

Letters

To the Editor:

Miss Joan Ash's article on "The Exchange of Academic Dissertations," in the May 1969 issue of *College & Research Libraries*, contains a number of misstatements of fact and a basic misunderstanding of the intent of the system that was adopted in 1952 by the Association of Research Libraries. It is important that some of these errors be corrected and it is essential that her misunderstanding of the system be set straight, otherwise we could drift back into the very condition the 1952 report attempted to overcome. Let me deal first with the intent of the 1952 ARL Plan.

1. ARL appointed a committee in about 1948 (not 1951 as Miss Ash states) to study the problem of accessibility to doctoral dissertations, which existed because of the conditions that Miss Ash mentioned. There were others she did not list. Practically every American university had stopped requiring the printing in book form of dissertations because of the high expense to students and because of the waste involved in library exchange handling of texts which received very little use and were often of little value in themselves.

To meet the needs of that time our Committee looked for a way of doing two things, first, establishing bibliographic control, with abstracts, over dissertations; and second, making the full text available upon demand, thus eliminating the cost of an exchange system to provide them in advance. The Committee studied many ways of solving this problem and finally approached University Microfilms to expand its Microfilm Abstracts to provide central bibliographic control with abstracts. It also recommended to ARL libraries that they use one of the microforms for the text of their dissertations and then deposit the microform in the University Microfilms' vault. It has turned out that most members found it easiest, cheapest, and best to have

University Microfilms do the filming, but this was only one of the options our Committee recommended (see Plan C of the ARL Committee Report in the January, 1952 Minutes of the Association of Research Libraries). The essence of the system was that we proposed substituting a system of supplying the text in microform on demand for the old system of automatic exchanging of thousands of copies of printed texts of dissertations. We hoped that all American universities granting the Ph.D. would adopt this plan and that European countries would develop parallel plans for universities in their own countries with a system of international exchanges.

All but two or three American universities have adopted the plan and in those cases it is sometimes the intransigence of the head librarian that has kept the university out. We also hoped that European universities would adopt the plan and that a system of international exchanges among the various countries would result. The latter has come very slowly for a number of reasons. First, many European universities held to the high publication cost requirement as one of the methods used to restrict the universities to the wealthy and the aristocracy. This was only a minor point but not one to be ignored. Second, changes come very hard in European universities because of the governmental controls that are involved in many of the countries. And third, European librarians have had a great emotional attachment to the idea of exchanges primarily because cash seemed to be lacking for purchases and also because there was a kind of status symbol involved. They did not realize that frequently the cost of running an exchange system has been larger than would be the cost of purchasing publications as needed directly on demand.

Nevertheless, the European university libraries have in recent years been study-

ing the ARL-University Microfilms plan and I would hazard the guess that within the next ten years we will see its adoption by most of them. What we will not see is a return, as apparently Miss Ash hopes, to the old system of exchanging printed editions of the texts of dissertations. Why not? First, because most European university dissertations are not very good and are not worth the cost of an exchange system; second, European universities will soon be giving up, as some of them already have, publication requirements for the same reasons that American universities gave them up at the end of World War II; and third, the ARL-University Microfilms method of publishing dissertations has proved to be a very satisfactory system for making texts available for which the demand is light. It is conceivable that European university librarians will see the virtue of this system.

2. Now to correct a few of the errors in Miss Ash's article.

(a) Her first sentence makes no sense. The text of American dissertations are now freely available and we are all freed of the necessity for maintaining the old exchange system, which was clumsy, expensive, and not complete. But this was not caused as she says "by the rigid control of a private enterprise." It was an ARL Committee that buried the old exchange system when it was already dead and beginning to smell.

(b) The implication of her paragraph beginning "the wave quickly receded" is incorrect. Once the ARL-UM system was described and explained by such articles as Vernon Tate wrote, the plan caught on rapidly and most American universities joined. There was no need for more articles. A standing ARL committee has continued to advise University Microfilms on the solution to problems that have arisen and will continue to arise.

