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Service decision-making processes at three New York state cooperative public library systems

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to look at the organizational structure and service provisions of cooperative public library systems in New York State. The study also seeks to ask questions of how cooperative public library systems decide what services to provide.

Design/methodology/approach – Descriptive statistics, factor analysis and cluster analysis were applied on New York State public library systems' 2008 annual reports to generate quantitative profiles of public library systems and their service transactions. Three cooperative public library systems displaying different service features were purposefully selected for further study of their service decision-making processes. The face-to-face and phone interviews were adopted in the study.

Findings – Research findings from this study provide information on specific service variations across cooperative public library systems. The findings also provide differences of service decision-making processes in addition to the factors that might cause these differences.

Originality/value – This study adds knowledge of public library systems' management and organizational structures, therefore fills a knowledge gap on public library systems. It can also serve as the baseline for future studies using newer annual report data and therefore to study the changing roles and services of cooperative public library systems in New York State.

Keywords New York State, Decision-making processes, Cooperative public library systems

Paper type Case study

Background

American public library systems were born in efforts to extend library services to remote or underserved areas and populations. The library systems were also meant to generate economies of scale that individual libraries cannot achieve, enhance, and strengthen the level of library services provided by an individual library to its community. They were organizations established to serve libraries, not the public, although some public library systems did provide services to populations within their service areas when those populations had no other access to library services. In 1948, the American Library Association (ALA) issued *A National Plan for Public Library Services*. The plan called for larger units of public library service as well as systematic coordination of existing library resources and functions (Joeckel and Winslow, 1948). President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society initiatives also emphasized libraries and books for education and resulted in money for new programs in public libraries (Sager, 1992). The passage of the federally funded Library Service Act (LSA) in 1956 and its successor, the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA, 1964), made it possible for independent libraries to act cooperatively for a specific purpose and to extend the service to rural libraries (Childers, 1988; Kirks, 1989). In 1967, ALA



published *Minimum Standards for Public Library Systems*, 1966 to provide guiding principles and standards for system services.

Around this time, cooperative library systems' developments took place in about half of the 50 states. However, the practice was different in each state depending on the perceived needs (Long, 2005). In the late 1950s, the New York State Legislature and Governor authorized the establishment of public library systems in the Education Law. Their governance and funding were described in the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education[1]. There were eight public library systems serving 13 counties plus Watertown Regional Service Center in New York State in 1956 (Cade, 1987). There are now 23 public library systems including all 62 counties and serving almost all the state's area and population and all 756 public libraries except Hillview Free Library[2] in Diamond Point. This is the only public library that is not a member of any public library system.

A typical public library system in New York State includes a board of trustees, a group of member libraries, a headquarters with director and staff, and a central reference library, which is also a member library. The 23 public library systems can be divided into three types, which include consolidated, federated, and cooperative. The consolidated public library system maintains administrative control over services, staff, and finances of branch libraries. The federated public library system on the other hand is based on coordination and voluntary cooperation with little or no control over member libraries' services, staff, or finances. The cooperative public library system is similar to the federated library system except that it is established by cooperative agreement among multiple libraries, while federated library system is established by municipal or district governors (Bly *et al.*, 1986).

In fall 2005, the New York Library Association Public Library Section conducted a survey of its mailing list subscribers. This was done in order to seek subscriber's opinions about potential public library systems mergers. In the survey, there were questions about what services provided by public library systems were valued most by member libraries. Other questions sought to highlight those services that member libraries thought they would lose if there was a potential system merger. The responses reflected both strong for and against opinions of the potential mergers (Ren and Andersen, 2008).

Public library systems mergers were not put into action. However, this survey study and its findings brought attentions to New York State public library systems and their services. Consequently, this inspired the generation of this study. This study sets to look at the organizational structure and service provisions of public library systems in New York State. The study further seeks to ask questions of how these public library systems decide what services to provide. Compared to existing research which focused on how public library systems' services affected individual library service levels (Seavey, 1988; Childers, 1988; Shisler, 1995), findings from this study add knowledge of public library systems' management and organizational structures. This study responded to the calling for more data about Library Networks, Cooperatives and Consortia (LNCCs) in key informant interviews in a research conducted by the American Library Association's Office for Research and Statistics (Davis, 2007). This was extremely beneficial in addressing their changing roles and services.

Descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and cluster analysis were applied on New York State public library systems' 2008 annual reports to generate quantitative profiles of public library systems and their service transactions. The annual report is required by the Education Law to receive information about public library systems[3].

It contains system demographic information, service transaction counts, and funding information for the reporting year. The face-to-face and phone interviews[4] were adopted to study the organizational decision-making processes. The 2008 annual reports were intentionally selected since they provided public library systems' services information before these organizations started to experience severe state budget cuts and had to cancel or adjust many services that had been in existence since the early years of their establishment. It provides baseline data for future comparison studies using newer data.

Organizational and service features vary across different types of public library systems in New York State (see Table I). Consolidated public library systems emphasize direct services to users; cooperative public library systems emphasize coordinated resource sharing; and federated public library systems emphasize both. Services also vary among the same type of the public library systems based on each organization's unique organizational features and member needs (Ren, 2013). This study chose to focus on the 16 cooperative public library systems to control for the effect of "system type" upon service variations and organizational service decision-making activities.

Research questions

The following questions have been asked in this study:

- (1) How do cooperative public library systems' services vary?
- (2) How do cooperative public library systems make service decisions?
 - What service decisions do they make?
 - Who is making service decisions?
 - What methods are used in making service decisions?

	Consolidated (3)	Federated (4)	Cooperative (16)
<i>System features</i>			
Area (m ²)	103	1,739	2,493
Population	2,669,426	578,401	540,898
Branches	70	4	0
Total outlets	73	8	6
Librarian	460	30	6
<i>System funding (\$)</i>			
Local source	99,222,515	9,330,105	115,819
State aid	13,564,647	2,123,701	2,020,406
Federal source	1,659,851	48,543	28,981
Contract	0	5,175	612,525
Total funding	142,664,402	12,208,596	3,246,796
<i>System services</i>			
Borrowers	1,632,205	105,992	2,767
Circulations	20,398,436	993,149	32,018
Holdings	21,346,353	1,273,351	83,807
Total ILL	30,884	114,256	63,061
Total consulting	172,862	18,918	21,310
Training sessions	373	90	86
Total references	5,295,287	115,398	623

Table I.
Public library systems:
averages across system
types for 2008

- How do they use information in their service decision-making processes?
- What are the challenges faced by them in their service decision-making processes?
- What are the factors that influence their service decision-making processes?

Research design

Factor analysis and cluster analysis were applied to cooperative public library systems' 2008 annual reports to identify the service trends across cooperative public library systems. Factor analysis helped to identify the underlying service factors in the annual report; cluster analysis allowed the researcher to divide public library systems into different clusters based on these identified common factors.

Based on the cluster analysis results, one organization was selected from each cluster. Multiple case studies were conducted to understand the service decision-making processes at those selected organizations. Organizational decision-making practice is a complex phenomenon considering the variation of the organizational context, the decision content, and the decision-making processes (Papadakis *et al.*, 1998). For public library systems where decision-making practice has not been widely studied and well documented, the case study was the appropriate research method to accumulate knowledge. The case study answers the "how" question and studies a phenomenon that is hard to appropriately separate from its context (Yin, 2003). According to Yin, multiple case studies are almost always good for reliability since they provide different contexts for comparing findings.

Selected cooperative public library systems were contacted. Their consent was given to the researcher for this study. Multiple interviewees were selected from inside and outside of each organization, and from different positions within the system. This enabled the interviewees to provide different perspectives when describing service decision-making processes. Their transcripts were compared and contrasted.

