

Specialization and the Rising Tide— Two Waves of the Future?

THE ACADEMIC WORLD has become increasingly aware in recent years of a great problem hovering over the horizon of the next two decades, a problem fast assuming the proportions of a *bête noire* in the form of tremendously increased school enrollments.

Elementary and secondary school authorities are already wrestling with the beast, and judging by the frantic cries for help, the authorities are not winning. The alarm has spread upward through the academic ranks, and last fall representatives of the whole scholastic world met in the White House in an effort to devise workable solutions.

Although the universities are still several years away from the front-line battle, their period of grace diminishes each year as the baby crop moves up the scholastic scale. Within a decade the increased birth rate which began its sharp rise after World War II will have poured over into the nation's already crowded colleges and universities. By 1970 the number of persons of college age will have almost doubled.¹ Total enrollment is expected to be 4,200,000 (compared with 2,500,000 in 1954) even if the percentage of college-age youth attending college remains at 31.²

Solutions to the enrollment problem must be found, and the ivied walls are already resounding with heated debate as to which way we should turn.

¹ Ronald B. Thompson, "College-Age Population Trends, 1940-1970," *Education Digest*, XIX (1954), 23.

² Norman Burns, "The Coming Crisis in Higher Education," *School Review*, LXIII (1955), 252.

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Many defensive tactics have been pushed tentatively forward, but as yet no grand strategy has evolved, except perhaps to call for greatly increased expenditures. Increased expenditures there must certainly be, but these call first for increased taxes, endowments and other forms of revenue, demands which can be carried only so far. The public will insist that some basic solutions be found within the academic world itself.

It will become "mandatory for us to examine what we are doing—to reassess our educational philosophy; to adopt new methods and adapt old ones; to find new resources in teachers, facilities, and financing; and in general to raise hob with the *status quo*."³

One proposal which raises hob with the present state of affairs is that of making it more difficult for a student to go to college by raising entrance standards so high that only those for whom there is room would be admitted. This is saying in effect that a full head as well as a full purse will be needed by tomorrow's freshman.

This partial solution has already run into heated objections, a very pertinent one being that it is contrary to our democratic tradition of making advanced education generally available to all, then requiring a student to prove his inability to absorb it by failing, rather than first requiring him to prove that he is able to absorb it.

This fence-building idea also runs into the very practical question of how long many parents will submit to increased

³ S. B. Gould, "The Challenge," in "Some College Presidents Discuss the Rising Tide," *Educational Record*, XXXVI (1955), 205.

taxes for higher education if their children are to be denied the opportunity of receiving it.

Others have suggested that the number of two-year "community colleges" be increased to absorb part of the load.⁴ Still others propose the greater utilization of adult education programs.⁵ Some believe that, "despite the fact that we will meet these needs . . . the effort will result largely in giving more people more bad education."⁶

In general, all these proposals are efforts to cope with the enrollment problem as it affects the undergraduate colleges. The graduate schools are still further removed from the shot and shell, and fewer proposed solutions have come from this quarter than any other.

However, it is the course the graduate schools pursue which will have by far the greatest effect upon our academic research libraries, maintained primarily to support graduate programs of instruction and other research. It is therefore imperative that these libraries anticipate as far ahead as possible any changes in graduate instruction which would affect their policies, especially in acquisition.

One possible solution on the graduate level, still very tentative but eyed with increasing interest of late, would raise much hob with the *status quo* of university research libraries. This proposal may be summarized by the word "specialization."

Except for a few years toward the end of the nineteenth century, when the land-grant college, with its attendant vocational influence, was in full growth, specialization has been almost a dirty word in academic circles in the United States. It is a concept in direct opposition to the Renaissance ideal of the universal man, an

ideal nurtured in the humanistic tradition, receiving new impetus from the general education movement of this century, and inherent in the word "University" itself.

Talk of specialization has usually been disguised by euphemistically referring to it as "cooperation," a verbal gymnastic at which both educators and librarians have been proficient. A glance through *Library Literature* and the *Education Index* shows many more articles listed under cooperation than under specialization. However, another glance through the articles themselves shows that many are actually discussions of specialization projects.

The anathema attached to the word "specialization" has come understandably from an abhorrence of the overspecialized man, a much-maligned but very necessary phenomenon of the twentieth century.

However, this objection can hardly apply to the present discussion or be allowed as a valid objection to possible specialization programs. It is aimed principally at the specialization *within* the curriculum which produces the overspecialized man, while the proposal under discussion deals with specialization *among* curricula and the universities administering them. Stated in its simplest terms, it calls for a lessening of the competition among universities which forces them to try to cover as many fields of graduate instruction as possible.

