table 4

<b>Type of program</b>	<b>Centrally administered</b>	<b>Administered by branches</b>
Babytime (0-23 months)	1 (17)	16 (17)
Toddler time (2-3 years)	5 (32)	27 (32)
Storytime (4-5 years)	10 (51)	41 (51)
Second language instruction	0 (2)	2 (2)
Author visits	24 (41)	17 (41)
Internet instruction for kids	11 (33)	22 (33)

It appears that children’s programming is mainly a decentralized service, except for author visits. In this type of program, the author usually conducts the same program in several locations within a system, and therefore central coordination is most efficient.

## **Board Type and Structure**

A study of regional/county library governance would not be complete without data about the number and type of library boards in each system, the process by which a person becomes a board member, and the responsibilities of each board. Of the 58 systems surveyed, 50 (86%) had a central board; 21 (36%) had other boards in addition to, or in place of, a central board. These additional boards were usually responsible for administering individual member libraries within the region/county, or responsible for

libraries within a geographic section of the region. Of the provinces surveyed, the incidence of boards in addition to a central board occurred most frequently in systems in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Quebec and New Brunswick.

An Alberta CEO who characterized her library system as “very decentralized” felt strongly that decentralization was an empowering management structure for the 38 local library boards in her region, each one representing a town or district. She maintained that these local board members “became more involved in library matters because there was no guardian angel from a headquarters far away who could solve personnel, programming and building problems and dispense dollars.” This decentralization of responsibility translated into frequent and persistent lobbying of the provincial government by these many local board members, resulting in increased funding and a higher profile for libraries. Having just one central board for the entire region and centralized management would weaken this grassroots sense of responsibility and lessen the number of library supporters, according to this Alberta CEO.

The CEO of a decentralized northern Saskatchewan system commented that inequitable service levels and facilities in her various service points remained a major drawback of the decentralized model, but she noted that these inequities likely troubled her more than her customers, as she was more aware of the differences as she traveled throughout the system.

There were important differences in the method by which individuals became members of central boards as opposed to other boards. In the central boards, 26 (48) systems appoint members, 7 (48) elect members and 15 (48) use a combination of appointment and election. In the other boards, 15 (18) systems appoint members, 1 (18) elects members and 2 (18) use a combination of appointment and election.

A Nova Scotia CEO noted in her interview that dealing with elected town councilors who sat on either her central board or on one of the local boards required considerable diplomacy, as these politicians were especially prone to jealousy. She was careful to avoid any “whiff” that she might be giving more advantage to one community over another, particularly when new services were introduced in only one service point. To deflect charges of favoritism, this CEO would characterize the new service as an untried and possibly disastrous “pilot project,” to be introduced throughout the system only when it had proven its worth.

The responsibilities of the various boards differed both between provinces and from system to system, however some trends were discernable. Of the 49 systems that provided information about their central boards, policy (33) and budget (29) were mentioned most frequently as being primary areas of responsibility. Others included staffing, communication and advocacy, management, finances, planning - mentioned between 6 and 10 times as key central board responsibilities; governance, audits and grants were all mentioned between 2 and 4 times. Of the 21 systems that provided information about their other boards, policy, advocacy, fundraising and grants were each

mentioned six times as being areas of responsibility. Others included budget, programming, staffing, mentioned between 3 and 5 times; governance, management and finances were mentioned twice or less.

A British Columbia CEO, who worked in a municipal library system prior to the centralized regional system she now managed, had high regard for her regional board members:

“In a municipal system, you can hand off personnel and buildings to municipal officials. In a centralized regional system, you cannot. The board members have to make policy and budget decisions regarding union issues, staffing configurations, and planning new buildings. A regional board member has much more on his or her plate.”

This same CEO talked extensively about her frustration with new board members who always insisted on consulting with their home town council to ask how they should vote.