Service variations across cooperative public library systems

Data from 2008 annual reports were imported into the statistical analysis software SPSS for factor analysis, and two service factors were found[5]. One factor was most strongly associated with variables that were related to "system direct service." The other factor could be described as "system capacity." The first factor included variables of "the number of Interlibrary Loan requests handled by system," "number of system circulation," "number of system outlets," and "number of books owned by system." These four variables all reflected the direct services provided by systems. The second factor included service variables of "number of certified system librarians" and "total number of items in system Union Catalog." The first variable represented the professional capacity of the system whereas the second variable represented the resource size in the whole system area, including both system and member libraries' resources.

By using these two factors in the subsequent cluster analysis, the 16 cooperative public library systems were divided into three clusters. Table II shows the cluster membership.

The Chautauqua-Cattaraugus Library systems (CCLS)[6] was identified as the system that has most "direct service." The second factor was instrumental in determining membership in cluster three, which included the three large cooperative

public library systems in New York State. The Suffolk Cooperative Library System (SCLS)[7] is the largest one among them. Memberships in cluster two consisted of the bulk of cooperative public library systems, whose service profiles were not differentiated by either factor.

CCLS and SCLS were selected for the further case study of their service decision-making processes. The Mid-Hudson Library System (MHLS)[8] was selected from the cluster two, primarily because the researcher had ready access to this organization. Table III provides the demographic information of three organizations.

Service decision-making processes at three cooperative public library systems

This section reports the data collection, analysis, and findings on service decision-making processes at the three organizations.

I. Data collection

Data collection took place over a period of three months from March to May 2010. Based on their involvement in system service decision making, interviewees selected included system directors, staff members, and member library directors or system board members. Nine interviews were carried out: two at the MHLS[9]; four at the CCLS; and three at the SCLS. Seven interview sessions were face-to-face while two interview sessions were conducted over the Skype Internet Call[10]. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to one hour and was audio recorded. The audio files were transcribed and yielded a total of 163 pages of 1.5-spaced text. Each text file was

Table II.
Cluster membership
on service factors

Clusters	Cluster membership
1	Chautauqua-Cattaraugus Library System
2	12 Cooperative public library systems
3	Nassau library system Suffolk cooperative library system Westchester library system

Table III.
Basic information of three
public library systems

	CCLS	MHSL	SCLS
System population	223,705	627,046	1,419,369
System service areas (m ²)	2,372	2,937	911
Number of member libraries	36	66	56
Number of counties served	2	5	2
Annual operating fund (\$)	1,616,761	2,867,177	8,972,616
State aid (\$)	1,205,739	2,274,915	3,899,052
Annual operating fund per capita (\$)	7.22	4.57	6.32
Average population served by member	4,802	9,197	24,982
Average member full time employees	3	5	36
Members population < 5,000	27	29	8
Member annual operating fund (\$)	151,106	388,122	3,597,932
Member annual operating fund per capita (\$)	31.46	42.20	144.02

Source: 2008 New York State Public Library System Annual Reports

named after the public library system visited, then numbered sequentially by interviewees with dates when the interview took place.

II. Data analysis

This qualitative information was analyzed manually. Similar codes were grouped into one category. Themes were extracted from related categories. Five themes have emerged from the interview texts:

- (1) system profiles;
- (2) system service decisions and decision makers;
- (3) system decision-making processes;
- (4) system decision making – information; and
- (5) system decision making – challenges.

1. *Theme 1: system profiles.* The first theme that emerged is about system features and its perceived functions and services. Table IV summarizes both the sub-themes within theme 1 and the categories within each sub-theme. The same categories across all three public library systems are underlined; the same categories between two public library systems are italicized; unique categories at each public library system remain unchanged.