3. It was never contemplated that American universities would make copies of their own dissertations and send these on exchange to European libraries. That is what we were trying to avoid. But any university that wanted to do this could do so by purchasing, at a reasonable cost, copies from University Microfilms and

send them to European libraries. Few did so obviously because the need did not arise. Again Miss Ash misses the point of the system that ARL created.

4. It is not true that University Microfilms has "remained uninvolved" with foreign dissertations. On the contrary, it has made many efforts and is continuing to do so, to help European universities evolve a new workable system for the old one which they cannot maintain much longer.

5. The American student pays \$20 to have his dissertation published in the ARL-University Microfilms plan. Where does the German student get the money to give the university library the 150 copies Miss Ash mentions on p. 239, even though in the previous paragraph she said that the German universities gave up the publication requirement years ago? They may have done so but the student still pays the cost. Recent information indicates that German universities are now going to pay the cost.

6. Under the ARL-UM plan the student, not University Microfilms, controls the copyright. This is stated clearly on the contract which the student signs, along with University Microfilms. University Microfilms will handle the mechanics of the copyrighting but Miss Ash is in gross error on this point.

7. The problem of handling classified information is solved simply by not publishing the dissertation until the information in it is unclassified. I doubt very much if many universities are turning out classified dissertations.

8. Likewise the pirating question she raises is another red herring. If the dissertation is copyrighted, pirates can be punished. If the danger is acute at the time the dissertation is submitted to the university, the university can withhold it from publication until the danger time is passed. This could happen, for example, with a novel which the author thought might become a best seller. But, of course, this problem could be solved by copyrighting.

9. Obviously the "use of academic dissertations for exchange by academic libraries has greatly diminished since University Microfilms extended its operation in 1953" is true. But the *use* of disserta-

tions has increased and availability is nearly 100 percent complete. Miss Ash assumes that an exchange system has virtue in itself. A university can buy and send out on exchange as many copies of the occasional dissertation it might want to use for this purpose at a lower cost than it would pay for the maintenance of a full exchange system in the old manner. Her last sentence on p. 239 is simply untrue.

She admits on p. 240 that the present system is successful. Why then complain about its effect on a system of exchanges which it was intended to replace?

10. The International Association of Technical University Librarians is primarily a European organization and it reflects the attitude of those librarians, including their kind of thinking about the exchange problem. They do have a special problem of cash but I think they are kidding themselves when they think they are lowering the cost by maintaining an exchange system. The Association would appear to be perpetuating a system that is already near the end of its time.

11. American university librarians are surely not so foolish as to give up a successful program just because librarians in other countries cling to an outmoded system. I regret very much that Miss Ash, through misunderstanding the intent of the present program, seems to indicate that American librarians ought to move in a backward direction.

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To the Editor:

My purpose in writing a paper on the exchange of academic theses was not to condemn University Microfilms or the ARL committee. My aim was to focus attention on the poor service American librarians are giving to scholars who need foreign theses and foreign librarians are giving to their researchers who request

American dissertations. University Microfilms and the ARL committee have served our country well; I would like to see similar arrangements made on a worldwide scale. A University Microfilms representative informed me in a telephone conversation shortly after publication of my paper that University Microfilms had set up a depository for American dissertations on microfilm in England. This is certainly a step in the right direction.

In reply to Dr. Ellsworth's specific points:

1. I found the 1951 date on page 6 of the source listed in footnote (1) of my paper and am sorry if it is erroneous.
2. I cannot agree that all foreign dissertations are bad: witness, for example, research in the medico-biological areas from the Scandinavian countries, Israel and Japan.
3. American theses are not "freely" available to foreign libraries. Their cost is great both in money and access time.
4. It is true that the author has copyright privileges for publication of his thesis in book form. The rigid copyright control I refer to in my first sentence is the regulation stated on page 238 of my paper which says that only University Microfilms can reproduce the thesis in microform or by xerography.
5. The arguments concerning classified information and pirating are not mine. As documented in footnotes 15 and 16 of my paper, these were found in the *Library Association Record*. I tend to question their validity myself.

I agree that the old exchange system is outmoded. This is why I have suggested a new plan. Dr. Ellsworth has clarified much that was not apparent in the literature, but has not proven to me that I misunderstand the present program. Is better service a step backward?

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