



Moving a Library Collection: Impact on Staff Morale

by Virginia F. Moreland, Carolyn L. Robison, and Joan M. Stephens

A "do-it-yourself" library move may produce significant changes in the established patterns of personnel organization and staff behavior. Most previously published work on the topic of moving a library collection, however, has focused on the procedural aspects of a move. This study recounts and analyzes the impact of such a move on library staff attitudes and morale.

A "do-it-yourself" library move, one in which all the supervision and labor is supplied by existing library staff members, is not an uncommon occurrence in the academic world. The logistics of such a move are awesome, and several authors have addressed the technical and physical issues involved in the relocation of collections. Of equal interest, however, are the dramatic changes that may occur, at least temporarily, in the established patterns of personnel organization and behavior.

In 1987 the authors of this article were participants in the planning and execution of a major library move at Georgia State University. The William Russell Pullen Library collections were redistributed into a new building addition and all library floors were reorganized. In all, 134 people, including the entire full-time library staff and some student assistants, were involved in moving, shifting, and shelf-reading more than one million volumes.

Bringing to this experience diverse backgrounds in library science, psychology, sociology, and education administration, the authors became fascinated with the social and behavioral aspects of this unusual library event. In particular, they were impressed with the fact that in spite of hard physical labor, tedious tasks, serious time pressures, and other possible sources of stress, many of the library staff expressed positive feelings about the project. This article explores how and why this happened.

Much of the following discussion is based on the authors' memories as active participant-observers of the events described. Eight months after the move, the authors informally surveyed the staff who had participated to learn about some of their attitudes. While comments from

the survey are used as illustrations, this article is not intended to be either a formal documentation of events or a report of research.

For those who might be planning or contemplating a major library move, this project has been described in more detail in two other sources. Cravey and Cravey described the computer modeling and other calculations used to plan the physical aspects of moving the collections;¹ and Moreland et al. provided a more detailed chronological record of the personnel aspects of planning and executing the move.²

Building Motivation on Cooperation

The importance of staff motivation to the accomplishment of organizational goals has been discussed extensively in the literature of organizational development. Most library administrators are familiar with motivation theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, in which fulfillment of the need for self-actualization presupposes fulfillment of lower-order needs such as survival and security. Present-day managers use such techniques as job enrichment, quality circles, matrix organization, sociotechnical system design, and team-building to motivate employees.³

Most of these techniques, however, focus on relationships *within* work groups rather than those *between* work groups, which is an important factor in any organization that depends on cross-functional cooperation. Bare's survey of professional and nonprofessional library work groups, for example, revealed that professional group performance was correlated most highly with expertise, mature interpersonal processes, and task goal clarity, while nonprofessional group performance was correlated most with

*Virginia F. Moreland is Head of the
Reference Department,*

*Carolyn L. Robison is Associate
University Librarian, and*

*Joan M. Stephens is Assistant Head of the
Acquisitions Department, Pullen Library,
Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA.*

performance-contingent rewards, member retention, supervisory behavior, and work flow efficiency.⁴

Too great a focus on intra-group motivational techniques may cause fractionalization of the work force—some groups may become isolated and territorial to the detriment of overall organizational goals. Gardner, in his suggestions for combating organizational “dry rot,” emphasized the deleterious impact of “vested interests,” especially in academic organizations.⁵ Many library organizations have built individualistic or competitive reward structures rather than cooperative structures, in which an individual or group can achieve goals (and rewards) only if other individuals or groups attain theirs.

A classic study of cooperative reward structures was carried out by Sherif, who analyzed how the “vicious” competition between groups of preadolescent boys at a summer camp was affected by a superordinate goal that could be achieved only by cooperation among the groups. The boys joined forces to repair a breakdown in a water supply line, a cooperative venture that appeared to lead to increasing friendships and mutual acknowledgment of strengths among the formerly warring factions.⁶

We were curious to see if a similar superordinate goal, the moving of a university library collection, had produced improvements in relationships and morale among the library staff members involved. Conroy and Jones stress the importance of team-building to develop *esprit de corps*.⁷ Team-building may have a positive and dramatic impact on productivity; evidence suggests that a highly motivated, cohesive team may consistently outperform individuals working separately. In this instance, the “team” was the entire library staff. In our research, we attempted to discover what contributed to the feeling of camaraderie experienced during the move, how many of the participants experienced this feeling, and how long the feeling persisted after the move.

