Library System in Change: An Examination of the RAILS Merger

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Abstract

By World War II, local public libraries were a ubiquitous part of communities across the United States, providing free materials for continuing and self-education as well as serving as an important reference tool within their communities. However, even large libraries did not always have the resources or materials they needed. Starting in the 1960s states across the country established library systems that support local libraries by providing reciprocal borrowing, consultant services, training, continuing education, delivery and more. Library systems are vital in the modern world so that more information and materials can be disseminated and it is in our interest to ensure that librarians have the support and training they need. Illinois was a leader in creating library systems; it had systems that covered the entire state by the late 1960s, but large changes are now rocking Illinois’ library systems. As of July 1, 2011, the nine library systems in Illinois merged into two systems. By conducting a literature review and a series of interviews with library directors, I learned more about the RAILS (Reaching Across Illinois Library System) merger, which lead me to conclude that the merger occurred because of financial problems, many services were cut for the merger and though merged the systems has yet to become unified. One solution to these problems is to stabilize or increase the finances for Illinois’ library systems.
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Introduction:

We are all familiar with libraries. Most of us probably grew up with a public library in our town, community or neighborhood. It probably served as a community center, a place for town meetings and events. If I asked, everyone could probably conjure up the image of their local public library. You might have attended a story time, children’s programs, visited on a school field trip or learned to read in a local public library. Maybe in high school or college you visited a library for research or for a project. Perhaps you browsed the shelves because you wanted to learn how to knit a hat or cook a special dish. Have you visited the library to use their computers, pick up your tax forms or just to check out a book to read? I know I have and it is likely that public libraries have influenced your life in some way. However, there is an aspect of most modern public libraries that we, as the patrons, rarely see. This part supports public libraries. This aspect might help train our local library’s staff, provide technological support, delivers library materials around the state or around the world. The key player behind the scenes of our local public library is the library system.

My public library was very special to me. My mom took me and my sister there from a very early age. I attended story time, participated in the summer reading program and checked out many books and movies in my youth. As I got older I still went to my public library. I used to stop by every Wednesday after school to pick up a few books for the week. My town is fairly small, only about 3,000 people, and thus my public library isn’t too large. I often wanted to read books my library didn’t personally own. However, this turned out to not be such a problem. You see my library was a member of the South Central Library System (in Wisconsin) and they had a shared catalogue. Whenever I needed a book my library didn’t have I could just go onto LinkCat and order it. If there weren’t other holds on it, the book would usually arrive at my library in a
few days. That is what got me interested in library systems. I knew they provided this shared
catalogue, but I wasn’t sure what else they did. Over the summer before my junior year in
college I interned at my public library. Once there, I heard a presentation that the library systems
in Illinois were disappearing and there were only two left. I wanted to know more. What
happened to them? Where were they going? Well, firstly I found out they hadn’t really
disappeared, they had merged. There are actually now three library systems in Illinois: Reaching
Across Illinois Library System (RAILS), Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS), and Chicago
Multi-type Library System (CMLS).

For my thesis I decided to examine the RAILS merger. One July 1, 2011 the five
northern Illinois Library Systems merged into one, RAILS at the same time the four southern
Illinois library systems merged into IHLS. I wanted to understand what was happening to library
systems in Illinois, which meant I needed to know what was happening with the merger, what
caused the merger and what would happen in the future. My main goal in this effort was to
discover what effects the merger would have on public libraries, their patrons and ultimately on
the citizens of Illinois.
Methodology:

For this thesis I conducted a literature review pertaining to library systems. I found many short newspaper articles on the merger and I read books on public libraries, their history and purpose. I also reviewed documents that outlined what public libraries and library systems are and should be like. Ralph H. Stemstrom’s study *The Emergence and Development of Public Library Systems in Illinois*, was invaluable to my understanding of the history behind library systems in Illinois.

To understand how library directors felt about the RAILS merger and how the RAILS merger would impact local libraries, I conducted interviews with five library directors. Two interviews were conducted in person in the office of the library director. My first in-person interview was with John Spears, the executive director of the Naperville Public Library and the other was with Sarah Meisler, the director of the Wheaton Public Library. Both libraries had been a part of the DuPage Library system. Three of the interviews were conducted through email. These were with Kyla Waltermire, director of the Morris Area Public Library, Mary Souice, executive director of the Three Rivers Public Library District, and Maria Meachum, director of the Wilmington Public Library. These three directors served libraries that had been a part of the Prairie Area Library System (PALS). I also meet them briefly before a SAILS meeting in Naperville. I wish I had been able to conduct all my interviews in person, however, due to time constraints and transportation issues this was not possible. Also, in order to get an idea of the issues and problems facing library directors I attended a meeting of SAILS and informally discussed the merger with library directors. I received many materials from John Spears the director of Naperville Public Library. These sources dealt with the laws and standards surrounding library systems as well as some future plans for library systems and the funding for
library systems. They were invaluable to my research and I give my heartfelt thanks to John Spears for them.
Libraries’ Purpose:

To understand library systems you must first understand libraries. Libraries are varied and multifaceted institutions. They are not, as the popular idea states, storehouses for books. In the grand scheme of libraries there are several distinct types: academic libraries, school libraries, special libraries, archives, and public libraries (there are more, but it would take too much time to go over every sort of library there is). Academic libraries are libraries attached to colleges, universities or other institutions of higher learning. School libraries are the libraries within schools, below the college level. These are the libraries in elementary schools, junior highs or high schools. Archives store and preserve important documents for posterity. They rarely lend out their documents, though people may sometimes come to archives to view materials. Special libraries have collections focused on one area of knowledge. They can be either private or public. Public libraries offer free materials to members within a specific geological area. All these libraries are different, function in different ways and contain different resources, but they all still serve the function of a library.