Despite all the objections to it, academic authorities have realized for many years that some form of specialization is necessary. As early as 1913, at the conference of the Association of American Universities, Dean Guy Stanton Ford asked if it is "wise or necessary or possible for all Universities to be all things to all advanced students."⁷

⁴ Frederick deW. Bolman, Jr., "Signs of Change in Higher Education," *Journal of Higher Education*, XXVI (1955), 252.

⁵ Edward B. Olds, "How Adult Education Can Help in Meeting the Higher Education Needs of the Rising College-Age Population," *Educational Record*, XXXVI (1955), 229-39.

⁶ Victor L. Butterfield, "Dangers of Expansion," in "College Presidents Discuss the Rising Tide," *Educational Record*, XXXVI (1955), 207.

⁷ "The Library and the Graduate School," *Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the Association of American Universities*, XV (1913), 38-46, as quoted by Edwin E. Williams in "Library Cooperation and Specialization," *Library Quarterly*, XXV (1955), 60.

At the 1923 AAU meeting, Dean Ralph Hayward Keniston, taking notice of the increasing growth of graduate studies unaccompanied by any definite plan, suggested that "the Association appoint a committee whose duty it should be to secure from the several members of the Association a statement of the fields of graduate instruction to which that university intended to devote its major attention."⁸

Many other highly placed academic voices have advocated some form of specialization among graduate schools. But, as Edwin E. Williams points out in the article cited above, there has been much talk but little action. The spirit of the gridiron seems to have permeated the entire campus, and vigorous competition is carried on among universities and their libraries. School enrollments and library holdings have sometimes been rung up on an imaginary scoreboard to attract students, scholars and researchers in a manner often very similar to athletic recruiting.

Competition may foster achievement in certain fields, but the "present tendency to be all things to all men is intellectually destructive."⁹ The real loser in such academic battles has been the total research potential of the nation.

Past failures to effect any workable specialization agreements have been due chiefly to the lack of a catalyst to speed such action. As one college president has said, "Our colleges and universities have sometimes indicated by their deeds that they are content to drift along, distributing the mass of knowledge that they have accumulated and guarded over the years, rather than to climb boldly among the treacherous cliffs of contemporary problems."¹⁰

Specialization was desirable in the past

⁸ "Co-operation among Universities in the Development of Different Departments of Study," *Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the Association of American Universities*, XXVI (1924), 46-51, as quoted by Edwin E. Williams, *loc. cit.*

⁹ Rice Estes, "Implications of Current Educational Trends for Library Service," *Special Libraries*, XLI (1950), 164.

¹⁰ Gould, *loc. cit.*

in order to unite the participating universities in working toward the common goal of increasing the nation's research facilities. But it was desirable only, not imperative. The coming pressure of increased enrollments could well be the force which makes it imperative.

A pilot program in specialization, watched with increasing interest by universities and their libraries across the nation, was initiated by the Conference of Southern Governors of 1947 and has been carried out by the Southern Regional Education Board.

The southern states, realizing their relative paucity of advanced educational facilities, set up a cooperative program which assigned certain subjects to schools already strong in those subjects. A central educational fund, formed from assessments upon the participating states, was then used to help finance out-of-state graduate students wishing to attend these schools for work in their specialty. Essentially, it was the inability of individual state institutions to meet the demand upon them for advanced educational facilities which forced the southern states into their specialization agreement.

It would be a rash educator indeed today who would state unequivocally that the institutions of his own state will be able to meet the demands which will be made upon them in the next twenty years. Although perhaps in a better position than their southern neighbors, the universities of the rest of the nation may soon be faced with the same inability. Subject specialization agreements are one solution they may investigate closely.

Such an investigation is already being made at the grass roots. One concrete result has been an interstate compact for higher education signed by eleven western states which emulates the example of the South to a certain extent. Much attention was given to specialization by libraries and universities at the Monticello Conference of the Association of Re-

search Libraries.¹¹ This conference laid the groundwork for a study of research library problems by the Association of American Universities, a study which will focus further and highly authoritative attention on specialization.

What implications do increased enrollments and the possibility of specialization agreements hold for university libraries? They are many, and some are frightening. Only a few of the most obvious can be discussed here.

For one thing, the libraries will be faced with a hydra-headed growth problem. The problem of book collection growth has been with us for years and has been the subject of many dramatizations from the academic library ranks. Fremont Rider has pictured libraries of the future containing long miles of shelves and acres of catalog trays. Keyes Metcalf has pointed out that universities may have to drop a professor a year to compensate for library growth.