Background on Pullen Library

To appreciate the context of the move experience, it may be helpful to know something of the Pullen Library’s structure and history. Staff are organized into six departments, all of which report to the Associate University Librarian. Departments operate with a fair degree of autonomy. Librarians are represented in many areas of library governance through

participation on standing and ad-hoc committees. The support staff also elect representatives to several of the standing committees and have a separate Supportive Staff Committee. These committees provide an avenue for participation in a broad range of issues and some opportunity to interact with co-workers from other departments. Yet for many staff, daily contacts occur primarily within their own departments.

It is in the area of special projects that the library has seen the benefits of broader involvement of the staff at all levels. Three projects in particular involved the participation of staff from all departments of the library: targeting the library’s collections when a collection security system was purchased and installed in 1976; changing over from the card catalog to a microfiche catalog in 1982; and staffing a patron assistance desk for two quarters when the library’s online catalog was introduced in 1985.

Thus, when planning for the library move began, a large portion of the library staff had experienced at least one precedent for library-wide volunteer participation in a superordinate goal. However, the prior projects, although they were major undertakings, did not have quite the same degree of urgency, total participation, or disruption of normal routines as did the library move.

Planning and Executing the Move

Planning for the move took place over many months. While most of the planning was handled by a few individuals, a concerted effort was made to keep the entire staff apprised and to share information as details become known. The library director issued a newsletter entitled *Moving Right Along* that furthered communication with the library staff and selected University administrators.

It was made clear that all staff were expected to participate in the move. Those who for medical reasons could not work on certain aspects of the move were given alternative work assignments. The move would require closing the library for two weeks and vacation requests could not be honored during this time. As the move approached, a detailed plan and work schedule were unveiled, and staff were asked to sign up for specific work shifts. It was clear that people would be working in small teams under the supervision of the move managers.

The move began on December 5 and work was to cease on December 18 when the university closed for the holiday break. Unfortunately, the very detailed work plan proved to be too optimistic. The staff went through many of the phases common to individuals taking part in a group process. First, they became oriented to unfamiliar tasks and structures; then they made initial mistakes and experienced anxiety and breakdowns in communication; this was followed by a period of re-establishing ground rules and expectations; then they settled into a steady and productive work flow. Many staff members generously contributed far more hours than they originally anticipated, giving up time they would have spent on other duties or projects. The move was successfully completed, although not on schedule—work carried over into the first week after the holiday break.

Survey Results

In all, 134 full- and part-time staff participated in the move. In August of 1988, eight months after the completion of the move, a survey of these staff was conducted to determine their thoughts and feelings about the move. Seventy-three responses were received, for a response rate of 54.5 percent. The feelings most commonly expressed were satisfaction, pride, relief, accomplishment, and physical exhaustion. We recognize that staff members who felt extremely negative about the move may have been reluctant to respond to the survey.

Of particular interest was the question of whether participation in the move had an on-going effect on feelings about working in the library. Of the 73 respondents, 39 (53.4 percent) indicated that there had been an on-going effect—34 said the effect was positive, 5 said it was negative. The 5 who experienced lasting negative feelings were all support staff who felt that they had been exploited or treated unfairly by being asked to participate in the move without some additional compensation. The positive comments from the 34 dealt with increased understanding of other areas of the library: improved relationships with staff in other departments; and increased feelings of teamwork, partnership, belonging, pride, accomplishment, working toward common goals, and appreciation for resource management and planning for the move.

The remainder of this paper addresses the organizational themes that emerged from our observation of and reflection on the move, and from the survey responses. It is an attempt to identify and analyze the specific aspects of the library move that may have produced the positive effects on staff morale and organizational integration.

The Work Environment

For the 15 days it took to complete the move, the experience of "working in the library" was radically redefined. The doors were closed to the public, so all the energy of the staff had an inward focus—on the move itself and on some other work functions that were maintained at a minimal level. Work schedules were less varied than usual since the move did not continue into the evening. Thus, the entire staff was in the building at one time. Some weekend work was required. This was a sore point with some staff, but those public service staff who had always shouldered night and weekend assignments were pleased to be sharing that burden with others.