“I try to gently remind them that their home council has appointed them to the library board to make decisions, not just to represent the council and their home town. The provincial library act is silent on who the board member is representing, and the implication is that the member is supposed to think about the good of the system as a whole. But it’s only after the first 3 or 4 meetings that regional board members start to think system-wide ... they see that others are trying to be fair to all. So they begin to vote based on their conscience and their newly acquired knowledge base, and temper their competitiveness and parochial interests.”

## Services

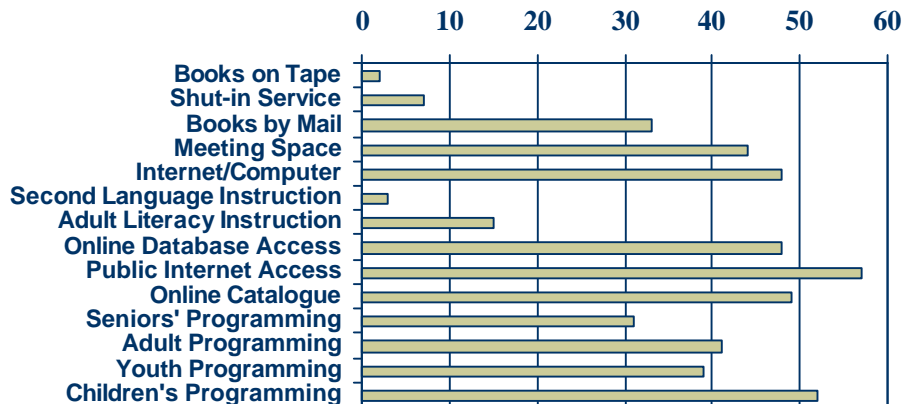
### Types of Services Offered

An effort was made to compile an exhaustive list of services in order to determine those most commonly offered by county and regional library systems. To ensure that new services would not be overlooked, respondents were able to list additional services not listed that their systems provide to patrons.

Table 5

Programming for children (0-9 years)	52 (58)
Services for youth (10-15 years)	39 (58)
Programming for adults	41 (58)
Programming for seniors	31 (58)
Online catalogue	49 (58)
Public Internet access	57 (58)
Online database access	48 (58)
Adult literacy instruction	15 (58)
Second language instruction	3 (58)
Internet/computer instruction	48 (58)
Meeting space	44 (58)
Books by mail	33 (58)
Shut-in service	7 (58)
Talking books/books on tape	2 (58)

### Services



As evident from the table above, adult and children's programming is offered by most systems, and that regional/county libraries provide services to those unable to visit the library, perhaps because of distance or disability, mainly through "books by mail" rather than by person visit – "shut-in service." Also worth noting is the fact that 98% of responding systems offer public Internet access, as opposed to 3% in McAllister and Curry's study (1995), and 67% in Curtis and Curry's study (1997).

The CEO of a system in northern Saskatchewan commented on the need for multi-generational programming in her region, where people of all ages are attending employment training classes, making the division between youth and adult programming artificial. She also emphasized that multi-use buildings were the norm in northern Canada:

"Often the school is the only building of consequence in the community, so it is the accepted gathering place, and a natural place for the public library. Sometimes the school also houses the office of the doctor who flies in once a week and the dentist who flies in once a month."

The CEO of a Manitoba system noted that she frequently encountered opposition from her board members when she tried to introduce new services into her member libraries, but that she had developed greater empathy for her board members after heated discussions throughout the years:

“I now appreciate the larger view of the region that my politician board members have. Libraries aren’t everything. The politicians on my board also have to fix roads, manage waste management, and deal with more people on the welfare roles during a recession: my library services sometimes on not on their radar.”

## **Reference Structure**

Providing adequate reference service is often difficult in large regional/county systems with small member libraries staffed with few, if any, professional librarians. Questions about the degree of centralization of reference service, including referral policies, were included in the survey to determine how reference service is structured. The survey results revealed that in most regional/county systems (37 of 58), the individual member libraries try to answer all their own reference questions, but they have the option of referring complex or “stumper” queries to a central branch or other resource reference service. In 21 of 58 systems, member libraries must answer all their own reference questions themselves: no backup or central service is available.