The core purpose of all libraries can be summed up as the preservation of materials and dissemination of materials. Preservation means saving documents, letters, books and other resources from destruction. It is particularly important to archives, national libraries, such as the Library of Congress, and academic libraries, where such resources are expected to be preserved for later use and research. Even the smallest public library usually contains a local archive of old records, copies of the local newspaper and public documents. By simply gathering materials into one location, libraries preserve them. The preservation of all these materials is invaluable to research and the study of human history.
However, for the public library, distribution of materials is the main objective. Distribution simply refers to the loan of library materials to a patron. Lind Hage says, “Each library collects materials, organizes those materials, and makes those materials available to people in a specific geographic area” (1). Public libraries do collect materials, but the main focus is to get those materials out to their patrons. These materials include so much more than books. They also distribute: magazines, journals, newspapers, videos, DVD’s and C.D.’s. Distribution in the modern public library also goes beyond physical materials; electronic sources include: electronic books (ebooks), audio-books, music, databases, and other electronic services, in some public libraries, internet service and so much more. The distribution of these materials through a public library is sometimes the only way the public is able to gain access to information and ideas. Besides the lending of materials public libraries also serve as community centers and sponsor programs for children and adults. Many public libraries also conduct programs for the education of children (and adults) such as reading classes, tutoring sessions, story time, summer reading programs and other classes. All these programs are also part of a public library’s mission to disseminate, not just materials, but information.

Public libraries have a unique mission to provide services to the members of a certain geographical area free of charge. Public libraries are restricted by location, and generally, only provide services to people that live within their geographic jurisdiction. It depends on the library, but if you tried to get a library card two towns over it would probably not be allowed. (Although, there are many exceptions to this rule.) Since public libraries, by definition, are public there are certain standards they are expected to aspire to. Ronald Benge presents his ideal vision for public libraries in his book Libraries and Cultural Change. Also, Unesco, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, issued a manifesto in 1949 to set out some
important guidelines for public libraries. Both standards overlapped in certain areas. Unesco focuses on public library’s impact on improving education, preserving culture and disseminating information. They call for the public libraries to be, “an essential agent for the fostering of peace and understanding between peoples and between nations” (19). Public libraries do provide educational programs for adults and children. Also, public libraries often are used as meeting places and cultural centers. Berge and Unesco believe public libraries should be accessible to all members of a community and in turn all public libraries should be able to provide for every citizen. Public libraries in the United States do provide equal service to all patrons in a specific location and to provide equal service to all. Without charge public libraries are also accessible to all economic classes.

Unesco also states, “the public library should be maintained wholly from public funds, and no direct charge should be made to anyone for its services” (19). Public libraries in the United States are funded by public funds, although not wholly. They often are supported by the specific geographical area the library serves; although they may also receive state funding and federal grants. Many public libraries also rely on private donations and fundraisers. Since public libraries are funded by the public, they can provide their services for free. However, this places the public library constantly at the whims of local, state and the national government for funding.

Public libraries are considered important enough to fund through the government because they create a place for the free exchange of information. As Lind Hage says, “Libraries –even the most humble– are the foundation of a literate citizenry and therefore a free and informed society” (viii). Public libraries are an indicator that the citizens of a country must be educated, to at the very least be able to read. Once able to access the materials in a public library, those citizens
have the means to gain all the information in that library (a daunting task, but possible). Because public libraries provide information for free, they are important in continuing and self education.

As a republic, it is imperative for citizens of the United States of America to be educated. Lind Hage also says, “Whether formed by our colonial forebears or by groups of interested people today, the public library continues to be one of the primary forces of a democratic society” (8). Republics, like the United States, are run by representatives the public elects. To elect the best representatives, it stands to reason that the public needs to be educated. Free public education only lasts until the senior year of high school, a grade at which most people are eighteen. Eighteen is also the age at which one becomes able to vote. Citizens still need to remain educated after the age of majority because that it when they are able to exercise their right to vote. They still have the right to free information and education. Public libraries are a key part of continuing and self education. While it is a goal that has never been achieved, there is also a notion that in the United States everyone deserves equal access to the same education and information. Public libraries in particular are important to that mission because they provide that information free of charge to their patrons. “By providing materials, services, and programs, the public library continues to serve all people, without regard to race, religion, or economic status” (Lind Hage 7). Public libraries exist for use by the public. Since they are free no one can be turned away based on their lack of money. Because public libraries are funded by public money, they have no right to deny patrons, based on their race, religion or sex. However, sadly in the history of the United States this has not always been the case. In many places well into the 1960’s public libraries flagrantly discriminated against African Americans, but the ideal public library never denies anyone service. Also, all those within the same library have the same access to material that everyone else has. Within a single public library citizens actually have equal
access to information. However not all libraries are equal; my small town library has far fewer resources than the Naperville Public Library simply based on the population and location. Library system help bridge the gap between small libraries, large libraries and their access to information
What is a Library System?

Library systems have grown in importance since public libraries began. It would be impossible for any single library, even the largest, to provide its patrons with all the information that is out there. Lind Hage agrees. She wrote:

The first libraries in America were formed for the purpose of sharing books with other people in the immediate community. Public money was used to build a collection of materials that community members could borrow from the library. As communities grew and library usage increased, it became apparent that a single library would not be able to meet all the information need of its community. (Lind Hage 85)

Single libraries are unable to provide everything a patron may need, but through the network of library systems, a public library can provide more materials. A library system is simply a connection between several libraries. If not for the library system, these libraries would not ordinarily be affiliated in any other way. According to Robert Rohlf in “A Plan for Public Library Development in Illinois”, “A library system is simply a public library generally serving more than one city or village or town” (“A Plan” 14). Library systems usually cover a greater area than a single town or city. Thus, a single public library with a branch or more does not constitute a library system. Despite what Rohlf said in 1964, a library system can connect any type of library: public, school, special or academic. Sometimes, as in Illinois, a library system can include different types of libraries.