The CCLS is unique in many ways. Its system director is also the director of one of its system central libraries. The public library system and that central library reside in the same building with intertwined office areas and personnel responsibilities. After

	CCLS	MHLS	SCLS
System features	Intertwined office areas and personnel Declining population in rural areas Small and poor member libraries		Biggest system Members support system funding Members vote on system budget
System functions	To help members <i>To accomplish state mandated functions</i>	To help members <i>To accomplish state mandated functions</i> <i>To predict or forecast trends</i> <i>To coordinate resource sharing</i>	To help members <i>To predict and forecast</i> <i>To coordinate members</i>
System services	ILL and delivery Training and consulting ILS (18/36) <i>Maintaining web page</i> Consolidated acquisition Central processing Deposit collection ^a Direct library service	ILL and delivery Training and consulting ILS and OPAC(66/66) <i>Coordinated database purchase</i>	ILL and delivery Training and consulting ILS and OPAC (48/56) <i>Maintaining web page</i> <i>Coordinated services</i> Customized service

Notes: Items inside the parentheses are the fraction of member libraries joining the system ILS.

^aSystem collections for residents of nursing homes and other institutions

Table IV.
Theme 1 – system profiles

coding the interview transcripts from the CCLS system director, staff members, and a board member, several system features stand out:

- CCLS serves an area in western New York State with a declining population and mostly small towns or rural areas.
- “Most of our libraries are very poor” (CCLS-1-04/20/2010). Five out of 36 member libraries have an annual budget of <\$20,000. Some member libraries have no professional librarians and are open only limited hours (20 hours per week). Only 18 of 36 members had joined the system’s Integrated Library System (ILS)[11] at the time of interviewing.
- The major funding source for CCLS is from New York State. CCLS also receives funding from the two counties of Chautauqua and Cattaraugus and from some private donations. All system services are free to member libraries. Member libraries do not contribute to the system budget.

The system services provided by CCLS range from interlibrary loan and delivery to training and consolidated acquisition. CCLS also provides centralized services such as processing newly purchased materials and getting them shelf-ready for members. Coordinated services that put financial impacts upon members are rare at CCLS. Beside member services, CCLS provides the most direct services to public among all cooperative public library systems. For example, the system has a video department which serves both the public coming to its central library and member libraries. CCLS has the most service outlets in places such as senior centers. CCLS also had a bookmobile which delivers books to patrons within the system service area[12]. CCLS’ functions are to help member libraries and to accomplish state-mandated functions.

The MHLS serves the staff and trustees of its 66 public library members in the five counties of Columbia, Dutchess, Greene, Putnam, and Ulster in the southeastern region of New York State. It does not provide direct service at all. Its coordinated services include maintaining the shared ILS and coordinating databases purchases for member libraries. It provides interlibrary loan and delivery services, and provides training and consulting services. All 66 members joined the system ILS. MHLS has 29 member libraries that serve a population <5,000.

MHLS’ functions expressed by system staff and member libraries are:

- to help member libraries;
- to predict and forecast service trends; and
- to coordinate resource sharing.

Out of 56 member libraries, the SCLS has eight member libraries serving a population <5,000. At SCLS, member libraries not only contribute to the system operating fund but also pay service charges. SCLS works in partnership with its members to assist member libraries; to promote and organize cooperation among members to accomplish what individual members would not accomplish alone. It also has the function of “pushing” new services to members. Using one member library director’s words, SCLS is “the hub of member libraries” (SCLS-3-05/05/2010).

These three organizations have different emphasis in their roles and services to members. CCLS’ main focus is on helping and supporting members as much as it can without imposing financial burdens to members. For MHLS and SCLS, coordinating

services and predicting new service trends for members are emphasized in addition to helping and supporting them.

2. *Theme 2: system service decisions and decision makers.* Theme 2 is about different kinds of system decisions, and parties involved in making such decisions.

At the CCLS, service decisions can be divided into the following categories:

- service decisions that affect all members;
- policy decisions; and
- operational/management decisions.

At CCLS, the parties that are involved in service decision making are the system board, the system director, system staff, and member libraries. The CCLS system board is responsible for making policy and service decisions that affect all members and the system director is responsible for making operational/management decisions within the system. The system board meets every other month to make decisions based on statistical data and other information provided by the system director and staff. There is no formal and routine mechanism in place for members to participate in CCLS' service decision making. Their involvement is called upon by the system director through ad hoc task forces; and their input is sought through informal channels like phone calls or face-to-face meeting opportunities during training sessions. This informal and adventitious nature of member participation in CCLS service decision making can be related to member libraries' lack of money, long-traveling distance, lack of professional capacity, and the fact that all system services are provided for free. There is also a big difference between CCLS and the other two organizations in the system board's involvements in making service decisions.