These writings and others have called much attention to the problem, but as yet no universally satisfactory solutions have been forthcoming, and the disturbing thought is that these predictions have necessarily been based on past growth. Increasing population and school enrollments may render them obsolete. Although there is not necessarily a direct connection between enrollments and the size of book collections, in the past collections have increased geometrically while enrollments have increased at a much slower rate, arithmetically at worst.

In any event, in the near future, along with the problem of where to put the books, university libraries must find a place to put the students. Greater development of photo-reduction processes may help relieve some of the pressure on stack space, but students cannot undergo the same reduction. Seemingly, the only solution here will be greatly increased space for reading rooms.

¹¹ Edwin E. Williams, ed., *Problems and Prospects of the Research Library* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1955).

More students will also strain already overtaxed library services and will intensify the pull exerted in every research library between services and resources, perhaps eventually driving the advocates of increased services from the field.

Specialization, should it come in some form, would have an equal or even greater effect on university libraries. To a certain extent specialized acquisition programs are already in effect, in that each library is usually expected to buy heavily in those areas where the graduate instruction of the university is strongest. But the specter of far-reaching subject specialization agreements must haunt every university library administration trying to formulate long-range acquisition plans.

Perhaps it should be emphasized here that specialization would materially affect only the large research libraries which exist primarily to service graduate programs of instruction and faculty research. The undergraduate curriculum must cover a recognized range of subjects, and the total number of books and other materials necessary to support it should remain fairly constant.

One possible result of the enrollment pressure, however, may be to drive a deeper wedge between undergraduate and graduate programs, forcing one to become even more general and the other to become more and more specialized. The pressure could force many universities which still try to maintain a balance between graduate and undergraduate instruction to follow one road or the other, a development which would have a profound effect upon their libraries.

Academic librarians generally have been credited with a willingness to go further along the road toward specialization, or cooperation, if you will, than their administrations will allow. Regional library and bibliographic centers, the Farmington Plan, and local agreements to specialize, among many other manifestations, indicate this willingness.

Yet librarians usually have tended to

criticize themselves for failure to formulate even more far-reaching and effective cooperative plans. Much of the blame should be laid at other doors. As George Alan Works pointed out in 1924: "An arrangement of this type [of specialization] lies beyond the power of librarians. It is a problem for trustees, administrative officers, and faculty members. It means that most institutions will have to make a choice between mediocrity of work in a wide range of subjects and a relatively high type of research in a limited number of fields."¹²

"They [librarians] can argue plausibly that they have gone about as far as they can on their own."¹³ This willingness to cooperate or specialize stems from a desire to increase the resources of the region and nation by relieving libraries of the necessity of duplicating acquisitions of neighboring institutions. It was forced upon them by the great increase of printed and other material necessary for research. If this method of meeting a growth problem has been operative among libraries, there is reason to believe that it may also appeal to university administrations now that they are faced with a growth problem of similar proportions.

"The answer to the ever-growing prob-

¹² George Alan Works, *College and University Library Problems* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1927), p.54.

¹³ Williams, *op. cit.*, p.59.

lem of research materials is more cooperation between libraries."¹⁴ Is the answer to the ever-growing enrollment problem more cooperation, meaning specialization, among universities? No one can say at this time, but whether or not universities do in the end turn to some form of specialization, the possibility of such an eventuality cannot be ignored. Specialization could become a Trojan horse unless its approach is spotted from a distance of several years. Universities could decide to specialize in certain subjects and de-emphasize others, then adjust their facilities accordingly at a much faster pace than their libraries could follow in their acquisition programs. Therefore it will be imperative that library administrations recognize the earliest indications of a budding specialization movement and the direction which it will take. In the past librarians have sometimes been among the last, not the first, to learn of changes. The accomplishment of this feat of prescience may call for such cloak and dagger operations as were employed at the University of California,¹⁵ but it must be done. Otherwise our large university libraries may one day find their present catch-all acquisition policies reversed from above and directed along narrower channels.

¹⁴ Estes, *op. cit.*, p.165.

¹⁵ M. A. Milczewski, "Cloak and Dagger in University Library Administration," *CRL*, XIII (1952), 117.

Rare Book Manual

A manual of principles and practices in rare book libraries and collections is in the process of compilation by the ACRL Committee of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections. The committee seeks suggestions and advice especially from potential readers and users of such a manual. Please communicate with the editor of the manual, Mr. H. Richard Archer, Librarian, The Lakeside Press, 350 East 22nd St., Chicago 16, Illinois by December 15, 1956.

Weeding and Discarding

If any librarian is using a weeding or discarding system (including the disposal of withdrawn items), the details of which have not been published, would he please report his experience to Howard F. McGaw, Director of Libraries, University of Houston, Houston 4, Texas. The material will be examined with a view towards its possible inclusion in a monograph on weeding to be completed in the winter of 1956/57.