BEVERLY P. LYNCH

The Changing Environment of Academic Libraries

Since 1910 academic libraries have been essential resources to the colleges and universities they serve. These libraries have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to adapt to an everchanging environment. It may be time now for academic libraries to define and shape the environment as well as adapt and respond to it.

LIBRARIES serving institutions of higher education display an extraordinary sensitivity to conditions around them and a remarkable ability to adapt and change over time. Since the turn of the century, academic librarians have designed patterns of decision-making and organizational structures that have enabled the libraries to exist within and respond to higher education's changing environment.

Assessments of the academic library's environment appear regularly in the library literature. Arthur McAnally and Robert Downs, in their provocative article, "The Changing Role of Directors of University Libraries,"[1] suggest pessimistically that the university library of the 1960s was unable to cope with the enormous expansion that occurred within the university during that time; the role of the library was reduced and its power diminished as the management patterns within the university changed; the expansion and fragmentation of knowledge influenced university curricula and design, and these patterns directly influenced the university library in terms of staffing patterns, responsibilities, and decision making. Yet academic libraries survived the 1960s and emerged even stronger in the 1970s. Libraries were able to adapt to the changes occurring in higher education in the expansionist era.

During the first annual conference sponsored by the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago, librarians were reminded that "the library is part of society as a whole and does not in any sense exist in a vacuum, nor does it pursue its own course isolated from the happenings around it."[2] In 1960 at the Graduate Library School's twenty-fifth conference, it was assumed that library development is influenced by forces immensely wider than the librarian's professional concerns.[3]

PRESENT TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In 1977 librarians are aware of trends in higher education that influence directly the nature of materials housed in the library, the use of the library, and the kinds and extent of services provided by the library: declining SAT scores, grade inflation, elimination of even mild requirements of a "core" of instruction, reforms in the curriculum that involve less reading and writing. To ensure strong academic libraries in the 1980s, librarians must understand the environment in which they work and attempt to identify trends of importance to which they must respond.

The decline in the number of books published or the increase in number of scientific journals published affect the nature of the library's collections. Several chemists spoke to this point in a letter published in

Beverly P. Lynch is university librarian, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. *This article is based on an address delivered at a meeting of the College Libraries Section of ACRL on June 18, 1977, at the Annual Conference of the American Library Association in Detroit.*

College & Research Libraries a few years ago. The chemists, concerned about the proliferation of journals in chemistry, urged librarians to resist buying journals that were published to exploit the library market.[4]

Although librarians may be in agreement with these scientists, many would be hard pressed not to make those new journals available to students and faculty members in one way or another. A few librarians have begun to speak of these matters and to alert colleagues to the potential impact of no-growth budgets.[5]

The abilities of college students, as evidenced by average scores on entrance examinations and reading skills, influence library programs. Recently the chancellor of a major urban university was quoted as saying that 10 percent of the freshmen enrolling in that university could read no better than the average eighth-grader. As dismal as this commentary is, the chancellor further reported that, of those freshmen who were reading at the sixth- to eighth-grade level, many had graduated in the top half of their high school class.[6] Few librarians have come to grips with the needs of this segment of the student population.

One statistic alone may reveal more of the future of academic library service than any other: The average freshman enrolling in college today comes with an experience of 15,000 hours of television viewing. That freshman has spent only 12,000 hours in the classroom. How many hours has that freshman spent in reading? One scarcely dares speculate. How will that freshman cope with the book oriented library still serving most colleges and universities? How will the library respond with service programs for this student? Only the future will tell.

Between 1870 and 1910 extraordinary changes occurred in American higher education. Two new purposes, research and service, were added to the fundamental purpose of education. At the end of this remarkable forty-year period, the educational style in the college classroom had changed from recitation to lecture and seminar. Faculty members were skilled specialists instead of generalists. The curriculum had expanded to include many specialized courses that students could elect instead of just a small core of courses that were required. Departmental structures were designed, and professional education was formalized. And the library was in place as an essential resource of the college.

