"Research" is rapidly becoming one of the hardest-working words in our contemporary vocabulary. In our daily references to research we may mean anything—from the assignment a second grader carries home from school to a multimillion dollar project relating to our national defense effort. Yet a biochemist doing fundamental research in cell growth would probably be quite unhappy at calling either of these activities research, because neither is primarily concerned with the discovery of new facts at the growing tip of knowledge.

Turning to Webster for some much needed help, we find research defined as: "1. a careful search; a close searching. 2. studious inquiry; usually critical and exhaustive investigation or experimentation having for its aim the revision of accepted conclusions, in the light of newly discovered facts." Certainly we are given a great deal of latitude here, and for our purposes the term "studious inquiry" would seem to serve well enough.

Library research, by the nature of the questions that it concerns itself with, falls largely in the realm of applied research. And who is to say where a survey leaves off and research begins? For the purposes of this discussion, then, we shall not exclude studious inquiries of any kind, whether they involve a survey, a study, or a demonstration as the vehicle of research.

Why Library Research?

In some respects the institution of research in our times is very much like the institution of motherhood. Even if one were against it, he would scarcely dare admit it. I am sure, however, that the case for library research will stand

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In *A National Plan for Public Library Service* Carleton Joeckel and Amy Winslow have this to say:

Research is an indispensable foundation for library planning and for the development of library services. It identifies needs and discovers methods of meeting them. It evaluates the results achieved by library programs. Library objectives, the framework of organization, techniques, service procedures—in determining all of these, research is useful and essential.

It may often seem to the library administrator, when he is desperate for the means to provide basic library materials, that library research definitely belongs in the category of a luxury, to be pursued only after the basic library services have been taken care of with some degree of adequacy.

On the surface this makes good sense. Yet industry, which does not voluntarily spend money it does not expect to get back in one way or another, is currently spending over $10 billion a year on research and development, and even more significantly is steadily increasing the percentage of expenditures which it is pouring into research and development. (It is worth noting that this expenditure was less than half the present amount only five years ago.)

No one could feel more strongly than I that change for the mere sake of change is shoddy, extravagant, and destructive of basic social values. Constructive change, however, providing necessary adjustments to rapidly changing social forces, and employing the best social and physical inventions of the day, is not only good but necessary to effective library service. Without belittling in any way the magnificent job that libraries are doing, and fully recognizing the dramatic increase in library-related research over the past few years, we still have every evidence that vastly more emphasis should be placed on research simply in order to make minimum adjustments to the world our libraries serve.

To be more specific, I should like to suggest several research needs which grow out of conditions and pressures that are very real to us in New York State, as I am sure they are in other states. What little research we have been able to bring to bear on them serves more to convince us further of their urgency and complexity than to present final solutions.

There is, for example, a very pressing need for the development of new structures and devices for effecting cooperation among different types of libraries. The tradition of informal cooperation, which has served us so well in the past,
simply cannot cope with the exponential generation of information which is so characteristic of our times, and the attendant need to make this information readily accessible to any person, anywhere. Means must be found to systematize and formalize relationships among public, college and university, special, and even school libraries, so that these institutions may effectively share the responsibility for serving the total reference and research community, at the same time they serve their own specialized clienteles. Solutions to this highly complicated problem will come only through studies, demonstrations, and experimentation.

Another area where considerable library research is already being carried on, but where the possibilities and demands are almost limitless, is in the application of modern technology to library methods and procedures. Both in the development of new machinery to perform library functions, and in the application of devices already in use in other fields, there exist possibilities which could well revolutionize many aspects of librarianship. In most of these developments, such as, for example, the use of electronic devices for the storage and retrieval of information, libraries have had very little to do with what progress has taken place thus far, and one can easily imagine libraries as we know them being completely usurped in certain respects by information centers developed quite apart from the traditional library movement. Again, library research is the only hope for catching up with a world that needs information services so critically that it will develop its own ways of meeting the problem if libraries fail to keep up.