Service decisions are categorized differently at the MHLS. Service decisions are categorized into:

- service decisions that has fiscal impacts on members;
- service decisions that affect all members[13]; and
- other services.

At MHLS, service decisions that either impose fiscal impacts on members or end up being a rule that every member has to follow will need to be made by member public library directors. The system director can decide on training or consulting services which do not have fiscal impacts, but members' input always has to be sought. The system board is the final decision maker once members or the system director have studied the issue and recommended a decision to the board. The system board passes the budget and the Plan of Service.

Service decisions at the SCLS are very similar to MHLS. Those service decisions that either have fiscal impacts on members or affect a significant number of members will have to be decided by members. System directors or administrators can make decisions for training or continuing education, but members' input must be sought. The system board is the final decision maker. "Nothing reaches our board for a decision until the libraries have said yes we want this and that part of the decision-making processes is over" (SCLS-1-04/13/2010). Table V summarizes sub-themes under theme 2.

Unlike MHLS and SCLS, CCLS does not identify service decisions that will impose fiscal impacts upon members since it is important to keep system services free.

The CCLS system board is highly involved in the system service decision making. At MHLS and SCLS, system boards are final decision makers who are presented with recommendations made by the system staff and member libraries.

3. *Theme 3: system service decision-making processes.* The third theme that emerged from the interview transcripts is the system service decision-making processes. The general service decision-making processes at the CCLS involve identifying needs, collecting information, holding group discussion, and making final decisions. The need for making service decisions at CCLS can come up from member libraries or their patrons, or come down from system administrators or from system staff. Information that is used to help make service decisions comes from conducting studies and doing research, collecting statistical usage data; seeking professional opinions; and surveying members. The system director's years of experience and personal knowledge are also used to make service decisions. Discussions take place among board members or staff members; advantages and disadvantages of different plans are presented and debated. At the end, either the system director or the system board makes the decision.

At CCLS, the system director plays a central role in system service decision making. The system director is the one who calls meetings; decides who should be involved in making a service decision; and provides required information to the system board.

At the MHLS, members participate in system service decision making through the director's association and advisory committees. They meet monthly and discuss issues concerning all members. System service decisions that either have fiscal impacts upon members or affect members' operations have to be brought to these meetings for discussion and voting. Even if the service decision does not need to be brought to the director's association for discussion or voting, advisory committees' input is collected to help the system director make decisions. System staff members provide information for the group discussion among members. There are rules in place governing service decision-making activities among member libraries: the quorum rule and the rule of "nothing should be voted on before it was discussed at least once before the voting takes place" (MHLS-1-03/16/2010). MHLS adopts a "simple majority" policy when members make service decisions. Service decisions made by members are applied system-wide.

Similar to MHLS, SCLS has advisory committees which include member representatives from different service areas such as resource sharing, technology, and marketing. The system area is divided into five geographical zones; each zone has its monthly meeting. All system members meet quarterly around the system, "where

	CCLS	MHLS	SCLS
System service decision	Service decisions that affect all members Policy decisions Operational/ management decision	Service decisions that affect all members <i>Service decisions that cost members money</i>	Service decisions that affect a significant number of members <i>Service decisions that cost members significant amount of money</i>
System service decision makers	System director System board Member libraries (very little)	System director System board <i>Member libraries</i>	System director System board <i>Member libraries</i>

Table V.
Theme 2 – system service decisions and decision makers

all the directors of the systems are invited to come, we meet in different libraries around the county so they have an opportunity go visit their colleague’s library” (SCLS-1-04/13/2010). These regular meetings provide opportunity for the system to communicate with members, and to discuss issues with members, and “to be able to put a finger on the pulse of the group in person” (SCLS-1-04/13/2010).

