
The mission of a university undergraduate library: Model statement

Prepared by the ACRL Undergraduate Librarians Discussion Group
and the ULS Steering Committee

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San Francisco and submitted to the ALA Standards
Committee for final review.*

The purpose of the undergraduate library is to take primary responsibility for meeting the library needs of undergraduate students in a large university environment. The designation of a separate library expressly for undergraduates is based on the premise that undergraduates deserve a full and fair share of the libraries' resources—materials, services, and staff time. The policies of the separate undergraduate library may frequently give preferential treatment to undergraduates to ensure this allocation of resources. The nature of the environment, the specific needs of undergraduates, and the kinds of staff and services required to effectively meet those needs are more fully described in the following paragraphs.

Environment

The library systems of large universities generally consist of several major departmental libraries plus numerous special libraries and reading rooms spread over a large campus area. The materials collection of the library system is measured in millions of volumes. Each library within the system concentrates on the needs of the members of a specific de-

partment or field of study, and the quality of the library is defined in terms of the strengths of the research collection. Specialized services are often provided for those doing research, such as computerized searching of commercial resource databases. The staff members of those libraries are selected for their ability to provide graduate-level reference services, to organize complex collections, and to select the often esoteric materials needed in a research library. In-depth subject knowledge and managerial skills are also frequently required.

Users

Within this research-oriented setting, there are large numbers of undergraduate students with varying levels of experience and ability in using libraries. As a group most first-year students share the following characteristics:

1. They do not yet have the sophisticated research skills needed to exploit the research library's potential.
2. They are intimidated by the complexity and size of a large library system.
3. They are often reluctant to ask for assistance

in the use of a library.

4. They are unaware of the many services and resources which are available in university libraries.

The needs of academic library users are on a spectrum, with study space, instruction in basic research tools, and reserve books at one end, and primary source materials and special bibliographic services at the other end. The concentration of needs of the undergraduate is at the former end of the spectrum and the undergraduate library focuses on serving these needs. The undergraduate library may also serve the informational needs of other users, including members of the civic community.

Information services

An undergraduate library with a collection of the size and nature required to meet undergraduate needs is not always easy to use. The identification of materials wanted is often confusing and may be incomprehensible until the user is actually shown how the system works. Teaching students how to use a library is therefore a basic service provided by the staff of the undergraduate library. The teaching programs of undergraduate libraries are varied. They include teaching by personal contact and through the preparation of printed and other materials. They include formal group instruction and informal, unstructured contacts with students. The programs generally include three types of activities: reference and referral, orientation, and formal instruction.

Reference encounters with undergraduates often result not only in answering specific questions, but also in personalized instruction in the methods of identifying and retrieving library materials. Supplemental to this personal contact is the provision of bibliographies, booklists, and other aids designed to introduce undergraduates to the materials available in the library and to guide them in finding the materials. The reference service provided by undergraduate librarians is also a referral service to the wide variety of resources in the library system. Referrals may also assist an undergraduate in becoming aware of community libraries and information centers, as well as of personal supportive services including academic, financial, health, and counseling services.

Orientation activities acquaint undergraduates with the facilities and services of the library. They include activities such as the distribution of maps and informational materials that describe the library system and the resources and services of the individual libraries within it, staff-conducted tours for groups, and self-guided tours. Orientation may also include public relations activities that help students become aware of the services and resources of the library.

Bibliographic instruction programs should improve the ability of students to make effective use of the library collections, services, and staff. Instruction may be offered as part of coursework in an aca-

demically subject or interdisciplinary program, in a separate course on library skills, in workshops and term-paper clinics, and through point-of-use aids in the library.

Reference service, bibliographic instruction, and orientation activities are appropriate for all levels and types of library users. The undergraduate library focuses on two problems that are particularly common to undergraduates—finding the materials they need, and knowing when to ask for help and having the confidence to do so. Undergraduate libraries provide a laboratory in which to teach students how to use a library. The experience of using an undergraduate library is preparation for using all libraries; preparation not merely for graduate work and research, but also for learning to use information sources that will be needed by undergraduates for the rest of their lives as citizens, as consumers, in their professions, and for their recreational interests.

Collection

The subject scope of the undergraduate library will primarily support the teaching curriculum. A given undergraduate library would operate at one of the following collecting levels: 1) at the level of freshman and sophomore classes; 2) at all levels of undergraduate classwork; 3) at all levels except in disciplines supported by specialized subject libraries or professional schools with undergraduate programs, in which cases bibliographic support by the undergraduate library will be at the freshman and sophomore level. Since many undergraduate courses require large numbers of students to read the same library materials, direct curriculum support will be provided through reserve collections and through purchase of multiple copies of items with high demand.