The main purpose of library systems is to provide services to the libraries in the system. Rohlf elaborates, “It [a library system] is in fact the library’s library, rendering services to local, self-governed community libraries which they are either too small or too poor to render to themselves” (“A Plan” 14). Library systems serve libraries the way libraries server their patrons;
they provide services, free of charge, to educate, support and empower the local library. The most obvious service library systems usually provide, to patrons, is the delivery service. Library systems are an extension of libraries; they share even more material over even greater geographical locations. Lind Hage explains, “It is common for consortia [a group like a library system] to operate a delivery system that facilitates the movement of library materials between member libraries” (88). Library systems were partly created to help facilitate sharing resources between libraries. Systems help equalize the material people have access to. For example, my hometown has about 3,000 people, so our public library doesn’t have a huge collection. However, through the South Central Library System I have access to the collections of its 53 member libraries, which is the same access that someone from a much larger city, like Madison, has. Many library systems facilitate the delivery of materials from one library to another. While delivery is the most visible service to patrons, systems also are usually involved in administration, publicity, training, and continuing education. Systems can also help with cataloguing, centralized purchasing and processing. Shared catalogues are not necessarily part of a library system, but usually develop alongside a system and are supported by a system.

Library systems also help with keeping costs low. Group purchasing was a service many library systems in Illinois once had. In group purchasing a library could buy items through the library system. Since a library system is much larger than the individual library, they had a lot more buying power. Lind Hage explains:

In addition to discounts on the purchasing of print and nonprint materials, the consortium may be able to negotiate discounts on office and library supplies, equipment, repair and rebinding of damaged books, and printing or delivery services. The type of shared
discounts that could be negotiated are limited only by the imagination of the libraries in the consortium. (89)

With group purchasing through the systems libraries were able to save money when buying their supplies. The money they saved could then be used for other things. Library systems make libraries more effective and cost-efficient.

Library systems have all different kinds of connections and structures. Rohlf states that, “It [a library system] can be governed by a single library board or by a board composed of board members from area member libraries. It can be consolidated with a single government agency, or a loose cooperation existing by the will of its member libraries within its service area” (“A Plan” 14). Library systems can come in many different shapes and sizes and depending on the state, area and laws that govern them. There are three main types of library systems: consolidated, federated and cooperative. Consolidated library systems have the most control over their member libraries. “In a consolidated system two or more libraries give up their autonomy to a single board of trustees which governs the operations of all the units” (Stenstrom 21). Consolidated library systems operate like one large library, with many branches. However, unlike one large library with many branches, the consolidated library system expands beyond a town, city or village border. None of the library systems in Illinois are consolidated. Federated systems allow their member libraries more freedom. According to Stenstrom, “A federated system permits libraries to enter into cooperative arrangements with other libraries and retain their autonomy at the same time” (21). A federated system also receives its funding from the country board. The last system type, “cooperative systems…come into existence by the joint action of the boards of trustees of local libraries” (Stenstrom 22). This means the boards of the member libraries decide
to have a system and then work together to create one. All of Illinois’ library systems are cooperative systems and they receive all their funding from the state.

A library system has three definitions under Illinois Law. As defined in the Illinois Library Systems Act (75 ICLS 10), a library system can be:

(1) A multitype library serving (i) a minimum of 150,000 inhabitants or (ii) an area not less than 4,000 square miles and serving a minimum of 10 or more public libraries, elementary or secondary school libraries, institutions of higher education libraries, and special libraries. (75 ICLS 10/2)

According to this definition a system can be formed, with the minimum number of people, area and libraries, between public, school, academic and special libraries. This appears to be the most common system in Illinois. Both the RAILS and IHLS (Illinois Heartland Library System) systems fall into this category. Also the preexisting systems I’m looking at, the DuPage Library System (DLS) and the Prairie Area Library System (PALS), were this type of system. As can be seen, this system can include all forms of libraries and dictates a minimal size for library systems in Illinois.

Another definition of a library system from the Illinois Library Systems Act is, “A public library system consisting of a single public library serving a city of over 500,000 population” (75 ICLS 10/2). Unlike the other systems in Illinois, the Chicago Multi-type Library System (CMLS) can consist of a single public library. This provision was made because Chicago is so large and its public library serves so many patrons. It would be difficult to have a system with the Chicago public libraries because, by sheer volume, they would overwhelm all the other libraries in the system. While the law specifies that the public libraries alone would be enough
for the system, Chicago also has a multitype system, including school, academic and special libraries.

The third and final definition is, “A multitype library system that serves the same territory as a library system under subparagraph (2) of this definition that provides services to elementary and secondary school libraries, institutions of higher education libraries, and special libraries” (75 ICLS 10/2). In this definition a library system (with a minimum of 150,000 patrons, at least 4,000 sq miles and at least 10 libraries) can be formed by school, academic and special libraries. The biggest difference between this definition and the first one is that this system does not need to include public libraries. However, neither RAILS, nor IHLS nor CMLS are this type of systems because all three include public libraries.
History of Library Systems in Illinois

Library systems started to develop in Illinois after the implementation of a program called ‘A Plan for Public Library Development in Illinois’ in 1965. The original plan called for 21 library systems across the state. By 1968 there were 19 library systems in the state and these library systems included over 80% of public libraries in Illinois. In 2005, when the forty-year anniversary was celebrated there were 10 library systems.

