Services to Readers

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Libraries exist to serve the readers of today and of tomorrow. This is axiomatic, yet librarians know little about these readers and their probable demands. Even more surprising is the fact that college and university librarians manifest comparatively little interest in services to readers; a recent survey of areas which college librarians consider worthy of investigation reflects an active interest in administrative problems and in non-book materials but comparatively little concern for the use of the collections.

Disregard of the actual needs of readers in college and university libraries has been a constant in the development of American librarianship. Recent studies of consequence in this area will be noticed in this paper, but their number is small indeed. The two comprehensive volumes on college and university libraries by Lyle and by Wilson and Tauber say little about the use of materials: circulation and reference work are discussed in separate chapters in Lyle's volume, but services to readers are dealt with in a single chapter in The University Library. Both volumes discuss reader services as they are practised, not as they could or should be. College and University Libraries and Librarianship, a work concerned with planning for the period following World War II, shows even less interest in readers. Here the use of materials is treated in a chapter concerned chiefly with their organization, and of the nine recommendations relating to library materials only two can be considered as directly related to use. One recommendation proposes that librarians give more attention to the effective use of books but does not indicate how this is to be done; the other admonishes college librarians to assume greater responsibility for audio-visual materials.

The paucity of information regarding the needs and desires of readers has compelled librarians of institutions of higher education to make decisions based on a number of widely accepted but unsub-
stantiated assumptions. A few examples may be useful here. A university librarian confronted with the problem of what newspapers published in a state or region should be preserved for scholars will search in vain for studies of the use made of files of American newspapers by historians compared with that made by political scientists or sociologists. The working habits of undergraduate and graduate students are practically terra incognita to the librarians of academic institutions; exciting accounts of the literary discoveries made by research workers have been published, but these give little assistance to the librarian who desires to understand how scholars use catalogs and other bibliographical aids. Here again the librarian operates on certain assumptions, for example, that subject bibliographies are more useful to the advanced student than subject headings in dictionary catalogs; but there are few studies to support this belief. Where the studies have been made and the implications for university libraries are clear, the weight of the institutions usually precludes radical change. Fortunately, librarians are inveterate optimists; they have faith that what they do is worth the doing although proof may not be evident or even demonstrable.

A fundamental assumption in the administration of American libraries, school and public, is that if a person has direct access to books he will find the volume which best suits his need. This notion, regardless of its truth or falsity, is embraced by readers and librarians alike; because no one should dispute the right of an individual in a democracy to make choices which do not directly cause harm to others. Browsing in a large collection is one of the most respectable alternatives to work, and no librarian who has indulged in this form of academic whittling wishes to interpose barriers between a reader and the books on the shelves. The recent history of librarianship has been a struggle to keep every reader in direct contact with some books; access to certain materials becomes progressively more difficult in this day of enormous collections and regional depositories while the approach to others is embellished with the interior decorator's art.

Another basic assumption in college and university librarianship is that readers may be classed in four categories: undergraduates, graduates, members of the faculty, and persons outside the academic community. Each group may be subdivided: undergraduates may be considered as lower- or upperclassmen, graduates may be candidates for the master's or doctor's degree, and so on; but the four major divisions are dominant. Each is believed to have certain identifiable
characteristics which distinguish it from the others, and librarians have tried to meet the demands which result from the qualities common to each group.

Studies of the use of college and university book collections reveal that few undergraduates make extensive use of library materials. The average number of books borrowed in a year from the general collections is about twelve for each undergraduate student, and the average would be much lower were it not for a small group of students who borrow many books. Fewer than half of the students account for more than ninety per cent of the books withdrawn from the general collections by undergraduates. McDiarmid found that undergraduate use in a group of libraries differs in relation to sex, year in college, scholastic achievement as reflected in grades, and subject field; but the differences among the institutions studied revealed a greater range than those of sex, academic class, or scholastic rating. Generalizations regarding undergraduate library use made by McDiarmid and others are supported in the main by a detailed analysis of the records of books borrowed from the library at Hamilton College.

