

Private University Libraries and a National Information Policy

The private university library's role in a proposed national library program is described. The contributions and resources that the library can bring to the program, the financial problems associated with participation, and the various sources of support are reviewed. Several options are identified as means to fund the program and the difficulties with each are described. Foundations, federal funding, and the private sector are identified as possible sources. The role of the Midwestern libraries through the consortium MIDLNET is also discussed.

THE ORIGINAL purpose of a White House conference was to gather together those people who are best qualified to advise the president on a complex issue; the original purpose of a commission was to bring disciplined and superior intelligences together to study and agonize over a complex problem. In both cases, serious, objective, dispassionate investigation was thought to provide the guidelines needed for the making of sensible national policy. . . . No one who has ever participated in one of these foolish tent shows thinks there is the slightest chance of any intelligent contribution to national policy emerging from it."¹

If this statement, which recently appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* by syndicated columnist Andrew Greeley under the title, "Commissions of Absurdities," is correct in any sense, it would be best if the reader stopped here to embark on more important matters. As one reads the report of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science and the documents on a variety of issues prepared for the commission, the evidence is clear that disciplined and intelligent individuals were

brought together to study and agonize over the complex problem of designing a national library program, which, when fully implemented, will serve all the citizens of this country.

The commission's goals and objectives are ambitious, almost global in concept, with broad appeal to almost every possible audience, yet enunciated with a view that programs must be affordable, although requiring some governmental support; evolutionary and realistic, while striving for the ideal; and that those projects yielding the greatest return over the short run will be supported.

CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

For the many communities that have reacted to the commission's reports and those others who will participate in the statewide conferences, it is understood that, while the goal of creating a national library program is central to all communities, there is a wide and diverse set of characteristics for each participating community, with its specialized and unique information requirements that must be incorporated into the final design and the operation of the national library program.

One community, the private university library, which views itself as a contributor

John P. McGowan is university librarian, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

and participant, will need to define with some degree of precision exactly what it will contribute and how it will participate, such that there will be mutual gains for its users and those others noted in the commission's programs. For many private universities, straining to keep a balanced budget, dedicated to providing quality education, and supporting research, such definitions of roles are clearly difficult to make at this time.

Many of these institutions must support themselves through tuition, the yield from shrinking endowments, gifts, and aid from foundations and federal agencies. To attract the most gifted students they make available a host of scholarships and aid programs. Although there has been no real or substantial growth in their library budgets, there has been a general unwillingness on the part of many faculty to reduce the library budget, since they regard the library as absolutely central to their scholarship and research.

Extending the capability of the library through cooperative programs will be received with enthusiasm by faculty and university administrators if it can be demonstrated that services and collections will not be impaired. This is very unlikely, since many university libraries located in urban settings have always rendered a very high level of reference services to residents of the community and neighboring colleges.

Some form of assistance or incentives on a recurring basis will be needed if there is to be any expansion of these services. There is some reservation on the part of university administrators that state funding for this type of effort and others proposed by the commission may not be always available or even the most reliable source. Private universities find it difficult to develop long-standing and mutually advantageous relationships with state agencies.

STATE VS. FEDERAL FUNDING

In a recent study conducted by Northwestern University under a grant from the National Science Foundation on this topic of state funding, it was reported:

Increased state sponsorship is a mixed blessing for higher education. While allowing the education institution an opportunity to participate in the identification and solution of problems of local

concern, there are increased administrative difficulties. Not the least of these is the recovery of indirect costs. . . . the state legislature re-appropriates most funds coming to it from federal sources. The result of this re-appropriation process is that funds from DHEW (and presumably other federal sources) lose their "federal" character. Following re-appropriation by the legislature, these funds are regarded as belonging to the state and its various agencies. While this view may or may not be correct in itself, it has the effect of obscuring such federal regulations as those just cited regarding the recovery of indirect costs at federally negotiated level. In addition, the re-appropriation process makes it practically impossible to identify, after the fact, which state agency expenditures are ultimately of federal origin and which are not.

The current situation regarding the recovery of indirect costs from state agencies is clearly not favorable to higher education institutions. Because indirect costs are not recovered, the institution is forced to subsidize a project, a subsidy which is ultimately met through higher tuitions, decreased faculty compensation, delayed maintenance, or some combination of other strategies.²

If federal funds are to be channeled through state agencies as proposed by the commission, it is likely that private universities may not be the recipients of this aid in any measurable amount and may be restricted in what they can do for their local communities.

This support, which in the past has come primarily from federal agencies and foundations, has been an important factor in keeping many of these universities vital and innovative. In recent years this support has been substantially diminished. Graduate education and research have been severely affected by these changes in the funding patterns.

In a recent report, *Research Universities and the National Interest: A Report from Fifteen University Presidents*, there appears a series of recommendations calling for increased support to education, research, and the research library community. The private universities, as much as they would like to maintain a high degree of independence, need the support and assistance of the federal government to carry out their programs. The government is equally in need of the expertise that research universities can offer. However, as stated in the report, "it is desirable to maintain a degree of de-

centralization in the authority to make decisions about basic research."³

A SPECIAL RESOURCE

It is clear that the libraries of these institutions need support at various levels and, like their parent institution, have an unusual array of resources to contribute to the national program—unique collections, expert staff, and a thorough understanding of the scholarly and research process and the machinery and the resources necessary to maintain it. Many of these private university libraries have also pioneered in the application of computer technology to library operations, developed sophisticated and efficient techniques for servicing their students and faculty, and, because of their relative freedom from regulation, have been able to try various innovative approaches to their operations.

At some point in the future, when the history of this period is recorded, many of the accomplishments will be credited to the universities in the private sector. The commission affords these universities the opportunity to continue with these contributions and recommends that means be found to sustain the most promising ventures that will optimize accessibility to the nation's collections.