Normal rules of dress and decorum were largely discarded. Since the work would be physical and somewhat dirty, participants were encouraged to dress accordingly. And policies governing talking and eating were no longer in force. Indeed, a few refreshment breaks—parties, really—were staged in public areas of the library where food and drink are normally strictly forbidden. The move created a profound sense of "suspension of the rules," which was experienced by most staff as a refreshing change of pace. This sort of environment can often be achieved only by sending a work group away on a retreat. In this case, we didn't even need to leave the building.

Organizational Structure

Staff members spent a significant part of each work day during the move—ranging from several hours to all day—engaged in tasks outside (sometimes *far* outside) their normal job description. Regardless of their rank, title, or seniority, they were all novices who needed training and close supervision. In fact, since the move supervisors were primarily library assistants from the circulation department, normal status relationships were often reversed.

Work groups included staff, librarians, department heads, and administra-

tors. Support staff saw the managers in their sneakers and T-shirts and began to know them as individuals. (One survey respondent commented: "By far my favorite memory is the Library Administration Office in blue jeans....Managers of all descriptions would do well to wear blue jeans on occasion.") Several support staff members from circulation, on

"The move created a profound sense of 'suspension of the rules,' which was experienced by most staff as a refreshing change of pace. This sort of environment can often be achieved only by sending a work group away on a retreat."

the other hand, were seen in major leadership roles. A library assistant, for instance, could be observed giving the library director instructions on where to take his book truck, a phenomenon that was taken in good spirits by the administrator and enjoyed by the on-lookers. A senior faculty librarian reported, "My [move] supervisor was a student assistant, which was a wonderful (even joyous) experience of equality."

Since work team membership cut across departmental and status lines, staff got acquainted with people they'd never met before. Everyone wore name tags with first names only. With a new and common task at hand, it was easy to find things to talk about. As the tasks became more familiar, most people could work quite competently while also maintaining some casual social conversation. The book-moving teams needed the strongest level of collaboration and had the most intense opportunities to interact. Those who worked on shelf-reading or other miscellaneous tasks had fewer opportunities to experience new structures and social contacts.

As work teams formed and reformed through the days, cross-departmental contacts increased exponentially. By the end of the move, quite a number of staff were heard to comment with amazement and pleasure that they finally knew the name and face of every single library employee.

Teamwork

The two weeks of the move offered an intense learning experience in teamwork and small-group interaction. The rhythm of the work day was structured around four two-hour shifts. At the beginning of each shift, several teams of eight to ten people would be organized and sent to work on a specific part of the collection. If the average participant worked 3 shifts per day, for 12 of the 15 days, s/he could have worked with as many as 36 different work teams.

Teams were composed of a few people who loaded books from shelves to book-trucks ("senders"), several people who pushed book trucks to their new locations ("pushers"), and others who installed the books in their new locations ("receivers"). Thus, the team was actually divided between two locations, often on different floors or in different wings of the complex. If the senders and receivers were not in sync, confusion, tension, and mistakes could result. Some team members were perpetually en route back and forth, and could be used to carry messages. "Slow down, we can't keep up!" or "Watch out, that last truck was loaded backwards!" are examples.

Some teams emphasized power and speed. If the chief sender was strong and worked fast, s/he would need a strong and fast receiver at the other end. Other groups worked with more deliberation, sometimes trading off tasks during a shift to avoid tedium and muscle strain. In a short period, participants had to learn to work together in a variety of contexts and styles. After a few days, the work styles of various supervisors became known. Since the work teams were largely self-selected from the volunteers available on a given shift, people were often able to assign themselves to the supervisors with whom they'd be most comfortable.

Motivation and Achievement

During normal library operations, one hopes that disparate units and departments are working together toward common goals. In practice, those goals may seem distant and indistinct because of the demands of everyday tasks. During the move, the common goal was clear, tangible, and unavoidable. Progress, or lack of it, was charted daily in the main lobby. The importance of the superordinate goal was also obvious. Once the move began, the library could not return to normal functioning until it was completed.

The move also provided new motivational drive for those who favor competition. Normal library routines rarely inspire feverish efforts to set new records or out-shine another work group. The book-moving venture, however, allowed and perhaps even encouraged competition. It was friendly competition to be sure, but some individuals really enjoyed the challenge of trying to move ten more trucks of books per shift than anyone else. It should be noted that management attempted to down-play competitiveness, fearing that it might lead to carelessness and mistakes. That almost athletic spirit of competition, however, never disappeared completely.

