

## **Library Automation: Is it for Your Library?**

by Charlene McGuire and Emily Sitz, Southwest Kansas Library System

### ***Public library Automation in Kansas***

Did you know that 50% of public libraries in Kansas use an automated system, or an Integrated Library System (ILS), to manage library-related information and tasks? Is your library one of those? If not, then the library's staff and board may be discussing library automation in the very near future as the state library has initiated the first of three years of LSTA grants designated to assist libraries in meeting the costs of automation.

At this point, you might be asking what the term "automation" means. Library automation, for our purposes, refers to a software management system for libraries which typically includes—at a minimum—an online card catalog, ideally accessible via the Web, and an automated circulation system.

### ***Why Automate Your Library?***

- **Service** – It will assist library staff in providing more in-depth reference service through advanced search techniques.
- **Much Easier Circulation** – It takes just a few seconds to check materials in and out.
- **Create Subject Bibliographies Easily** – You can search for and print the results.
- **Patron Convenience** – Patrons want to know what you have, what the loan status is, when materials will be available, how many people are on the reserve list, etc.
- **Statistical Reporting** – It will assist with reports for the board, the System, the State Library and other individuals, as well as with collection development.
- **Simplify Library Processes** – It will automatically create overdue notices.
- **Patrons Expect This** – Colleges and universities, schools and large public libraries are usually automated, and patrons, especially younger ones, are growing up in an environment where using the computer to access information is not only an expected convenience, it is a necessary skill.

### ***How Do You Automate?***

Basically, automation encompasses the process of taking information about each borrower and item in the library from its printed form and moving it to an electronic record. The library moves from an author, title and subject card catalog to an electronic catalog complete with keyword searching. In order to automate, usually some degree of preparation must be accomplished. For example, taking inventory and weeding the collection (pulling out unsightly items, items with outdated information or items which people just don't use) are often necessary steps in the automation process.

### ***The Other "how"***

Automating your library will be expensive. Just how expensive the process will be is determined by the nature of the prep work your library staff have done, the type of system you purchase

including all the “bells and whistles” you deem to be necessary and/ or desirable, and the type of maintenance arrangement you decide upon.

The LSTA grants offer public libraries in Kansas an excellent opportunity to have the burden of those initial costs alleviated. It is then the library board’s responsibility to ensure that the automation system is maintained. So, if you are considering automation then you must realize the ongoing financial commitment and plan for it. After purchasing the ILS, the library will have an annual maintenance fee which should cover software upgrades and software/hardware support costs.

### ***A Vision for Kansas***

The State Library would like to increase the percentage of automated public libraries in Kansas from 50% to 80% of the total. An automated catalog is an integral part of a vision for library service in Kansas which emphasizes a patron-centered approach – an easier, “one stop shop” for patrons to have access to the information they want and need.

In the Southwest Kansas Library System, 67% of our public libraries are automated. We have libraries with service populations of less than 250 and more than 25,000. Those libraries which are un-automated and comprise the remaining 33% have service populations which range from 44 to 1,420. A handful within that group is considering automation as a viable course of action. Should you be looking into automation for your library? Please ask your staff and the consultants at your regional library system to help guide you through this process.