The knowledge, skills, and abilities of librarians grew and developed as the library became essential to the educational mission of the college. Always with more demands upon the library than there were resources, librarians turned to the early management literature seeking techniques that would help increase the efficiency of library operations while holding down operating costs. Few librarians remember the poverty years. It has only been since the end of World War II that higher education and the libraries within it moved from a state of genteel poverty to a state of modest affluence.

Economic Concerns[7]

We cannot ignore the fact that genteel poverty is back. As book and journal prices escalate, personnel costs rise, losses from theft and mutilation increase, libraries and the colleges and universities they serve face declining budgetary support.

From the beginning colleges and universities have been funded from three general sources: tuition and other charges to students, governmental support, and philanthropy. These sources have had a differing impact upon the various institutions. Seldom have they provided the level of support that colleges and universities thought they needed. In 1950 the total operating income available to higher education in the U.S. was $2.3 billion. In 1971 it was nearly $25 billion.

Much of this increase came from expansion, expansion in enrollments in graduate and professional programs, expansion in student aid, expansion in sponsored research and public service projects, and increases in auxiliary services, particularly those that deal with the housing and feeding of students. Increases in student tuition and increases in the support of faculty salaries provided by state governments also provided much of the new money.

Despite this substantial increase in total dollars, the pattern of expenditure during this period remained quite stable: 80 percent assigned to educational and general (E

& G) activities; 20 percent assigned to auxiliary enterprises and hospitals. Within E & G activities, 70–73 percent supported the primary programs of instruction, research, public service, and student aid. Thirty percent in 1950 and 27 percent in 1971 went into those support programs that include libraries. Significantly, support of libraries actually may have declined in terms of the overall percentage of total dollars just during the period considered to be the most affluent for libraries.

In the coming years the academic library will be influenced greatly by the way monies are distributed between the primary programs of the campus and the support programs. A 70–30 distribution probably will not be possible to maintain. Higher energy costs, higher costs in student health services, federally imposed requirements relating to affirmative action, unemployment compensation, aging physical facilities, as well as the higher costs of library materials will bring pressures for greater aid for the supportive services.

Since total dollars probably will not increase, monies for support programs will have to come out of primary program monies. Library budgets will remain vulnerable. Library managers will be required to produce sound and valid justifications, and those justifications will be based upon measures of performance. There will be pressure to preserve materials budgets and to decrease the costs assigned to salaries and wages.

Libraries historically have used E & G monies to compare library budgets and to argue the case for more funds. The *Standards for College Libraries*[8] state a library's budget should not fall below 6 percent of the institution's total E & G expenditures. The percentage figure is a useful measure of comparative support; but as the percentage erodes, we will see efforts to change the base of comparison.

Historically, the smaller the institution the greater the support costs. Independent colleges with enrollments of under 2,500 students require 40 percent of the E & G for support services. These colleges will experience grave difficulties in maintaining present levels of library support, although all libraries will be hardpressed.

The Commuting Student

The development and expansion of the public sector of higher education that took place during the 1960s has already influenced the patterns of higher education. The close proximity of colleges and universities to potential students and the rising costs of tuition have brought about a commuting student body and faculty instead of a residential one. Many states now have low-cost colleges within commuting distance of 95 percent of the population.

Most elements of academic library service have been designed for the traditional residential campus. The present interlibrary loan system, for instance, brings the book to the borrower's campus. An interlibrary loan system designed to serve a commuting community in an urban setting may well seek to identify materials needed by a student or faculty member that are held in a library—whether public, academic, or special—closest to the person's home. Once the item is identified, the librarian will make arrangements for the borrower to use the materials in the lending library. In Illinois a computerized circulation system is being designed that has this kind of service as its base.

Reciprocal borrowing agreements are emerging or are already in place in many areas serving commuter campuses. Such arrangements will directly influence library collections, programs of service, and organizational arrangements.