At SCLS, voting is avoided generally except for those service decisions that all members have to agree upon, such as resource sharing service decisions. “The vote to me, all that does is to pin people in a corner I don’t think they necessarily wanted to be pinned into” (SCLS-1-04/13/2010). Instead, SCLS adopts a “significant majority” policy when it comes to make group service decisions. “You know the majority in our system is 27 libraries, I don’t ever want there be a 28 to 26 vote, but if 28 libraries want something, 26 libraries don’t want something, we are not doing it, because that’s not general enough consensus” (SCLS-1-04/13/2010). The service decision then will be scaled down to a level that is appealing to most members. Table VI summarizes the three sub-themes under theme 3.

4. *Theme 4: system service decision making – information.* At the CCLS, information collected for making service decisions includes members’ input, statistical usage data, and professional expertise. Member input is collected through surveying members and annual field visits to member libraries made by assigned field consultants. Statistical usage data are used to determine what kind of reference questions have been asked and if certain database products are well used in answering those questions. Professional librarians are involved when their expertise and knowledge is needed. System staff members are responsible for collecting information.

At the MHLS, members’ input is always sought through both formal and informal channels. Members’ concerns can be expressed at monthly meetings or through other communication channels like phone calls or e-mails. Quantitative data are used when making service decisions whenever the data are available. One example is using the item volume numbers and delivery frequency data to decide whether to add or take away a delivery stop from a library. System staff members are responsible for collecting information and presenting it to members for discussion.

The SCLS also seeks inputs from members through regular meetings, field visits by the system director and staff members and by other communication methods such as

	CCLS	MHLS	SCLS
Identifying needs	From members From system staff	From members From system staff From advisory committees	From members From system Meeting somewhere in the middle
Member involvement	Not formal Field consultants ^a	<i>Director’s association</i> <i>Advisory committees</i>	Zone meeting <i>Advisory committees</i> <i>Directors’ quarterly meeting</i>
Group decision making	Voting among board members	Voting among members Simple majority	Avoiding voting in general Significant majority

Table VI.

Note: ^aCCLS assigns system staff members and the James Prendergast Library staff members as field consultants for each member library Theme 3 – system service decision-making processes

phone calls or e-mails. The interaction not only happens at the administration level, but also involves member library staff. Vendors are invited and proposals are presented to all members in order for them to make final decisions. Experts from outside of SCLS are also invited when they are needed. Table VII summarizes theme 4.

5. *Theme 5: system service decision making – challenges.* One challenge for CCLS is members' lack of professional skills and funding. CCLS depends more on the system board and system staff members to make service decisions. The second challenge is the lack of money. Over the years, state funding, as the major system funding source, has been continuously reduced. Difficult decisions have to be made to eliminate certain system services that have been in existence since 1960s; or to ask members for help continuing system services that used to be free (e.g. book mobile and database access).

At the MHLS, the challenge of system service decision making is to develop consensus, especially in resource sharing: "Everybody is very passionate about their own rules and they would love to have a consensus, as long as everybody does what they want" (MHLS-1-03/16/2010). Usually group discussion will go on and on, and the service decision has to be tabled without consensus from members. The stagnant state budget has led the MHLS to both eliminating existing services (e.g. printing services and mini-grant) and charging members for services that were free (e.g. delivery services).

The SCLS receives both member support and state funding for its operations. Members also pay service fees. With reducing state budget, SCLS also has to make decisions to eliminate services (e.g. dial-in internet services). The other challenge for SCLS service decision making is also about developing consensus among members:

You have 56 or 54 real active members who each has different sets of priorities, has different economic situations, has different financial self-interests, and trying to make sure that anything we offer is offered in a way that will allow the most, the greatest amount of them to get the actual value out (SCLS-1-04/13/2010).

Because of the significant amount of financial support received from member libraries, the SCLS takes special precautions to make sure that every interest involved in the system service decision making is treated fairly. Sometimes the processes can be time-consuming.