Library systems, in Illinois began in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. The development of library systems was a conscious effort on the part of Illinois’s State Library. Back in 1961 Phyllis Maggeroli, an Adult Education Consultant for the Illinois State Library and president of the Illinois Library Association organized the Library Development Committee. This committee was created to form an inclusive program to further develop all libraries in Illinois ("A Plan” Foreword). In 1963, the Library Development Committee hired Robert H. Rohlf, then director of Dakota-Scot Regional Library, MN, to conduct a study examining how to further develop public libraries in Illinois. Out of the study came Rohlf’s “A Plan for Public Library Development in Illinois.” (“Dreams and Expectations”). In his study, Rohlf reported many shortcomings in Illinois’ public libraries. Rohlf noticed that the laws in Illinois regarding libraries were confusing and at times contradictory. He also noted that the current tax plan taxed larger libraries or library units more heavily than district libraries. Rohlf concluded that these taxes prevented libraries from merging into larger units. (“A Plan” 3) He also saw that the number of libraries in Illinois was rising quickly, but overall fewer people had accesses to libraries than in the past ("A Plan” 4). With the small library unites Rohlf discovered:

This large number of public libraries serving only 8,502 people (excluding Chicago) on the average results in large duplication in cataloging cost, reference book costs, specific
periodical costs, etc. In addition, because of this limitation in size, few libraries can provide microfilm back files, phonograph records, films, bookmobile service to outlying areas, reference material in depth and duplicate or sufficient copies of high demand books all features of large library units. (“A Plan” 5)

Rohlf found that small library units results in duplicate costs and limited services. Also small library units would most likely remain small, because as Rohlf found, there was no large scale cooperation between libraries in 1963. In other words, there were no library systems in Illinois prior to 1963. Rohlf suggested that the development of library systems could solve many of these problems. He wrote:

In short, such systems offer an end to the problems of nonresidents and duplication of materials and services in a limited geographical area and the beginning of film and record services, centralized processing, specialized personal, greater depth of resources through quick inter-loan, service to sparsely settled areas, superior reference service, and special rotating book collections, which are basic elements in a library system. (“A Plan” 16)

According to Rohlf, the creation of library systems would provide service to more people, prevent duplication of material and provide the resources for additional services. Library systems could be the answer to nearly all of Illinois’ library problems.

Rohlf’s ideas were taken into consideration and on August 17, 1965 the Illinois Library Systems Act was passed. This act was created to spur the growth of regional library systems within Illinois. The act says:

Because the state has a financial responsibility in promoting public education, and because the public library is a vital agency serving all levels of the educational process, it is hereby declared to be policy of the state to encourage the improvement of free public
libraries and to encourage cooperation among all types of libraries in promoting the sharing of library resources. (75 ICLS 10/1)

Illinois authorized the Library Systems Act on the grounds that libraries promote education. Public education is part of the state’s responsibilities, so Illinois argued that funding public library systems was part of their obligation to fund education. Library systems in Illinois are only funded through the state of Illinois. In order to promote library systems, “provision is hereby made for a program of state grants designed to establish, develop and operate a network of library systems covering the entire state” (75 ICLS 10/1).

Illinois libraries choose to develop cooperative library systems. Ralph Stenstrom, in his thesis *The Emergence and Development of Public Library systems in Illinois*, explained:

The Illinois systems are called cooperative systems and come into existence by the joint action of the boards of trustees of the local libraries. From the boards of the local libraries a board of trustees is elected to govern the system. The system board submits its application and plan of service to the State Library and receives its funds from the state. A system director and staff direct the work of the system, but local libraries retain control of their own operations.” (22)

The cooperative system was very appealing to local libraries because they gained all the advantages and services of a system, but local libraries were still able to keep their autonomy. There are some disadvantages to having cooperative systems. Stenstrom found that systems can’t insist on standards for their member libraries because members retain their independence. However, at the same time library systems were required to meet the standards of the state library. Systems are required to meet the expectations and restrictions of the State Library or they cannot receive the funding to operate. Each system was expected to provide the core services,
which included: “automation/technology; bibliographic access, consulting; continuing education; delivery; interlibrary loan; reciprocal access; and reference” (Boria 55). Besides these core services, library systems in Illinois offered other services to their member libraries including: reciprocal borrowing, interlibrary loan, bookmobile services, grants for member libraries, consultant services, reference services, book back-stopping, audio visual resources, advice in book selection, in-service training, centralized purchasing and processing, publicity, public relations and delivery.

All funding for the library systems came from the Illinois General Assembly and was channeled through the State Library. These grants include equalization grants, library system grants and per capita grants. The equalization grants provided extra support from the state for public libraries underfunded by their communities. The library systems are funded by the library system grants and are only given if the library systems meet the requirements of the State Library. This is the primary source for income in Illinois’ library systems. The per capita grants award each public library $1.25 per capita that meets their requirements and are a part of a library system. (75 ILCS 10/8)

History of the DuPage Library System

The DuPage Library System (DLS) was created in 1966 and approved of on June 3rd. (Stenstrom). The system was initiated by the Wheaton Public Library. When it started the system had just 11 member libraries, and covered 300 square miles. The system served 261,568 patrons. The system headquarters were housed in the Wheaton Library. By 1968 the system expanded from just DuPage County to cover part of Kane County, growing to 612 square miles. In the beginning only public libraries were part of the DuPage system, but in the early 1970’s special, school and academic libraries started to join the system. (Brynes and Kramer) In 1968 it was
reported to have 21 member libraries, covered 612 sq. miles and served approximately 285,000 patrons. (Stenstrom 74-5) By 2005, 40 years after the initiative to start Illinois libraries, DuPage had 140 member libraries and affiliates and served nearly 950,000 patrons. (Brynes and Kramer 89). The DuPage Library system included the Naperville Public Library and the Wheaton Public library.