Students, particularly undergraduate students, generally use and need the library in a very quick time frame. Librarians, in order to provide satisfactory service to a commuting population, must be more sensitive than usual to this time element. The student may be on campus three hours a day and have only thirty minutes of free time during those hours, that is, time to get to the library, identify what is needed, and then retrieve the material. If there is no success in this endeavor, it is likely that the student will use the precious, on-campus time in activities other than library-related ones.

Methods of decision-making, comfortably in place in many libraries, have been designed and developed within the environ-

ment of residential campus communities where abundant opportunities exist for the building of consensus before decisions are made. The commuter campus provides few opportunities for those informal discussions that help to build consensus. Decision-making patterns already are changing. In the transition, confrontation rather than consensus will be common. Seldom will the cause of confrontation be understood.

The Undergraduate Curriculum

Few colleges or universities and few libraries within them define their goals and objectives with any precision, despite the direction given by those who say that without carefully defined goals and objectives an institution cannot evaluate its performance, allocate its resources wisely, plan for the future, motivate its members, or justify its existence.

Much has been written about the undergraduate curriculum. Rarely described is the larger goal the student should reach during the four undergraduate years.

Knowledge has expanded dramatically during the last forty years, yet undergraduate education still is designed to introduce a student to all disciplines in a way that will produce the broadly educated whole man or woman. A major task for colleges is to identify those bodies of knowledge that are important and then develop ways to present these subjects effectively and in some depth to those students who do not plan a major or advanced study in those fields.

A major task for librarians is to participate effectively in this enterprise and to introduce the treasures of the library in such a way that students will use libraries effectively throughout their lives. Librarians, through library skills programs and programs of bibliographic instruction, have identified objectives and designed programs to meet those objectives. Often these are frustrating endeavors, for the college itself has not recognized or articulated the goal or objective the library program is designed to achieve.

By implementing its programs through courses taught in the various disciplines, the library has been unable to reach more than a small minority of the student body. By and large, the library has been content with its programs of support to the instructional program. The library has not been able to design programs of its own that will reach the majority of the student body.

Shaping the Environment

Libraries have adapted to the environment defined by the college or university. There may be opportunity now for the library to participate in the definition of the environment and design programs and services to its definition. The library, as well as any other academic unit, can articulate the goals and objectives central to undergraduate education. "Helping students acquire a variety of basic intellectual skills and habits of thought" clearly is a responsible objective of undergraduate education. The library, by defining such an objective and designing programs to meet that objective, may be able to influence and shape the environment of the college as well as respond to the environment.

Allan Bloom, in a very pessimistic article entitled "The Failure of the University," says:

> Very simply put, young Americans no longer like to read, and they do not do so. There are no fundamental books which form them, through which they see the world and educate their vision. To the extent they use books, it is because school requires them to do so, or it is for the sake of information. Books are not a source of pleasure, nor would many students imagine that old books could contain the answers to the problems that most concern them. The university does not represent a community the bonds of which are constituted by a shared literary heritage, and friendships are not formed by the common study of the important issues.

Dr. Bloom goes on to describe the question posed by two professors at Cornell University to the president of that institution:

> If we prove to you that an Arts and Sciences student can now receive a B.A. degree at Cornell, and thus be presumed to have acquired a liberal education, without having been required to read a line of Plato, the Bible, Shakespeare, Marx or Einstein, would you consider this to be evidence that there is a crisis in education at Cornell?[9]

If Bloom's assessment is an accurate one, it may be time for the academic library to do more than respond to its environment. By developing student programs and serv-

ices that meet broad goals and objectives of undergraduate education, the library can shape the direction of American higher education in a very direct way.

The environment of the academic library is an ever-changing one. The library has demonstrated its ability to meet the environment and adapt to it. It may be time now for the library not only to demonstrate its adaptability but to demonstrate its ability to define and to shape the environment in which it works.

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