No comprehensive study has been made of the use of university libraries by graduate students, but we do have the investigations of Swank, McAnally, and Stevens of dissertations prepared by Ph.D. candidates in English literature, in American history, and in certain other fields. These studies, although suggestive, are not conclusive; because they examine the product rather than the process of research. Moreover, these studies of library use as reflected in doctoral theses assume that the candidates who prepared the dissertations gathered most, if not all, of their information in the libraries of the institutions from which they received their degrees. Librarians, who in this country are constitutionally peripatetic, should be quick to recognize that graduate students are equally if not more so. The need for a more searching examination of the bibliographical practices of research workers has been pointed out in a proposal of the American Library Association for "A Basic Study of Bibliographical Organization." In an inquiry suggested as appropriate to the "Basic Study," research workers would keep diaries and case records of their reading and sources of data, and of developments in their investigations; such information might prove of real value to the librarian who wishes to anticipate the requirements of graduate students and other research workers.

The needs of members of the faculty are even less distinct. Interests
of professors range from trivial antiquarianism to broad philosophical generalizations, and no apparent common denominator characterizes the library use of an instructor in playwriting and that of a professor in hydraulics. Members of the teaching faculty often are credited with a detailed knowledge of the literatures of their respective fields and, as a consequence, are thought to have little need for a subject approach to library materials. This can in truth be said only of teachers who are bibliographically minded; many are not. It may be significant to note that few of the great American book collections were formed by teachers—even by those with wealth.16

Persons outside the academic community which supports a college or university library who are entitled to some service from the institution range from nearby residents to visiting scholars. The possibilities for service to extramural readers are limitless, but librarians provide for few. During 1951 one large university library introduced a fee of twenty dollars a semester for extramural readers.17 Unless this amount is considered a fair charge for services to be rendered—and it is difficult to see how a fixed sum could be—the fee must be recognized as a device to reduce the number of readers from outside the academic community. Restrictions respecting the use of manuscripts and other rare materials in university libraries by extramural readers, and such restrictions are common, are not justifiable unless there is reason to believe that persons connected with an institution can make better use of sources of information than those who are not. This is rarely a warrantable assumption, and use of unique or uncommon materials by extramural readers should not be restricted unless demands of this nature interfere with the services given to members of the academic community. The use of manuscripts by visiting scholars has been considered by a special committee of the Association of Research Libraries.18

College and, in particular, university librarians, unable to meet the peculiar requirements of many individuals and unable, or unwilling, to permit every person direct access to all materials, have adopted the practice of segregating in departmental libraries and other special locations books considered appropriate to the needs of groups of readers. The graduate seminar library has been a commonplace in American university libraries for more than half a century, yet the volumes on the shelves are rarely used in classes held in the rooms. Seminar collections permit the intensive use of books, but their possibilities are seldom realized. Recognition of the special needs of
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undergraduates has resulted in the establishment of libraries for readers at this level in Columbia University, the University of Illinois, and elsewhere. The most famous of these, the Lamont Library at Harvard, was planned to give college students direct access to a collection of selected volumes, to encourage recreational reading, and to concentrate library services to undergraduates in a single location.\(^{19}\) The segregation of books to meet the demands of a group of readers appears in its most unhappy form in the reserve book room. Reserve book rooms employ the closed shelf, open shelf, or combination systems; but none provides for more than the most elementary demands of a large number of students.\(^{20}\) The scheme of renting books for supplementary readings introduced at the University of Chicago should be superior to the practice of placing books on reserve, yet the latter is the rule rather than the exception. Even if librarians found it difficult to maintain rental collections, the money expended for staff in most reserve book rooms might be used to better advantage in the purchase of additional copies for regular loan.

To compensate for the rigors of institutional atmosphere, detailed classification, and lack of direct access to the general collection, librarians have provided browsing rooms where popular literature can be read in comfort. Browsing rooms, although somewhat out of fashion, seem to be on the increase.\(^{21}\) This would appear to be an encouraging manifestation of the desire of students for extra-curricular reading, but this is not conclusive. It may mean only that more librarians have come to accept the browsing room as a workable substitute for a service which the entire library should but does not perform.