As seen in Table VIII, across all three public library systems, stagnant state funding, or reduced budget is a common challenge for them to make service decisions

	CCLS	MHLS	SCLS
Information	Member input 1. <i>Annual field visit by assigned field consultant</i> 2. <i>Surveying</i> 3. Phone call 4. E-mail Statistical data System staff members' professional expertise Cost studies System board members' expertise and knowledge	Member input 1. Phone call 2. E-mail Statistical data System staff members' professional expertise	Member input 1. <i>Field visit by system director or assigned staff</i> 2. <i>Surveying</i> 3. Phone call 4. E-mail Statistical data System and members' staff expertise External resources

Table VII.
Theme 4 – system service decision making – information

of either eliminating services or charging service fees. For both MHLS and SCLS, the difficulty of reaching group consensus is a common challenge. For CCLS, the challenge is not the group decision-making processes but the fact that members are limited by their professional skills and financial resources to either fully participate in decision-making processes or to have coordinated new services that will pose financial impacts on them. At CCLS, the system board is making service decisions that are otherwise made by members at MHLS and SCLS. For both CCLS and MHLS, traveling distance is also a challenge for involving members into service decision-making processes.

These three public library systems have different service decision-making processes in place; such differences can be attributed to their differences in members' needs, organizational features, and system services. The stronger the members' financial and professional capacity is, the more coordinated system services will be provided and there will be more member involvement in system service decision-making processes. The section below summarized the major factors that affect service decision-making processes at three organizations.

III. Summary

Service decision-making processes at cooperative public library systems in New York State are influenced by both service-related and organizational features.

1. *Service-related features.* Service-related features include service content, funding sources, and service impacts.

Service content. In the State of New York, cooperative public library systems provide services ranging from centralized supporting services to coordinated and shared services. They also provide direct services to the public. Services to members cover areas of administration, operation, and user services. Services can be provided in the form of monetary, material support, and professional support such as consulting and continuing education services. For centralized system services and direct public services, public library systems are the major decision makers; for coordinated or shared services that require member libraries' financial or material contribution, members are the major decision makers.

Service funding:

Because the state is not increasing our funding, therefore we have to cut some services, because we can't afford them. We will also start to charge our members for services, so once we start to charge them, they will be more involved in the decision-making process. The reason they are more involved in ILS is because we charge them for that (MHLS-1-03/16/2010).

The core people involved with the decision-making processes here (SCLS) are first and foremost the member libraries as represented by their directors, since they pay such a significant portion of our funds (SCLS-1-04/13/2010).

When the system service is provided to members free of charge, public library systems can make the service decision based on members' input; when the system service is

	CCLS	MHLS	SCLS
Challenges	Members' limited capacity Budget cut	<i>Group decision making</i> Budget cut	<i>Group decision making</i> Budget cut

Table VIII.
Theme 5 – system
service decision
making – challenges

funded with member libraries' money or provided to members with charges, member libraries are the primary decision makers.

Service impacts:

They, the directors, make the decisions about things that either cost everyone money or end up being a rule that everyone has to follow. And the majority of the rules are how resources are shared. So there they really have to do the voting. In those other areas they are suggesting a direction that we then follow (MHLS-1-03/16/2010).

When the system service does not affect member libraries' day-to-day operations and user services, the public library system can make the decisions. But when a system service requires changes on how library users receive library services, member libraries want to make such decisions according to their patrons' interests. At public library systems, whenever a service decision has to be applied system-wide, member libraries are the primary decision makers.

2. *Organizational features.* Organizational features mainly include system and members' features.

Systems' features. The unique setting of each public library system has a natural influence on its service decision-making processes. The number of professional staff members, the amount of annual operating funds, and the geographic location and traveling distance from member libraries can all affect the system' service decision-making processes.

Member's professional and financial capacity:

For whatever reason, many libraries, many directors don't show up for director's association meetings. I mean we are a five-county system, and it's a long way to come for some directors. Some directors also have very small libraries, and if they leave the building, there is nobody there, so often it's the same group of the people at the director's association meetings (MHLS-3-03/25/2010).

