

By GEORGE H. SABINE

# The Library in the Educational Institution<sup>1</sup>

NO ONE questions the proposition that the library occupies a central position in any educational institution, whether it be a great university, with thousands of undergraduate students and hundreds of potential scholars and scientists in its graduate school, or a small undergraduate college. The treasures of the literary arts, the knowledge of man's past and the moral and social achievements of his civilization, the accounts of discovery and of scientific investigation, are recorded and preserved for the most part in books. Education consists in no small degree in making each rising generation aware of what has been felt and thought and discovered by the generations that have preceded it, and while no really vital education can content itself merely with this task of conserving what has been done in the past, every new step that men make into the future must take its beginning from the recorded achievements of the arts and sciences.

This dependence upon the spoken and the written word is indeed the chief mark which distinguishes man from all the other creatures of the world. It is this alone which enables him to create and possess a culture. Other animals learn by observation and by imitation, but the learning of an animal, stored in the skilled adjustments of his nerves and his muscles, dies with him, and each successive generation begins again at the place where the preceding generation began and acquires in its lifetime only the

same skill that its predecessors had. Language, on the other hand, is the great repository of all the skill and learning of man's past, enabling each new generation, if it is wise, to begin where the preceding generation left off. The linguistic symbol becomes intellectual shorthand for years of labor and enables the human learner to by-pass the roundabout learning of trial and error. And though the spoken tradition was an instrument of enormous power, compared with the mental apparatus available to any nonhuman animal, its leverage was lengthened many hundred times by the invention of writing. The alphabet is perhaps some 4,000 years old, and within its lifetime is contained the history of all the great civilizations. The life of the printed book runs back for hardly half a thousand years. Without it modern science, modern government, modern social organization, and more especially modern education would be unthinkable. It is no mystery that at the center of every modern college and university stands the library.

Nevertheless, the library poses for every educational institution some very serious practical difficulties. In no small part these difficulties arise from a real embarrassment of riches. With our modern ideals of the collecting and storing of books the *ways in* are always open and the *ways out* are always closed. And since the production of books goes on at an ever increasing rate, the collection not only grows ever faster but it grows endlessly. It takes only a very elementary calculation in arithmetic to see

<sup>1</sup> Address at the library supper, Kenyon College, June 15, 1947.

that this makes an impossible situation, for if a number increases without end, no matter how slowly it increases, it must at some time exceed any limit you may wish to assign. And long before that process produces an arithmetical monstrosity, it will produce a library that no college can afford to house and keep in order. Moreover, a great portion of such a collection will at all times be obsolete. There are college libraries that contain an impressive number of volumes, but if the obsolete textbooks, for example, were subtracted, the number would shrink to very modest proportions.

### *Selective Purchasing and Cooperation*

My own experience as a teacher has been wholly in universities that aimed to support research in a great variety of subjects, and for purposes of research, especially in historical subjects, many books are needed—not to mention manuscripts—which from the point of view of undergraduate instruction are quite useless. Such libraries must number their volumes in the millions. Yet even here the problem is not solved. For if the biggest library were ten times as big as it is, it still could not contain all the books that some scholar might legitimately want to see. The day has certainly gone by—if there ever was such a day—when any library could intelligently aim at bigness or follow a policy of trying to grow equally at all points. If the library services of the country could be rationalized—which I fancy is not likely to happen—the line to be followed would be, first, selective purchasing, the development of every library upon some line of specialization appropriate to the institution of which it is a part, and second, cooperation with other libraries in a system of interlibrary loans by which out-of-the-way books might be made available when and where they are needed.

Libraries devoted primarily to research, however, are few and far between, and, I

take it, are not the subject in which this meeting is chiefly interested. At the same time I do not believe that what has been so far said has been wasted. The problem is the same everywhere and in general the solution is the same everywhere—namely, a wise and far-seeing selection of purposes and a steady policy of directing one's action into channels marked out by those purposes. In these respects the great research library and the library of an undergraduate college conform to the same principle. Any library, wherever and whatever it is, is a service institution and its activities ought to correspond to the service it is intended to render and the needs of the public which it serves. In this respect the undergraduate college and its library must jointly make up their minds what they intend to do and how best to do it. The college must decide what it means to teach, where the emphasis of its teaching falls, what kind of students it has, and what it means to make of them. Then the library has to be planned with reference to these purposes of the college. There is no way to decide what kind of library is needed, how big it must be, where it must be strong, and where it dares to be weak, until one knows who will want to use the library and for what. The first principle is that any library must reflect the educational purposes of the college of which it is a part.