A CEO from a B.C. regional system feels strongly that the reference service she has created is the key element that binds the system and the staff together. In her system, staff from far-flung member branches who are unable to answer a question are encouraged to phone or email the central/headquarters library for help. In turn, headquarters reference staff are encouraged to give these questions top priority. According to this CEO:

“The reference question may be the reason for the communication, but it’s the incidental and friendly chat around the question that binds the staff together.

When the staff from a branch 150 kilometres away only visit headquarters once a

year, if that, you need to foster communication and make them feel less isolated if the system is to work., and system-wide reference service provides the incentive to communicate.”

## **Issues Facing Canada’s County and Regional Library Systems**

At the end of the survey, space was provided for comments on the major issues concerning governance and services affecting county and regional library systems in Canada. By far, the most commonly listed issue was funding (60%). Other common issues included technology (26%), staff training (18%), insufficient staff (12%), rising costs (10%), declining rural population (10%), ability of member municipalities to opt out of system (10%), indifference or attitude problems (6%), volunteers (4%), low wages (4%), changes in board members (4%), the tendency of board members to represent only their own constituencies (4%), amalgamation of municipalities (4%) and too many branches (4%).

Typical of the comments received from the survey respondents about important regional/county issues are the following:

“The population decrease in rural areas affects the support base for funding in rural areas.”

“The increasing costs associated with providing new methods of electronic services. So much of the software, on-line reference services, catalogue, etc. come with a “hefty” price tag.”

“How do we meet demand with funding levels that have been stagnant or eroding in the 90’s? How do we adequately recompense staff who are making less now in

real terms than they were in 1990 despite massive changes to their jobs due to technology? How do we get the provincial bureaucrats, who control policy-making, to see that areas outside the capital regions need and deserve attention to the same level as the systems that serve their own spouses and kids?”

## **How to Manage a Regional/County Library System the Size of a Small Country**

The eleven regional/public library CEOs interviewed by telephone were asked what advice they would give a new CEO on how to manage the kaleidoscope of services and the complex governance structure of a regional/county library system. Their recommendations were remarkably alike, leading one to assume that the challenges faced by librarians in Nunavut, B.C., or Nova Scotia are similar. Summarized below are the ten most important management tips that emerged.

### **1. Meetings are Your Life**

Go to as many council/school board meetings as you can, making sure that you visit each group at least once a year. In a decentralized system with library boards for each member, attend the board meetings. In a centralized system, attend the town council meetings. It doesn't matter how many boards or councils are in your region (some Canadian regions have over 70) or how far away (8 hours drive?), your attendance at these meetings is crucial to the success of your system, no matter how cold it (minus 40!), no matter whether the mayor cancelled it last time without telling you!

## **2. Make the Central Board Meeting a Traveling Show**

Move the location of your central board meetings around the region. This gives board members a better sense of the challenges you face in managing a large kingdom (a regional library system in northern Saskatchewan covers 370,000 sq. km), and makes them appreciate how far you and your staff travel regularly. In both centralized and decentralized systems, having a traveling board meeting allows the members to see the good features of other libraries in the system

## **3. Over Communicate**

Communicate more than you think you need to. Distribute your annual report throughout your “kingdom” to every service outlet and at every meeting. Translate the report into all the languages used in your region. Exploit the economies of email, and keep in email contact with your library staff and board members in distant locations. Don’t assume that no news is good news: silence can often mean frustration or dissatisfaction. Create a system newsletter and distribute it in paper or electronic copy.

Communicate a lot about policies, and emphasize that those policies apply to everyone.

Become expert at writing policies that apply to the entire region

## **4. Be a portal**

Become the region’s gateway to the province, to the rest of the world. Your headquarters, either in a centralized or decentralized system can be the portal to information, education, training programs, and to funding opportunities like the Gates money.

## **5. Tolerate ambiguity and difference**

This point was considered especially important by CEO's of decentralized systems that included both school and public libraries. They would caution a new CEO not to dwell on the differences between member libraries, but instead to celebrate the diversity of the region. But be certain that you are not perceived as "playing favorites:" spread money and projects throughout the system with perceptive political savvy.