History of the Prairie Area Library System

The Prairie Area Library System (PALS) is the result of multiple mergers. The primary systems that formed PALS were Bur Oak, Northern Illinois, River Bend and Starved Rock. Bur Oak was created in 1968, had 17 libraries, covered 2,000 square miles and served an estimated 300,000 patrons. (Stenstrom 69-70) The Starved Rock library system was approved of June 9, 1966. By 1968, they had 25 member libraries, covered 2,118 square miles and served about 122,364 people. (Stenstrom 90-1) Northern Illinois was approved on February 24, 1966. In 1968, they had 50 libraries, served 560,000 patrons and covered 5,152 square miles. (Stenstrom 84-6) River Bend was established June 3, 1966 and covered 1,486 square miles. They had 17 member libraries and had nearly 191,000 patrons in 1968. (Stenstrom 86-7) When the four systems were first founded collectively they had only 83 public library members. (McKay 103) By 1968, that number had grown to 109 public libraries. In 1993 Bur Oak and Starved Rock merged into the Heritage Trail Library System. (McKay 103). McKay reported, “The Heritage Trail Library System, the Northern Illinois Library System and the River Bend System merged in 2004 to become the Prairie Area Library System” (103). As of 2005 there were 370 member libraries in PALS. (McKay) The Morris Area Public Library, Wilmington Public Library and Three Rivers Public Library were a part of PALS.
The Origins of this Merger

The reasons for the RAILS merger began in 2010. Along with many other operations in the state of Illinois, the library systems were not getting the money they were owed by the state. In early March only 35% of the North Suburban Library System (NSLS) budget was received by the system. (Marshall 1). This hit the library system so hard that the executive director of NSLS, Sarah Long, emailed NSLS member libraries to inform them that the system was cutting all services except for delivery on May 31, 2010. (Brock Peoples and Jeannie Dilger-Hill 4). In June 2010 the Lewis and Clark system starts to feel the budget crunch. They are owed about $388,000 by the state and have been informed they might not get that money until December. They decided to stop all non-essential services on July 1 and lay off 6 employees by June 30, 2010. (Philpott) These non-essential services included: consultant services, continuing education, grant development and human resource support. They continued to provide delivery, Local Library System Automation Program (LLSAP) and technology services. LLSAPs are shared catalogues funded by separate library systems. (Brock Peoples and Jeannie Dilger-Hill 4) By July, the lack of funding threatened the library systems’ delivery service. NSLS still only had about 42% of the funds owed to them. The Metropolitan Library System (MLS) was waiting for $1.1 million, DLS $584,000, PALS $975,000. The North Suburban Library System laid off twenty full and part time employees (“Lending Crisis” 1). The lack of funds threatened the systems’ delivery program. Ruzich wrote, “Officials with the systems said most have enough money to operate the delivery service for about four to five months” (“Lending Crisis” 1). This caused a lot of concern in the public library community, because delivery is considered one of the most important resources from the library systems.
In August 2010, the systems decided to merge. According to Ruzich, “The five upstate systems have signed a letter of intent to merge by 2012, according to officials who have been waiting for millions of dollars from the state” (“Overdue State Funding” 9). Those five library systems were the DuPage Library System (DLS), the Alliance Library System (ALS), the Metropolitan Library System (MLS), the North Suburban Library System (NSLS) and the Prairie Area Library System (PALS). On September 14 the first Merger Design Team meeting was held. This team was created to help facilitate the merger before the systems actually merged. During the meeting they went over the condition of the library systems. The DuPage Library System had to cut down from their twelve planned services to four. They were still funding delivery, talking books, restructuring and support for their LLSAP, Magic. With these minimal services they expect to have enough funds to last until Fiscal Year 2011. PALS cut down to three services: delivery, restructuring and support for PrairieCat, their LLSAP. They put the Prairie Area Library System’s Coal Valley facility up for sale and got a line of credit to keep their doors open until December. (Merger Design Team).

As of July 1st 2011 all the library systems in Northern Illinois, including Alliance, DuPage, Prairie Area, Metropolitan, and North Suburban, have merged into one large system called RAILS (Reaching across Illinois’ Library Systems). At the same time all the systems in southern Illinois, the Lincoln Trail, Rolling Prairie, Lewis and Clark, and Shawnee systems, have merged into the Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS). As a result of these mergers there are now only three systems in Illinois, RAILS, the Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS) and the Chicago Multi-type Library System (CMLS).
Results/ Analysis