### *Need Well-Selected Books*

It is obvious that what undergraduates need is not many books but well-selected books. And while every college will follow its own special bent in the selection, there are two rules that will be applicable everywhere. Education has always two sides: it makes students aware of the achievements of the culture to which they belong and it fits them to take a part in the present struggles and problems of that culture. Some workable combination of these two purposes is the object sought by any college

curriculum. This affects the library by giving it two principles of selection: it must make available good and readable editions of the classics in all the subjects that the college aims to teach, and it must provide the best of the contemporary publications even though these continually become obsolescent. Whether a college directs its teaching especially toward the humanities, or especially toward the social studies, or especially toward the sciences, it will have to make this combination of past and present. For without a present meaning the study of the classics in any subject will become antiquarian or scholastic. But without the historical aspects of a subject its present problems have no roots.

Another rule for the library of an undergraduate college is provided by the fact that it aims not merely to offer a service to persons who are already readers but also to make readers out of boys who have not yet formed the habit. In order to do the latter books must be accessible. No one can have a very genuine interest in books until he has learned the trick of being intrigued by a title, and when his curiosity has been aroused it needs to be fed at once. Some books at least ought to be where undergraduates can turn them over without the formality of asking for them. All this makes trouble for librarians. Books are put back in the wrong places; they are lost; sometimes unhappily they are stolen. This is the part of the price that has to be paid for making libraries attractive to students, and the undergraduate library cannot afford not to be attractive.

### *Teach Books Can Be Beautiful*

There is one other object that an undergraduate library ought to keep in view. It should first awaken and then keep alive the idea that book-making is an art and that books can be beautiful. If a library is fortunate enough to have the material to furnish

a rare book room, with fine specimens of old books or even manuscript books, so much the better. But this, though desirable, is not essential. Our fully mechanized modern printing plants can and do turn out beautiful books, and our modern book designers have learned to use these mechanized processes in ways that are artistically sound. And in books more than in most things taste can be made independent of price. The hand-printed and highly illustrated book will always sell at a price that makes it a collector's item, but a book turned out in quantity to sell at an ordinary price can still be well designed and well printed. For this kind of book good printing and good designing cost little more than bad. There are few articles of common use in which good taste has as free scope as in books, and there are few places where taste can be so easily trained as in the appreciation of a good piece of book designing, a good face of type, and a good job of printing. To make students sensitive to such matters is not the least important thing that a college library can do for them.

In conclusion I shall come back to the point where I began. A college can neglect many things without too much hampering its educational usefulness. But its library is one thing that it cannot neglect. For at some point every course that it teaches will depend upon its library. Even a quite elementary course taught largely out of a textbook ought still be taught by a teacher who is continually reading and studying beyond the limits of any textbook. No good course at a more advanced level can be taught exclusively out of a textbook. If it be a course in history, it must give to students some conception of sources and the ways in which historians handle evidence. If it be a course in literature, the best that it can do is to stimulate a student to read for himself the great books. If it

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has so far been chiefly to locate for the delegations and the Secretariat documents currently under discussion in the sessions of the various organs of the United Nations—speeches, draft resolutions, reports, and the like, to identify documents referred to or quoted, and to bring together documents dealing with any particular subject. The card index files cover a vast range of documents from the San Francisco Conference, through the Preparatory Commission, the General Assembly, the three councils, and the various commissions and other *ad hoc* bodies established by the main organs, as well as the circulars and bulletins of the Secretariat. But the efforts of a small staff to establish clues to all this material through cards, indexes, and other devices have left little time for publication of up-to-the-minute checklists or of detailed subject-indexes. Gradually, however, the backlog of checklists to documents is being whittled away by the issue of individual checklists to each committee series of the General Assembly for 1946. The Documents Index unit also issues at the close of

sessions of any organ during 1947, checklists which also list under each agenda item the documents submitted concerning it, the records of meetings in which it was discussed, and the section of the final report concerning the item. These checklists are themselves processed documents, but it is hoped that before the end of the year the unit will be able to publish this material in its own periodic checklist on a sales or subscription basis.

#### *Summary Note*

This survey has been of necessity brief, but it has possibly clarified the picture in some degree, and has suggested some of the documentary questions facing the United Nations and its associated bodies. The magnitude of the problem of international documentation demands that the best of technical skill and imagination be employed toward its solution for the benefit of all peoples. The cooperation and advice of American librarians in meeting this challenge will certainly be both warmly welcomed and expected.

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be a course in science, it needs a reasonable selection of scientific journals almost as much as it needs its laboratory. An inadequate library means crippled instruction everywhere, because it shuts off the sources

of information or of inspiration from teachers, from students, or from both. And apart from formal instruction, the library properly equipped and managed can be the chief intellectual influence on the campus.