May 1, 2018

Dear PLSR Steering Committee members,

Having read and annotated the Wisconsin PLSR Workgroup Recommendations Reports, including the Project Manager report, I realize two things:

1) A small forest was cut down to make all of the sticky notes I’ve attached to the report pages.
2) There are overarching issues for which the survey doesn’t provide an opportunity for feedback.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these thoughts in letter form.

This project, which I understand is far from done, has been a monumental effort that has taken hundreds of librarians across the state away from their normal work for a significant part of the past two years. The workgroup participants in particular, many of whom I know personally and respect greatly, worked long and hard on their recommendations. I appreciate all of these efforts.

A large amount of time and money have been put into this project to date, and I know for certain that neither of those investments automatically yield great results. I read in the comments from the earlier Russell survey that the greatest fear of some is that “all this work will be done and nothing will come of it.” I have the opposite concern: that we would let the investment to date push us inexorably forward on a pathway if it’s not the right one.

**Inputs v. Outcomes: Problem definition**

I’d very much like to see all residents of Wisconsin enjoy good library service, and when PLSR started, I thought that was the goal. But it seems to be something else: to deliver the same services (inputs) to all libraries. End-user outcomes, not library-level inputs, should be our focus. The PLSR process has been handicapped by its very name. “Public Library System Redesign” assumes something wrong with library systems. Surely the fact that systems operate differently from one another is not a problem in itself, nor is the fact that libraries don't receive exactly the same services from their systems. Those are simple situations, and they could be beneficial in some cases. A problem is when end-user outcomes aren’t acceptable.

What are the end-user outcomes that we should be trying to fix, or more realistically, improve* if we’re going to replace the current system model? I’m writing to ask you to use the PLSR process as an opportunity to look deeply at that question, without assumptions. Is there one problem or several?
Are the differences in how library systems operate the root cause of those problems or a means of responding to them? What if uneven end-user outcomes are more directly related to uneven local funding, uneven local demand/support for enhanced services, lower certification requirements for library directors in some libraries, a need for consolidation of libraries in more rural counties, or other factors? I don’t disagree that public library systems could use some “re-design” (couldn’t we all?) but to redesign them with a goal of uniformity of services to libraries rather than a goal of improving end-user results seems, to me, a huge disservice to our state residents. We could very well end up achieving uniformity of input without actually improving outputs, and find ourselves in the same place after all is done.

Once the end-user problems have been defined, the PLSR process would benefit from looking at successes, something it has not seriously examined. We have not gathered in-depth information about which processes/services are working exceptionally well in our various library systems (in terms of end-user results) or analyzed the factors that have contributed to those successes. Doing that carefully and scientifically would provide the knowledge necessary to test whether replication or adaptation of those factors could benefit other, or even all, libraries in their own service provision roles. Building on what has been proven to work can be more successful than scrapping everything and starting from scratch.

There are some ideas contained within the workgroup recommendations that are certainly doable, in fact doable within our current model of regional library systems. Those include creating a portal for CE opportunities so that all libraries know what available, sharing consultant expertise across the state, or offering statewide buy-in technology support. Those ideas are likely to improve outcomes because they simply expand on services currently being used (regional CE such as in southeast Wisconsin, system staffs and contracted technology help that many libraries already use). Whether the other recommendations contained in the reports will lead to better outcomes is far less clear to me, because we haven’t done the work to determine what most affects the outcomes.

*It’s important to acknowledge that only about 6% of library funding comes from the state. To believe that re-allocating that small amount of money will eliminate the problem of uneven service levels would be to discount the importance of local funding. Improving the service levels, though, is a possibility. I think it will be important to clearly convey to the library community the limitations of this project so that every member will have realistic expectations. Unmet expectations can lead to difficult situations in the aftermath of change.

**Scientific rigor:**

The Project Manager Report states that “Information and data should be the bedrock of the (PLSR) process.” I agree with this, and would add that scientific rigor must be included in that statement.

Most public librarians have not been trained in the rigors of science, generally framed as redundant experimental design, sound statistical analysis, recognition of error, avoidance of logical fallacies, and
intellectual honesty. Because of that lack of training, I want to make very clear that my next comments are not meant to be critical of individuals but rather to note serious flaws with the process. While information and data have been gathered and used by all of the workgroups as their “bedrocks,” the quality and assessment of both has been seriously inexpert. Scientific rigor is missing throughout, meaning that conclusions drawn from the information and data may well be wrong. Some examples follow but they are by no means the only ones:

Avoidance of logical fallacies, and intellectual honesty: The PLSR workgroup recommendations use the term “inequity” frequently and without precise definition. Intellectual honesty (objectivity) and avoidance of logical fallacies would have resulted in the use of phrases such as “inequality of input” or “differing priorities for service deployment.” It is incorrect to claim inequity because one system offers a particular service while another does not. It is incorrect to state that a system “cannot afford” to offer a service when in reality the system has made choices of which services to deploy. Rigor insists we avoid the politics of resentment and stick to the facts: every system declines to offer certain services; those vary by system.

Sound (statistical) analysis: Workgroups were not given access to professional polling services. The CE/Consulting workgroup relied on a survey that was made available to over 3,000 staff members of public libraries and, inexplicably, to K-12 and academic libraries, library systems and at least one state agency. There appears to have been no attempt to assure that the 88 responses provided a representative sample of library locations, sizes, and system membership, yet conclusions were drawn about service preferences, as noted in this page 32 phrase, “A significant percentage of respondents indicated the prefer...”

The Resource Library workgroup relied on a Resource Library survey which had 282 respondents including 23% who self-identified as working in resource libraries and 12% who didn’t know whether or not they worked in a resource library. Neither group would be the right one to ask about the value of resource libraries to other public libraries.

Recognition of error: Wage recommendations were made by averaging the wages of existing staff, with no regard to years of experience, local cost of living, or local economic conditions. Although this was done simply to estimate costs for budgetary purposes, the margin of error in that estimate is likely large.

The budget chart for the Collections workgroup is missing the cost of the collections themselves, or a placeholder to indicate that there will be a (substantial) cost. This is misleading to the reader.

Redundant experimental design: Instead of soliciting plans and pricing from experienced experts in the courier industry, in order to see whether there was consensus in design of a delivery scheme, the Delivery workgroup created their own plan and put out RFPs asking for pricing. When one provider replied that they could provide pricing only if they could re-draw the routes, the group declined to get that expert information.
The Project Manager Report states that one of the core principles of PLSR is that “outside expertise will add credibility and weight to the outcome.” Oddly, outside expertise is missing throughout the reports.

I know we can do better, and believe we must. We can improve outcomes for library users throughout Wisconsin, but doing so requires intensive problem definition and rigorous methodology. We need to be able to draw a detailed picture of what success will look like for the end user and then illustrate how changes that are proposed can be directly connected to that success in other areas of the state, or can be logically anticipated to create that success. I ask the Steering Committee to carefully assess whether the PLSR process and recommendations to date have accomplished those things. If you agree with me that they have not, I encourage you to make a bold decision to invest in that work so that PLSR doesn’t result in simply redesigning systems but instead positively impacts residents across the state.

Thank you for giving your attention to this rather long letter which, in its defense, is just 1% of the length of the report being discussed. I greatly appreciate your commitment to the PLSR project and to “getting it right.”

Sincerely,

Kathy Klager, Director
Pauline Haass Public Library