In 2011, John Spears, the executive director of the Naperville Public Library and, at the time, at large member of the RAILS board (he is now the RAILS board vice-president) explained that the reasons for the merger were purely financial. In FY (fiscal year) 2010 the library systems were getting their payments from the state late. In FY 2011 the payments were delayed for a long time. The North Suburban Library System (NSLS) actually ran out of funds and could no longer support delivery. The NSLS member libraries pitched in the funds to keep delivery running until the end of the fiscal year. Kyla Waltermire, director of the Morris Area Public Library, said, “They library systems suddenly weren’t receiving payments because the State couldn’t pay.” Spears said the merger took place to achieve cost savings, eliminate duplicate overhead, such as system directors, buildings and staff. Sarah Meisler, the director of Wheaton Public Library, agreed and said the merger defiantly happened for financial reasons. She also stated that they didn’t really need all the people and buildings they had in the previous systems. Because of communication improvements, Meisler believed that, the system wasn’t as necessary to connect individual libraries as it once was. Kyla Waltermire also found the RAILS merger took place because of finances. She said, “The systems undertook measures to merge in hopes that their combined resources would make the funding stretch a little further by removing duplicate services and cutting overhead such as facilities maintenance” (Waltermire). By merging, the library systems hoped to stay afloat with their limited funding from the state. She also said, “I believe the merger took place in part because of funding concerns and in part because that is what the systems’ funding partner, the Illinois State Library, wanted.” Mary Souice, the executive director of the Three Rivers Public Library District, found that finances were at the heart of the problem, also. She said, “The budget in the state of IL is atrocious. The merger was a
way to save the library systems and preserve them, while providing an opportunity to redefine system services in IL.” According to Souice, the library systems merged in order to prevent all the library systems from disappearing. Waltermire, also, commented on the lack of funding from the State and attributed it to the trickledown effect from housing market crash. Waltermire also said, “Since I am not familiar with how systems were before I joined PALS in 2008, I can only speculate, but it seems as if previous mergers were done more so to facilitate more sharing of resources rather than for cost-saving efforts.” Mergers have happened many times before in Illinois. The most recent before RAILS and IHLS was the PALS merger. When library systems merged they often merged their resources too, including their LLSAPs and services. The RAILS merger though, as Waltermire said was “for cost-saving efforts”. While funding may be the main concern, Maria Meachum, director of the Wilmington Public Library, noted, “People always feel there is safety in numbers and they feel that a single system will be easier to run than 6 would be.” The merger may have taken place mostly from the lack of funds, but it appears that safety, preservation and perhaps the changing roles of the systems also played a role in the systems merger.

The library directors also had varying perceptions of the merger. Spears found that the merger was really instigated by the North Suburban Library System (NSLS) and the Dupage Library System (DLS). Waltermire said, “The RAILS merger…and the new RAILS organization emerged at the beginning of FY12 on July 1, 2011, but in many ways the predecessor organizations are still merging. RAILS hasn’t yet accomplished becoming a unified organization.” John Spears further explained that there are many questions still up in the air. In October 2011 he said that RAILS was still trying to figure out a unified pay scale, because the old system pay scales are still in place. The directors of the previous systems were still employed
by RAILS and paid their previous salaries. All seven buildings from the original library systems were still open and being used by RAILS.

In addition to the lack of unity in RAILS, this merger was difficult. Mary Soucie, who had been involved in the previous PALS merger, commented that, “The PALS merger seemed a lot more inclusive and smoother than the RAILS merger. It included a lot less consultants and seemed more of a merger than a takeover.” Meachum commented on the general feelings surrounding the merger. She says, “Panic seems to be the general tone. A sense that if we don’t scramble to save ourselves we will perish” (Meachum). Spears suggested that much of the unrest surrounding this merger is due to the pace. The RAILS merger took place in only nine months. He also commented that merging all the different types of libraries and their individual needs will be difficult and take time. While many directors noted the unrest following the merger, many also saw the merger as an opportunity. Meachum said, “However, I also see librarians taking lemons and making lemonade, which is what will help us survive…” Though the merger is difficult many librarians, Meachum says, are making the best of it. Kyla Waltermire found something similar. She said, “This is a perfect time to revise and reinvent, and libraries should take advantage of it” (Waltermire). Even though this is an extremely tough time for librarians, they are making the best of it.

Part of the reason the merger was so difficult for libraries is because, except for delivery, talking book centers and support for the LLSAPs, all of the programs the systems once provided were cut. John Spears explained that the State Library won’t approve a plan of service that funds any other services besides delivery, talking book centers and support for LLSAPs. Since the State Library provides the grant that funds library systems in Illinois, the library systems must be approved in order to receive funding. PALS used to provide group purchasing, consulting,
continuing education, cataloguing and technology support. Most librarians were hit hardest by
the loss of continuing education and consulting. Mary Soucie said, “the loss of CE [continuing
education] and consulting has caused my library to increase our budget for these areas as we now
have to look to other sources to provide these services, often at a higher cost.” PALS once
provided these services free of charge or for a nominal fee, now local libraries have to pay for
them on their own. Kyla Waltermire also stated, “the biggest impact has been the loss of
consulting and CE. My staff and library’s budget relied heavily on receiving various training
opportunities for free or for a very reasonable fee from PALS.” She later wrote, “My library
cannot afford to send staff very far for CE, nor can we afford to pay several dollars a head just to
register.” From these statements, it can be seen that the loss of continuing education and
consulting through PALS has either cost local libraries more money or has been eliminated
completely. Furthermore, Mary Soucie also said, “Losing the purchasing power that was
provided by the system coordinating group purchasing is another loss; we are not able to
negotiate discounts in the same manner for one library.” Without group purchasing through the
system, local libraries will end up paying more for the same materials. Maria Meachum also
found, “However it [the merger] will end up taking a bigger bite out of my budget, and if we end
up having to pay for delivery we will have to cut back on something else.” Many of the services
through the library systems saved local libraries money. Without those services local libraries
will have to foot the bill for the same services. That means less money for other things.

The DuPage Library System also once provided services such as continuing education,
consulting and technology support. The Naperville Public library was a stand alone in DLS, so
they didn’t participate in a shared catalogue and other aspects of the system, but they did use
delivery, continuing education and consulting. Spears said the Naperville Public library wasn’t
too affected by the merger, but they did lose continuing education. Sarah Meisler, the director of Wheaton another member of DLS, thought that there wouldn’t much of an impact from the merger. Wheaton is a larger library and basically self-sufficient. Meisler found very few people used DLS services before the merger.