A third research need, very much upon us, is to evaluate our library systems in terms of their impact on library users. I am sure an evaluation would have profound implications for other states, as it certainly would for New York State. We know what library systems do for member libraries, and to the extent that they offer direct services we know a little of what systems do for users, but we are a long way from having the part of the story we most need.

You do not have to be told that one of the greatest obstacles to such an evaluation of the actual use which people make of libraries is the lack of even the most elementary units of measure for this purpose. We need desperately to devise ways of measuring both the quantity and the quality of library use--for establishing costs in connection with contract services, for comparing services, for measuring growth, for justifying budgets, and for many other purposes. We are much too prone to measure our libraries in terms of per capita expenditures, or
number of trained staff, or other units which are truly only means for serving users, rather than getting down to the essential business of measuring their actual use by people.

The Nature of Research

If it were necessary to labor further the case for research, each of the problems outlined here could easily be subdivided into other distinct and urgent research projects, and each of these in turn would suggest others. I think, however, it would be more useful to share with you now two or three observations about the nature of library research which have a bearing on the proposals I shall presently make.

I should like to submit, first, that research is much more than surveys or questionnaires, whose only purpose can be to gather factual data. Most of us have firmly fixed in our minds an image of the research worker in his laboratory, surrounded by test tubes, computers, and blackboards full of complicated mathematical formulas. Happily, in real life the most productive kind of library research often occurs simply as an imaginative reexamination of existing knowledge. The genius of the true research worker is his ability to define his problem, and to interpret meanings and see relationships in the material available to him. His best tool in this kind of studious inquiry is an imagination that is informed and disciplined, but essentially creative. I am sure, for example, that some of the most significant standards that appear in the still exciting and tremendously important Public Library Service, published by the ALA in 1956, were arrived at through a combination of quite commonplace information, simple arithmetic, and again, imagination.

If imagination is as important to research as I think it is, it follows that administrative and operational pressures are the enemies of creative research. One of the best reasons for setting up a research project may be to make it possible for some person or persons to be divorced from daily operational pressures in order to apply themselves creatively to a problem and stay with it until a good answer is found. As further witness to the incompatibility of research and administration, no one will ever know how many truly wonderful ideas have been wasted because they were first presented to administrators whose vision was restricted by the prospect of annoying problems in applying the ideas to their particular situations, causing them simply to discard the ideas as "impractical."

One more observation about research is in order. All applied research, and probably most fundamental research, pro-
ceeds from some kind of an assumption. If you don't think so, try setting up a research project without making some basic assumptions--assumptions that will inevitably have a critical bearing on the direction the research takes. If the assumptions make good sense the research may make good sense, but if the assumptions do not make sense it will be only an accident if the research does. No amount of data, or manipulation of data, will make up for basic errors or inadequacies in the fundamental assumptions from which the research proceeds.

Recommendations

At this point, having generalized, deplored, and admonished at considerable length, I should like to make some assumptions. I would like to assume that most of us are agreed on the following points: what we mean by library research; that library research is vitally important; that we are doing far too little library research; and that productive library research must proceed from sound and imaginative assumptions. I should then like to move on to a suggestion which is the thesis of my entire argument. In the interests of clarity I have broken this proposal into three parts, the order of which is immaterial. These are as follows:

1. The federal government could make no greater contribution to library development in the United States than to direct the major share of its efforts and resources into library research and grants for library research.

2. Since it is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to separate the problems of large libraries from small libraries, or urban libraries from rural libraries, even as it is becoming less and less feasible to separate the basic interests of public libraries from academic, special, or school libraries, the research program should concern itself with all kinds of libraries.

3. The research program should proceed from a bold overall plan, or framework of assumptions, that recognizes the essential totality of all library resources and objectives, and acknowledges the necessity for defining all library needs and functions in terms of appropriate levels of government and whatever nongovernmental agencies are involved.