One means to achieve this objective is to identify new ways to deploy and use the special talent that resides in each library, the experts in collection development, bibliographers, and those individuals with advanced training who have recently entered the library profession. Some formal way to share the special knowledge that these individuals have of their collections with their colleagues and faculty in other institutions needs to be explored, perhaps some type of "knowledge resource" network. The programs of many libraries can be enriched, collections more fully exploited, and service enhanced if ways are found to properly use this talent.

IMPEDIMENTS AND BURDENS

In any enterprise as ambitious as the one the commission is advocating, the possibility for identifying the incorrect solution or the least workable model is very high. Some years ago a Nobel laureat, in an address to

an audience of librarians and information scientists, stated that once the right problem has been identified the solution will readily be found.

The commission has identified the right problem. It sees the problem for university and research libraries as one of sharing imbalances, the inability to maintain and preserve and develop collections, various impediments to innovative and experimental collective activities, and insufficient funds to provide services to a wider clientele and sustenance to a number of select collections. These maladies are endemic to all university libraries. The disease will not kill the patient but, unchecked, will weaken and sap its vitality and ultimately leave it crippled. The private university is very susceptible.

The cure the commission prescribes is more federal and state assistance. In some cases the cure may be worse than the disease. Federal and state funding needs to be accepted with the full understanding that it will not encumber or change the character or primary mission of the university, service to its own student body and faculty.

If one is to carry this awkward analogy one step further, there is the matter of the administration and the level of the dosage that the patient can take without becoming addicted. It must be administered in such a way that it does not place an undue burden on the recipient of the aid.

A recent example: Under Title II-C of the Higher Education Act, Strengthening Research Library Resources, some 100 applications were received for which twenty grants were made. Each of the participating libraries and institutions diverted sizable resources to review guidelines and prepare and write proposals, and a host of reviewers were assembled to critique the proposals under a peer review process. Out of the twenty grants that were to be made, there was at the outset a general awareness that certain institutions would very likely receive funding. Under this assumption there were perhaps no more than fifteen grants available to the 100 or so libraries that submitted proposals. Although there is no evidence to support this statement, it is likely that upwards of a half-million to a million dollars in man and woman hours may have been spent on this effort.

NEW APPROACHES

A more efficient process must be found. For the small to moderate size university library with limited staff and expertise in proposal preparation the process is inequitable. In the recommendations appearing in the *Research Universities and the National Interest* it is stated:

We recommend that the Library of Congress explore with the country's leading learned societies and research-library organizations the possibility of establishing a permanent body to assess the quality of national resources, to promote action by responsible agencies, and to help shape national policies.⁴

Such a functioning, nonpartisan body with the commission's support might appoint boards of inquiry who could, as one of their duties, assess need, define optimum yield against support levels, and make recommendations as to how and where to allocate governmental funding. If the process were open and visible, the national library program would be better served.

Given the present mood of the country, recipients of grants, particularly the private university library sector, should not rely on any sustaining support for their operations or add on activities to carry out the commission's goals. They may need to break the habit very quickly.

As unattractive as it is to many libraries, users' fees and more reliance on the private sector may be needed. At those universities where there is a sizable amount of contract work, researchers should be encouraged to include in their applications support for special services supplied by their libraries. Many applications contain support for computer services, few for library services.

The network statements in the commission's report are in general accord with the views held by many individuals knowledgeable in the field. If the network system architecture can accommodate the bibliographic apparatus to identify and access collections, it will bring the resources of more libraries to a larger population and may ultimately lead to a more rational means of developing collections on a national level.

Until such time as this is accomplished, which at the present rate of progress may be several decades, means should be found

to support scholarly travel to use specific library collections that have been identified as national resources.

MIDLNET

The network objectives advocated in the commission report stress the need for standards, cohesiveness, experiments with different modes of technology, and a support for statewide networks. In the Midwest, where there are many strong statewide networks, a high level of expertise in computer technology, and rich multistate resources, there is some sentiment on the part of many libraries that a single state may be too small a building block for a network structure.

The creation of MIDLNET under the auspices of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation was formulated with a view that a multistate network could complement and enhance state networks and provide the basis for building a regional data base. The Midwest institutions, with their strong tendencies for independence and self-sufficiency, were also concerned that this important region of the United States needed stronger representation in the inner councils where national library policy was being discussed and also an opportunity to have an equitable share of the funding for its cooperative activities. To date some of these goals have been realized.

The regional data base is a longer range goal. However, MIDLNET, with the assistance of members of the University of Chicago library and eight other libraries in the region, is prepared, if sufficient support can be found, to take the first step toward that objective. After the completion of a systems and specifications study of the eight participating institutions, some operational activities employing the library data management system of the University of Chicago through MIDLNET could start in a year. The objective is to provide a next generation prototype operation that will serve the region, access other regional networks, and look toward the Library of Congress as the library of last resort.

If one looks at network development in the United States, it appears as a large unfinished mosaic, with many of the pieces still to be discovered for placement in the

array. The development of yet another network may appear to add to the disarray and complicate the orderly process of creating the national library network. Perhaps any undertaking as ambitious as this can never

be orderly or operate under a systematic plan. The best that may be hoped for is that out of the disarray will come order, and out of diversity of approach to the network problem will come progress.

REFERENCES

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2. Charles H. Seibert, "Improvement of Research Management Relationships between State Governments and the Higher Educational Community," A research study supported by grant #NM44247 from the National Science Foundation Research Management Improvement Program, July 1974 through August 1977, p.2, 15, 20, 21.
3. *Research Universities and the National Interest: A Report from Fifteen University Presidents* (New York: Ford Foundation, 1978), p.58.
4. *Ibid.*, p.100.