John Spears also noted that there was some personal loss when the systems merged. All the consultants in the systems were let go. Most librarians knew these people, cared about them, went to them for help and the consultants were the face of advocacy for libraries in Illinois. The fact that all the consultants lost their jobs was difficult for the library community, too. Kyla Waltermire also noted the loss of consultants. She said:

I personally also relied heavily on the consultants. One in particular, Nancy Smith (who just recently passed away) took the time to visit me as a brand-new director and guide me through everything I needed to know. She provided me with a binder that included who-to-contact lists, an administrative calendar, information on certain laws pertaining to libraries, and the like. That service was invaluable to me as I stepped into the directorship…”

All the help Waltermire received from her consultant was available through PALS. Now there are no consultants through RAILS.

While the loss of these services affected most of the library directors and their libraries they all mentioned those who would be hit harder. John Spears stated that while the merger created issues for larger libraries, small libraries really relied on the system for group purchasing, continuing education, consulting and technology. Also, since not all rural librarians have a library science degree, they relied on the system for information on the laws, how to run libraries and the finances behind libraries and the systems. Sarah Meisler spoke on how DLS was created
partly in 1966 to help rural and smaller libraries. These small and rural libraries needed the system for education and training. Maria Meachum said, “we still share some of our resources, but smaller libraries will suffer badly unless bigger libraries help. Unfortunately, the biggest wealthiest are closing drawbridges and leaving it to middle sized libraries to pick up slack.” This is starting to happen. Spears found that some of the large libraries in PrairieCat, the PALS LLSAP, were pulling their catalogues out of the LLSAP. This reduces the amount of resources other libraries can use.

To provide for these services many libraries are banding together in small groups. According to Spears, many libraries are creating groups within the system to help each other with continuing education: “If the intention by doing this was to further unify libraries it hasn’t worked. If anything, the Illinois library community, in my opinion, is starting to fracture.” There was a group formed in DeKalb County, lead by Sarah Tobias from the Sycamore Library, so they can help do things themselves. Another group, the Phoenix group, was formed in the former Metropolitan Library System for continuing education. LACONI (the Library Administrative Conference of Northern Illinois) which existed before the merger is trying to cover continuing education and consulting for its members. Even the Naperville library is joining a smaller group, SCAL-PALS, a group from PALS that existed prior to the merger, to help with continuing education. Though Spears sees these smaller groups as a symptom of a larger problem, the library community fracturing, others see the collaboration as a necessary tool without the system services. Mary Soucie sees this tend as continuing. She said “Collaboration at the local level will also continue to grow as we strive to provide the services that were once provided by the library system” (Soucie). Maria Meachum also thinks the small groups of libraries will continue. She said, “I see us forming smaller partnerships with 2-3 neighbors to accommodate day to day
needs, and bypassing the systems to solve our smaller problems” (Meachum). Souice and Meachum suggest that Illinois libraries will form little library systems within RAILS. Kyla Waltermire also noticed this trend. She said, “I have seen many libraries working together even more than before as a result of the loss of services and the merger” (Waltermire). Without the services from the system, local libraries are banding together to support their services they need. They are forming groups and consortiums to serve their needs. Libraries are also working together with other libraries for help and networking.

The future of RAILS is still unknown, but each director had fears and hopes for the new system. John Spears hopes RAILS become a strong system, but he is afraid that if the system doesn’t offer consulting and continuing education services soon, they might not be able to bring the libraries back together. That the library community will be divided up into those small groups and not connected like they should be in RAILS. Mary Soucie is worried about the loss of services, too. She said, “I think libraries will continue to feel the loss of services once provided by the system” (Soucie). Some libraries had really begun to depend on these services and Soucie seems to think they won’t be coming back. Maria Meachum is afraid the system will no longer be needed. She said, “I think we will end up not using the system for very much. They will become irrelevant if they have nothing to offer us that we cannot manage on our own” (Meachum). Because libraries are forming their own groups, little system, Meachum thinks that RAILS may end up with no function and thus become useless. Meachum also said, “Our own good administrative practices will be what costs us so much. I see us becoming independent of the state very soon.” Besides the system becoming irrelevant, Meachum is afraid that the state will no longer give public libraries the funds they need a deserve, so they might need to become independent of the state.
Kyla Waltermire has some hopes for the new system. She said, “As for the future of the system, I believe there are some great opportunities to expand services to the LLSAPs and fund statewide resource sharing channels” (Waltermire). Waltermire believes the merger is a chance for the services of the system to expand and grow. She also agreed with Spears and said, “I believe that, as the systems rebuild, there are also great opportunities to reincorporate CE for frontline staff” (Waltermire). Waltermire hopes RAILS will be able to expand the sharing of resources, but she also hopes that RAILS will bring back continuing education. Sarah Meisler preferred having more autonomy over her own library and less interference from the system. In her experience when libraries did things together through the system, they didn’t always make the best decisions. Sometimes the structures they put in place were unwieldy or technologically behind because that was what all the member libraries could afford. She hopes to have more control over what her library does.

Whatever happens with RAILS, all the directors were sure that libraries in Illinois will continue to be strong and provide for their patrons. Maria Meachum said, “I believe that because we are so able to adapt to change I still believe we will always have services to offer the public that they will always need and value.” Public libraries have so far been able to adapt and change to new situations, Meachum sees that continuing into the future. She thinks that public libraries will gain, “more technological forms of delivery” and become more of a cultural and community center for their areas. She also said, “There will also always be people who cannot solve their own basic information needs and we will be the source for answers” (Meachum). Libraries have always been a source for information. In the age of information, where people can easily find lots of information, libraries will be there to help people find the right information. Sarah Meisler agreed. She told me libraries serve an important mission and will never go away.
Libraries have always adapted and will continue to adapt. Sarah Meisler thinks programming will become more important for public libraries. Programs, especially for children, but also for adults, will continue and get better. Libraries have always held a high standard for programs, she said. Mary Soucie agreed. She said, “We will continue to be strong and to change as needed to meet the needs of our libraries” (Soucie). Waltermire found that the RAILS merger is a great time for public libraries in Illinois to grow and become better libraries. She said, “I think the systems have the opportunity to act as a catalyst for more collaboration on a wider variety of fronts. This is a perfect time to revise and reinvent, and libraries should take advantage of it” (Waltermire). Waltermire sees the future of Illinois libraries is in collaboration, if only the system and public libraries can take advantage of the opportunity.