The Responsibilities of the Federal Government

There are many sound and obvious reasons why library research is a natural function of the federal government. To name a few that come immediately to mind:

1. The federal government, by virtue of its overview
of libraries and library operations, and its position of national leadership and prestige, would hold a unique advantage in conducting, and especially in developing and coordinating, a national research program.

2. The federal government is large enough so that it could employ a full-time research staff. In contrast to the necessarily sporadic research efforts at other levels of government, which invariably perform research on a brinkmanship basis, this would provide a much-to-be-desired continuity. It would also mean that the staff could be persons trained in research, and free from administrative and operational pressures.

3. Generally speaking, the most successful public services are those services performed at the most appropriate and "natural" level of government. To apply this principle to the research function, a particular piece of library research usually needs to be performed only once in the United States. It is, therefore, most logical for the federal government to conduct it, and then to make the results available to all libraries to which it is pertinent.

4. Many research projects will involve a number of libraries and may necessitate the crossing of state boundaries. In these circumstances, the federal government is in the best position to conduct such projects.

5. The federal government is the central, and therefore most logical, agency to collect statistical data from libraries and to standardize these data.

6. A considerable amount of much-needed library research should involve other national and international agencies with which the federal government would be in the best position to deal.

Library research is of course presently conducted by many different agencies: the Library Services Branch of the Office of Education, the state library agencies, the library schools, the American Library Association and a few other state and regional professional associations, a number of foundations, and many individual libraries. It is healthy and proper to have this wide participation in research. Of all these agencies, however, there is most to be said for the major research responsibility resting with the federal government.

Looking at Today's Library Research

A look at library research projects financed by LSA funds serves only to bear out our earlier misgivings. There is naturally much that is worthwhile—the various state surveys in particular are resulting in programs that take cognizance of
the realities of today's needs and trends—but we are forced to admit that the total effort, looked at as a whole, is fragmentary, parochial, and inadequate.

Most significant of the research projects financed wholly or in part by LSA funds are the ten or so statewide studies of library services. Some 15 other LSA-financed studies break down roughly as follows: four on social factors influencing library development, three on aspects of public relations, two on structure and government, two on aspects of technical processing, one on finance, one on library development, one on training, and one on professional periodicals. There are, of course, other useful studies not financed by, but related to, LSA—the current ALA study of state library agencies being an outstanding example—but the story is a meager one at best.

I am sure it is fair to say that even as our thinking about libraries should reflect our research, so should our library research reflect our thinking about libraries. If this is true, I hesitate to draw the obvious parallel.

We have come now, in a very real and critical sense, to a time for meeting the great needs, and for taking the whole look. By nothing short of an effective mobilization of our total library resources can we begin to make the contribution that libraries are worthy of and that our communities and our world in turn demand from our libraries. In our approach to the problem of research we will undoubtedly have to move step by step—even dealing separately with problems of the rural and the urban, of techniques and structure—but each step must be part of a plan, not an isolated tinkering with whatever bits or pieces come to hand. We must conceive our research and draw our conclusions in the context of this plan.

I am not certain how we should go about developing this plan, or even whose responsibility it is; it would surely seem that those agencies with the broadest point of view—the ALA, the Library Services Branch, and the state agencies—should play a major role. At various stages in our library history we have taken the pains to draw such a statement of where we wanted to go and how we planned to get there. A major effort in this direction was A National Plan for Public Library Service, prepared for the ALA Committee on Postwar Planning and published by ALA in 1948. In 1956 we had the new public library standards, which are still sound and forward-looking. John Eastlick has made a much more recent contribution in his Special Report for the Federal Relations Committee of the ALA Library Administration Division, The Sixties and After. But the world is moving very fast, and for one reason

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or another all of these documents fall short of providing us with a framework for the new concepts and the direction which we need so much. We need now a truly imaginative new plan, a plan which itself is capable of growing and evolving, which both sets up the guideposts for library research and at the same time takes its directions from research.

It is my conviction that only in so doing will we carry on truly meaningful library research, or that we will realize the tremendous potential of the federal government for serving the library cause.

References