Another feature of much library work is a lack of closure or completion. Patrons perpetually need service. Books are shelved only to circulate again. Materials are processed, and then replaced by more materials to be processed. But the move was a refreshingly finite task. It only had to be done once, you could see it happening, and you knew when it was finished. Some of us were absurdly pleased to think that for one brief moment, all the volumes would be in order, straightened, and dusted.

Finally, the move provided an environment in which many normal work skills were useless and many different skills were suddenly valuable. Advanced degrees and arcane knowledge do not move books. Energy, strength, agility, physical coordination, spatial perception, and endurance were suddenly qualities of great importance. This turn of events was frustrating to some, who felt less than masterful at the tasks they were asked to do. One survey respondent commented, "In one way I really got into the competition and in a way that was painful since I couldn't possibly keep up with people who were stronger."

There were many aches and pains in the first week, as a largely sedentary work force began to put in several hours a day of physical labor. Yet some of the sedentary found great satisfaction in this temporary change, and they saw their skills improve with experience. Some staff who normally filled lower-level jobs found they were well equipped by youth, fitness, and stamina for the

move, and their achievements were sincerely admired by their colleagues.

Post-Move Changes

At the end of the move, the library was in many ways a new place. Of course the building was different—with the new addition open and the new arrangement of the collections. The staff had a profound sense of ownership, having touched so much of the collection and worked in so many corners of the physical space. Public service staff were now much better equipped to give directions and empathize with students having difficulty in the stacks.

Socially, the group was better integrated than ever before or since. The staff had endured a challenging and stressful time, and they had come through it together. They had also had much fun and established new relationships. Some pieces of library folklore were born, and neologisms were invented during the move. For example, when one is shelving and a book falls off the back of the shelf, it has just committed "libracide." A staff member who was supervising the final shelf-reading (and not familiar with the conventional term "edging") taught her work crew to "soldierize"—that is, "make the books line up nice and straight like little soldiers." There were memories of the worst disasters and the most productive days, and of "records" like the most book trucks moved in one shift. While not everyone found the move enjoyable, everyone nevertheless felt a share in this common group experience.

Lasting Effects

How long lasting were these benefits? Certainly some of the effects of the move did diminish over time. As personnel turnover took its natural course, the sense of familiarity with all the staff gradually declined. The radically different environment and role reversals were, of course, transitory. As soon as the building reopened, it was in some ways business as usual.

But in other ways, the move left a lasting mark on the organization. Eight months after the move, the survey revealed strong positive feelings among the staff who responded. At this writ-

ing, several years later, veterans of the move view it with something akin to nostalgia. A bond is still there for those who shared the experience, though a smaller and smaller percentage of the staff have those common memories.

The nine members of the current administration who were around for the move have attempted to find other ways to recreate the informality and community feeling of that two-week period. For instance, on a couple of occasions the library has been closed to the public for a day to allow departments to hold retreats and other in-service functions. The usual team-building strategies, however, seem pale in comparison to that one monumental project.

If we had worked at an institution with greater financial resources, it is possible that professional movers would have been brought in to handle this job, with just some supervision by the circulation department. The library staff might have spent a week or two catching up on their paper work, perhaps enjoying a respite from public service, and tackling long-neglected projects. In its own way, this would have been wonderful. But we would not trade it for the experience we had. In this one case at least, the meager budget of the institution led to the enrichment of the organization.

References

- ¹Pamela J. Cravey and G. Randall Cravey, "The Use of Computer Modeling to Redistribute a Library's Collection," *Technical Services Quarterly* 8 (No. 3, 1991): 25-33.
- ²Virginia F. Moreland, Carolyn L. Robison, and Joan M. Stephens, "The 'Do-It-Yourself' Library Move: Consequences for Staff Interactions and Morale" (ERIC Document ED 341 397, December 1991.)
- ³Barbara Conroy and Barbara Schindler Jones, *Improving Communication in the Library* (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1986).
- ⁴Alan C. Bare, "Contrasting Models of Library Work Group Performance," *Research in Higher Education* 15 (No. 3, 1981): 241-254.
- ⁵John W. Gardner, "How to Prevent Organizational Dry Rot," *Harper's* 231 (October 1965): 20, 22, 24, 26.
- ⁶Muzafer Sherif, *In Common Predicament: Social Psychology of Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).
- ⁷Conroy and Jones, *Improving Communication*.