We don't do it (getting member libraries involved in system service decision making) as much as that other systems do, mainly because they (members) are, most of them are not professionals, most of them work part-time, and we have winter out here, so getting them together is often difficult (CCLS-1-04/20/2010).

On the other hand, member's professional and financial capacity also plays a big role when it comes to making a system service decision that matters to members. The number of professional staff members, their annual operating funds, their available resources and community needs can affect their willingness and capability to participate in group decision-making processes.

Implications and future studies

The purpose of this study was to understand service variations across cooperative public library systems in New York State, and to document service decision-making processes in three selected organizations. This knowledge adds to the understanding of cooperative public library systems in New York State and their operations, and will shed some lights for understanding cooperative library systems in the USA in general.

Despite very few commanded services specified in the Education Law and the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education, New York State public library systems enjoy great autonomy in providing services and operating these organizations. This allows them to be flexible when providing services and making organizational decisions. Members with different financial and professional resources demand

different system services. For members possessing less financial or professional resources, it is important for system to provide basic supporting services that are mostly free. Coordinated system services that put fiscal impacts upon members are not priorities in such system. For members possessing relatively more financial or professional resources, systems are expected to explore new service ideas and to coordinate members for services that would be difficult for individual libraries to provide.

Research findings from this study provide information on specific service variations across cooperative public library systems. The findings also provide differences of their service decision-making processes in addition to the factors that might cause these differences. These findings verified that organizational decisions with different contents and contexts are made through different processes. Based on the nature of system services and organizational characteristics of both systems and their members, each cooperative public library system adopted different service decision-making processes. When system services were provided for free, systems were the primary decision makers. When system services had fiscal impacts upon members, member libraries were the primary decision makers. But the extent and degree of member libraries' participation in system service decision-making processes were limited by their financial or professional capacity.

A future study can be conducted to explore the correlational relationship between services variations and differences of service decision-making processes across cooperative public library systems and factors identified from this study on a larger scale. Ways through which these variables could be made operational can be of substantial significance. The ALA 2007 research reported the descriptive statistics of LNCCs's service priorities and their variations by organizational features such as the years of their establishments, number of staff members, member types. Those variables could also be combined in the new study.

Findings from this study can also serve as the baseline for a similar study using newer annual report data. The comparison can provide insights for understanding both the service changes and organizational processes changes over the financial crisis and how social media has affected member libraries' participation in service decision-making processes. At last, since cooperative library systems were different at each state, a similar study looking at another state will be important for accumulating data and information on library cooperation in the USA at a more specific level.

Notes

1. New York State's Public Library Systems (www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/lib/brochurp.htm).
2. See <http://adironackminute.com/hillview-free-library> for more information on Hillview Free Library.
3. The Education Law §215 Visitation and Reports.
4. The interview questions are available upon requests.
5. For a factor to be acceptable, the determinant for the correlation matrix among different variables should not be < 0.00005 in order to avoid multicollinearity. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test measures the strengths of the relationship among variables between 0 and 1, and values closer to 1 are more favorable. The Bartlett's test of sphericity is used to examine the hypothesis that the variables are uncorrelated in the population.
6. The CCLS's web site: www.cclslib.org/
7. The SCLS's web site: <http://scls.suffolk.lib.ny.us/index.html>
8. The MHLS's web site: <http://midhudson.org/>

9. One group interview was conducted at MHLS with the system director and three system staff members; eight other interviews were one-on-one interviews.
10. Face-to-face interviews were better when interviewing system directors and staff members, because the researcher could take the opportunity to observe the system setting. Phone interviews were sufficient when interviewing system board members and member library directors.
11. ILS is a suite of software programs that supports all standard library operations, including acquisition, cataloging, inventory control, and circulation.
12. The public service provided through the CCLS bookmobile was eliminated in 2009.
13. Most are resource sharing decisions.

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