Try to make both big and small libraries feel that they are getting a good deal, and promote equitability based on (but not absolutely bound to) standards such as building size being based on population and number of terminals based on circulation.

Establish minimum standards of service so the small libraries don't suffer with per capita funding. Such standards could be:

Collections must have no fewer than 10,000 volumes

Libraries must be open no less than 10 hours/week

The system must spend at least \$6,000 on materials for each location.

Establish standards, but don't die by them

Move your collection around to promote equity, but move it fast so it appears to belong to the entire system, and doesn't get "stuck" in one location. Use the delivery truck as a promotional symbol.

## **6. Don't Cut Out the Centre**

Beware of "over efficiency" that results in cutting out the core of your system. You must have adequate headquarters staff to operate and promote the efficiencies that are realized in the member libraries. The emphasis in the last 15 years has been to strengthen the

branches, particularly in centralized systems, because the branch is where the customer interacts with the service. Automate everything you can at the central headquarters, so that the staff can maintain outreach and communication functions, and not have their hours consumed by monotonous routines.

### **7. Maintain good relations and communication with all board members, especially those who are politicians**

Try to appreciate their “world” view, and keep communication lines open no matter how difficult that may be. Make it a practice to talk to board members individually, not just when they are in a group in a meeting. Vary the tune – one time tell them how good things are, what a great job the board and staff have done, how much demand for service is being created (sow the seeds, or “lay the track” for the future). Then, the next time, ask for money. Don’t be seen as having your hand out for money ALL the time. Explain the joys of regional libraries over and over – politicians have short memories, and even one replacement on the board can change its tone. When talking, be as honest as you can, and make sure that disagreement is okay. Preface statements with “In my professional opinion, I disagree...” Get to know the non-elected regional or municipal managers who interact with your elected board members. That’s where you’ll get a real sense of the agenda in that area. Promote to your board members/your politicians their responsibility to make decisions about the library service, not just represent the council. Educate new board members about library service, and promote the idea that they can think for themselves. Try not to put any decisions before the board when there are a lot of new board members.

## **8. Your Staff are the Key**

Staff in all branches and locations have to feel that they are part of the system: if the staff doesn't have it, the local politicians won't, and the customers won't. Your staff must be a cohesive group. Staff at all levels in all locations, no matter how dispersed, must have a common vision, common long-range plan, common customer service philosophy. How to achieve that? Communication and training.

## **9. Promote Autonomy**

Give individual libraries/councils/boards as much local autonomy as possible (like a teenager). Encourage individual boards to be responsible for their own libraries as much as possible: this has a "snowball" effect because the local boards then feel responsible for the success of the library, and become even more active. The regional system cannot be "a big amorphous system based far away that doesn't know them and doesn't care." Give individual board members the opportunity to say to their home constituents: This is what we (I) did for you. But with the autonomy you give them, make sure there are checks and balances. Give guidance, give choices within boundaries. For example, allow branches to do their own (frequently monitored) selection, but within boundaries. Local autonomy -> authority and ownership of problems-> responsibility

## **10. Decentralize to Centralize**

In both centralized and decentralized systems, decentralize as much as possible (without hurting core services) as a matter of policy. Have faith that decentralizing some services

will really strengthen your central, essential core services. Decentralize to prevent rebellion from member libraries. Work very hard to find that middle road between independence and autocratic rule from the center, or face rebellion and disintegration within your kingdom!

## **Conclusions**

Canadian regional and county libraries have a variety of complex governance structures, and offer a wide variety of services. But despite the differences among systems, the common characteristics of serving rural and often isolated communities, and of serving large geographic areas lead to commonalities in management practice. The data from this survey reveal that regional/county library management and services are quite different from that of their big city “cousins,” but the paucity of information about regional/county libraries in Canada and elsewhere leaves the general library community, board members, and members of the public unaware of the special nature of regional/county libraries and the crucial role they play in providing library service to Canadians. It is to be hoped that these libraries gain more of the recognition they deserve .

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