The curse of bigness afflicts many colleges and most university libraries, and at times the needs of the individual seem to be lost from view. This is particularly true at circulation desks where the desire to furnish books promptly and to keep an accurate and detailed record thereof has resulted in the introduction of McBee Keysort cards, IBM, photographic and mechanical charging machines, electrically operated conveyors, time-recording devices, and gadgets beyond number. As its first project the Research Planning Committee of the Association of College and Reference Libraries has undertaken to synthesize and evaluate the circulation control systems in college and university libraries.\(^{22}\) Confronted with this welter of machines and variety of systems, it is odd that librarians have given so little attention to changes in the period of loans or in the collection of fines which
would make many of the records unnecessary. The regular period of
loan to an undergraduate for a volume, big or little, is two weeks,
subject to renewal, although it is obvious that in many cases a loan
period of one month, not subject to renewal, would be to the advan-
tage of both the borrower and the library. Fines of a penny a day to
twenty-five cents an hour are standard practice in college and univer-
sity libraries, yet no one believes that fines provide income commen-
surate with the trouble of collecting them. Fine collecting prevails
because some punitive measure seems necessary to secure the return
of volumes wanted by others, yet fines do not reform refractory stu-
dents. The cynical might reply that some students are beyond reformation; but so long as the student continues in school, the librarian
should not despair.

The desire of college and university librarians to meet specific needs
of individual readers contributed to the development of reference work
in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In the first half of
the last century, students had practically no access to books in the col-
lege library; but, after the introduction of more liberal teaching
methods and extensive curricular offerings, the need for assisting the
student in his pursuit of information became clear. The assumption
by the library of the responsibility to make any part of the collections
readily available to any qualified user probably is the most revolu-
tionary change in the development of American librarianship. The
next step toward meeting the peculiar needs of individuals, that of
furnishing recorded information regardless of subject or location, has
already been taken by reference librarians in large university libraries.
The fulfillment of this additional responsibility has focused deserved
attention on bibliographies, union catalogs, descriptions of resources,
and other compilations needed by reference librarians in the identifica-
tion and location of materials for research.

One of the results of the efforts of American librarians to furnish
research workers with needed materials is the borrowing of uncom-
mon publications from other libraries in this country and abroad. The
practice began late in the nineteenth century and increased with the
development of research work in this country until the nature and
extent of the service demanded certain controls. A brief review of the
ey early history of interlibrary loan and the text of the 1917 A.L.A. Code
of Practice for Interlibrary Loans are to be found in Locating Books
for Interlibrary Loan, by C. M. Winchell. The Interlibrary Loan
Code of 1940 is a cogent statement of the principles which should be
followed in interlibrary loan work, but the experience since the adoption of this Code suggests that it has not been observed in spirit or in letter. The costs of interlibrary loans have spiraled in recent years, and all aspects of the service are under review. A committee of the Association of College and Reference Libraries, headed by W. A. Kozumplik, developed a unit form for interlibrary loan requests, which at the end of 1951 had been adopted by more than three hundred libraries, and has in preparation a revision of the 1940 Code.30, 31

Another promising development in interlibrary loan work is the recent decision of the University of California Library to supply photographic copies of articles instead of lending volumes of scientific journals.32 Small economies can be effected through more careful bibliographical work in preparing requests for interlibrary loans,33, 34 but larger savings are promised by the use of standard forms, photoduplication, and the refusal to lend materials for certain categories of borrowers (for example, students preparing masters’ theses).

The librarian is an intermediary between books and readers, and the wider and deeper his knowledge of both, the more effectively he can bring the two together. The impossibility of providing every reader direct access to all books implies that great care will be used in the selection of the works to which direct access is permitted. This makes it incumbent on the librarian to have an intimate knowledge of a number of notable books. At the same time, the librarian who desires to bring a wealth of pertinent literature to bear on an investigation of a reader must be familiar with bibliographies and other guides to materials. The riches of subject bibliographies, other than those described in Winchell’s Guide to Reference Books35 and other well known compilations, are rarely exploited.

The chief problem before a college or university librarian is simply what can he do to place the right book in the hands of a reader. To answer this problem the librarian needs, in addition to a knowledge of books, a keener understanding of persons engaged in living and learning. Every reader has had the experience of finding a book such as Tristram Shandy stupid at one sitting and delightful at another. Psychological factors of the utmost importance in the communication of ideas ordinarily are beyond the ken of the librarian who supplies the printed page, but only through satisfaction of the peculiar needs of individuals will the library become an effective agent in the learning process. Truly, in colleges and universities the librarian’s job, imaginatively conceived, is to bring “the books and the mind together at the moment of inspiration.”36
References

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