The undergraduate library will provide not only the best materials of historical or research value (which might be duplicated in other libraries on campus) but also overviews of a subject, jargon-free explanations of a field, and introductory materials. Research reports and other items restricted to a very narrow subject area are less frequently of interest to undergraduates and will be purchased very selectively. The undergraduate library's collection of periodical reference material will concentrate on the more standard and interdisciplinary periodical indexes, since these are most heavily used by undergraduates; the periodical collections should emphasize the titles covered by these indexes. Collections of course-related materials for undergraduate use have increased in the formats available and in content reliability and the appropriate additional resources for undergraduate study. Increasingly the undergraduate library will need to supply non-print materials (with bibliographic access) and well-maintained equipment in order to address growing availability and demand.

Undergraduates select from a wide variety of courses and are therefore looking for library materials on a wide variety of subjects in order to meet course requirements. The subject range of the undergraduate library will be of sufficient comprehensiveness and depth so that, in general, the undergraduate will have a single starting point from which to find the basic information needed for papers, speeches, projects, etc. More advanced needs of undergraduates will be met by specific referral to graduate collections.

The information needs of undergraduates extend beyond the requirements of the curriculum. Undergraduate students are vitally interested in current events and in the current state of the world. The development of cultural, career, and health and recreational interests is also an important part of the life of an individual, and the undergraduate years are a time for exploring the wide range of activities and opportunities available. The library experience of undergraduates should encourage them to seek materials in these areas. The collections of the undergraduate library will therefore be developed to meet these needs, since this is as important to undergraduate education and to the mission of the university as is the support of formal classroom instruction.

Staff

The staff of the undergraduate library must have certain abilities in addition to their information-seeking skills. The ability to interact on a one-to-one basis with a diverse clientele is essential. Staff should also be able to design and implement instructional programs that meet varied user needs. In addition, they should be able to interact with faculty in promoting effective use of library resources in relation to classroom activities. The ability to cooperate with staff of other libraries and resource centers is also needed.

The staff of an undergraduate library must have understanding of the pressures of campus life and a

concern for undergraduate needs and problems. The library staff should treat undergraduates with respect, make them feel comfortable in the library, and encourage them to ask for help. Only this personal interaction with students will humanize their library contacts, open paths of communication for their growth in using libraries, and increase their respect for libraries.

Study facilities

The environment of the undergraduate library should encourage the use of the library and its resources. The hours of operation must accommodate a range of student requirements based on class times, work commitments, and varied social habits. Many undergraduates live in environments which are not conducive to study; others simply prefer to study at a library. The undergraduate library should provide sufficient study spaces, based on the size of the student population, in a variety of seating to accommodate student needs and habits, e.g., quiet study of own materials, study with access to library resources, limited group study, and informal interaction.

Development

As undergraduate education changes, so must undergraduate library service. The undergraduate library must be innovative and experimental, alert to changing undergraduate needs, and must often adopt non-traditional library methodology. Current areas of development might include the following:

- Continuing exploration of effective use of library materials in support of classroom teaching.
- Expanding programs of bibliographic instruction.
- Service to special groups, e.g., the visually impaired, the disadvantaged, or international students.
- Integration of new and/or advanced technologies such as computer systems, microcomputers, video or optical disks as appropriate.
- Cooperative programs with other campus units, such as tutoring and counseling services.

Developments in some of these areas may be at the library system level rather than exclusively within the undergraduate library. However, it is the responsibility of the undergraduate library staff to shape these developments to meet the needs of undergraduates and their academic programs.

Note: This revision was prepared by the following people with approval by the Undergraduate Librarians Discussion Group and the Steering Committee of the University Libraries Section of ACRL: Thomas Fry, Deborah Biggs, Sandra Ward, Robert Merikangas, Molly Mahony, Roland Person, and Wilma Reid Cipolla. ■■

Personnel consultants

A list of librarians who consult on human resource management issues and conduct workshops on personnel topics is now in preparation by the Personnel Administration Section of ALA's Library Administration and Management Association.

Individuals who want to be listed in this publication must complete an application form, providing information about experience, references, and personal data. A modest application fee will also be required to assist with the publication costs.

Applications may be requested from: Jim Neal, E505 Pattee Library, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802.

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