Libraries are also affected by new technology. Things like eBooks and free online databases are all changing the services and materials libraries can offer. However, Maria Meachum is positive public libraries will still be a necessity. She said, “People feared we would become obsolete with the Internet and Google, but if you cannot rationalize out what you are looking for you can’t find it. We offer problem solving skills that many people lack” (Meachum). Even with the internet and Google, she found the libraries are still important tools for finding information. Libraries will still be important. Sarah Meisler also talked about how new technology is changing libraries. She observed that libraries are getting into eBooks and the consortium for eBooks is growing. Even as electronic resources grow, she added, print materials are still important. Some people can’t read on scenes with a light source, such as herself. Parents prefer to teach their children using print books and printed materials are still very popular. Books won’t disappear. However, she does think that, reference will change as more information becomes electronic. All the library directors agreed, Illinois libraries are not going away. Public
libraries in Illinois will continue to provide the service their patrons are accustomed to. They will change and adapt to the new system and to new technology.
Conclusion

Public libraries are an important part of our society. The equal access to information and knowledge they promote is a cornerstone to our democracy. Furthermore public libraries are important part of education in our country, a point noted by the Illinois state government when they created the Library Systems Act. Public libraries are money savers, as well. The public, small business and educators can review books without having to actually buy them. An important supporting element for many local public libraries is the library system. Library systems were particularly important in Illinois, which was the forerunner for library systems across the nation.

Library systems began in Illinois in 1965 following “A Plan” and Library system Act. Library systems quickly developed in the state. Starting in 2010, funding from the State was delayed. Systems never knew when or if they would receive the money they were promised. The lack of funding put so much stress on the previous systems that they were forced to merge. The five northern systems, Allience, Dupage, Prairie Area, North Suburban and Metropolitan, merged into RAILS. Though the systems successfully merged there are some problems. Directors noted that the systems have yet to be fully integrated. Also, due to budget restrictions, the system is only allowed to fund delivery, talking book centers and support for the LLSAPs. These limited services ignore much of what the systems in Illinois once did.

The directors I talked to miss many of the former services once offered. Particularly, many of the directors depended on continuing education for their staff and the consulting service. They also mentioned how the loss of group purchasing, technology support and the other services means they will need to spend more on those services out of their local library’s budget. That means less money for the local library, catalogue development, programs and the many
other services. The directors of the Naperville and Wilmington public libraries found that the lack of services has also forced libraries to form small groups in order to afford the services they once got through the systems. With libraries providing for themselves there is a fear that RAILS will become irrelevant. The director of the Wheaton Public Library believes libraries have all ready outgrown library systems and their services. All the directors were hopeful for the future of Illinois public libraries and equally positive that their libraries would continue to provide the standard of service their patrons expect.

RAILS has the potential to become a great library system. However, for RAILS to reach its full potential a few things need to happen. First, RAILS needs to complete the merger. It cannot continue as the cobbled together remains of the five previous library systems. That means RAILS needs its own directors and staff, its own buildings and headquarters. All of which I’m sure the RAILS board is working on. Beyond that the system needs to become unified. It won’t be easy. RAILS covers a large area and has an array of different libraries. It will be very difficult to fully merge the remnants of the old systems, but it is possible.

RAILS also, as soon as possible, should work to reinstate the services once offered by library systems in Illinois. When the system is fully merged, I hope the state library will agree to approve a plan of operation that includes services beyond delivery, the talking book centers and support for the LLSAPs. It was necessary for the state library to cut back on services for financial reasons and in order to more smoothly combine the systems. It would have been even more difficult to merge five different systems that provided different services. However, since the systems are all merged it would be great if the system could start offering the services the predecessors systems once did. In particular, reinstating the continuing education and consulting
services, as those appear to be the services most needed. As well the member libraries would appreciate the return of group purchasing and technology support.

A unified systems and the return of services will help prevent libraries from breaking away from the system. By providing services, RAILS will not risk the danger of becoming irrelevant to the member libraries. Also, if RAILS reinstates some of those services libraries will not need to form small groups to provide for those services. I don’t know if libraries forming smaller units to help each other is neccessarily a bad thing. In smaller groups libraries can deal with the issues that pertain to their specific situations, which would be difficult to do through RAILS. However, it would be useful if the libraries could also be unified at the system level. The state should not be full of little pseudo-systems without an actual system to support libraries. That would destroy the unity within RAILS and remove any ability the system once had to equalize services between libraries. When all the local libraries form small groups some libraries are sure to be left out; then those libraries would be without any services. With RAILS a library on the shores of Lake Michigan is connected to one on the boarder of Iowa. There are amazing opportunities to collaborate over such a large distance. These opportunities shouldn’t be squandered because RAILS didn’t become a unified system.

However to do this, unify RAILS and reinstate services, requires funds. Funding for the library systems has been cut since 2001 and the delay in funds in 2010 was even worse. The systems never knew when or if they’d get the money owed to them by the state. An increase in funding would not doubt be helpful as RAILS gets its bearings. Even if the state just paid the systems the money they had promised, that would be an improvement on the current funding situation. The state of Illinois needs to decide, are they sincerely interested in funding education, continuing the level of excellence for their libraries and providing equal access to knowledge and
information for their citizens? If so, they need to fund library systems. Consistent funding is the only tool the state can provide to help unify RAILS and reinstate essential services.
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