Special Library Education

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Two important conferences on library education were held in 1948. The first was held at the Graduate Library School, University of Chicago, August 16-21. Justified through the value of its own content and the originality of its participants, it laid down no program for future action, and its influence was entrusted to the publication of its papers and the criticisms they inspired. It should be added that this influence may be considerable if enough of the right kind of persons read the volume, but even under the best of conditions the results of the book will depend upon the imagination of its readers.

The second conference took place December 11-12, at Princeton University under sponsorship of the Council of National Library Associations. This conference also led to a publication, this time a summary of the proceedings which included resolutions or recommendations bearing on future developments. The guiding forces of this conference endeavored to set in motion certain activities which would affect library education for a long time to come.

It was more than mere coincidence, of course, that two meetings on the same broad topic should be held and successfully executed within less than half a year. The same fundamental reasons underlay both—changing patterns in educational practice and needs, and a feeling of uncertainty respecting directions and goals. The earlier conference in Chicago was by far the broader of the two. Its roster embraced notable individuals from outside the library field who were sometimes quite ready to criticize strongly the self-esteem of professional librarians. The Princeton conference, on the other hand, was attended exclusively by librarians (though they were not all educators), and whether they were sufficiently critical of their own work can only be determined by a subjective reading of the proceedings.

Both of the conferences devoted attention to special librarianship, but even the most unobservant reader must be struck by a strange difference in terminology. The editor of this issue of Library Trends wrote

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Special Library Education

a paper for the Chicago meeting entitled "Education for Special Librarianship." The same topic at Princeton was called "Educating Librarians for the Several Types of Library Work." Is there anything significant in the fact that two such widely varying titles were used to explore substantially the same ground? To this writer there is; these two titles indicate, not that special librarianship is a professional riddle, but that a special librarian (and possibly a special library) is an ill-defined creature, and since he suffers from this stigma his training remains problematic.

The special librarian himself is partly responsible for his present position. Ask any such person what his occupation is and he may possibly give you two answers. If he is loyal to the library profession as a whole, he is willing to reply, "I am a librarian"; if he chooses to be more selective he will doubtless say, "I am a medical librarian" or a "music librarian" or a "law librarian" or a "science librarian." It is not likely he will assert that he is a "special librarian," for if pressed for further explanation, as he surely would be, he would be hard put to it for adequate phrases. On the other hand the term "special librarianship" is widely used because it represents a broad concept unique and legitimate in the library field. The trouble comes in trying to devise educational schedules in accordance with a broad concept and in failing to realize that the particularities of that concept may have little in common but much in isolation.

There is another consideration which looms large with many "special librarians" and which the general librarian can little appreciate. Ask a law librarian what field he works in, or even what profession he belongs to, and he is quite apt to say "law"; similarly medicine, science, music, and a dozen other callings claim the allegiance and closest personal interest of their librarians. This attitude is encouraged by training, by inclination, by association. Any educational scheme for special librarians must take it into account and see that it does not weaken as students prepare to discharge their duties in library institutions.

There can be no question that preparation for work in a library is essential. That preparation is the best and most economical which is acquired in the shortest time under the most proficient tutors in the most systematic fashion. Does this automatically mean library schools, and are they in a position to serve the peculiar needs of the prospective special librarian when he most needs attention?

After the discussion of special library education at the Princeton conference it was recommended "that if and when a joint committee on education for librarianship is appointed, a thorough survey be
made by the committee to determine the most desirable educational preparation for special librarians, to serve as a guide to library schools in developing programs of training." 5 This recommendation was followed and is still in process of effectuation which may continue for several years. The Joint Committee on Library Education was created and it called into being two successive sub-committees on Special Library Education.

The first sub-committee was exploratory, rendering but one report. It assumed that "special librarianship" meant librarianship connected with special subject areas, and rendered a definition and a statement which appears to be permanently valid:

A special librarian ... is a librarian who, by virtue of special interests and talents, chooses to operate in a special discipline, and for that purpose requires a broadened and intensified knowledge of his selected field—to which he must adapt the library technics basic to all library practice.

The inclination toward his subject mastery, possibly evinced before entering library training and adopted as a career prior to library training, must not be discontinued as library technics are encountered; the latter are to be molded to the needs of the former, and the two must be studied and amalgamated with one end in view: the production of an individual who, as a librarian, can render a service that the general librarian is not competent to give. Several years may be necessary to make this situation (an ideal one) the general rule, but it is a condition of undoubted desirability. Library students of the present day, awakening to the attractions of library specialization as they study library technics, are still more in need of subject study, and the library schools have the responsibility of seeing that they get it. Otherwise the library schools do a disservice to the subject interests they endeavor to serve.$

The first sub-committee recommended, and was succeeded by, a second, much larger and more varied sub-committee, comprised of Leon Carnovsky, Eleanor S. Cavanaugh, Robert B. Downs (now replaced by Harold Lancour), George Freedley, Walter Hausdorfer, Sanford V. Larkey, Julius J. Marke, Mary Louise Marshall, Louis Shores, Maurice Tauber, and Melvin J. Voigt, with this writer as chairman. This is a representative committee and should be able to cope with any problems connected with library education, special or general, near or remote. But the dissimilarity of subject interests raises unexpectedly strange questions with some of the individuals, and it is only fair to say that early solutions are not in sight. How could they be
Special Library Education

when these questions have been vexing the best library minds for a generation past?

This current sub-committee is exploring seven fields of special librarianship: drama, finance, journalism, law, medicine, music, and science and technology. These are typical of present-day practice; they do not exclude many more fields which may be examined subsequently. The sub-committee's assignment is to suggest how librarians for these widely differing professions may best be trained and developed, how students may best acquire what they want in order to become "special librarians," how the library education system may best adapt itself to providing the students with what they need.

The library schools of the country are supposed to produce the country's librarians, just as medical schools produce our doctors, law schools our lawyers, technical schools our technologists and so on. The same schools respectively turn out the specialists when they go back for further work; and here lies a fundamental difference between training for library specialization and training for specialization in the so-called professions. When librarians return to school for additional training, they rarely do so for the purpose of specialization, at least subject specialization. Too often, indeed, the reverse happens; and a special librarian, discouraged by the lack of recognition by, or integration with, the library profession, seeks additional training which will make him a full-fledged "general librarian."

That there is widespread dissatisfaction with the opportunities for special library training cannot be denied. Neither can it be denied that the library schools should play a part, a significant part, in altering the situation. There is evidence that they would like to if they knew how, although one is occasionally shocked by individual attitudes. It was only a little more than a year ago that a letter from one of the most prominent library school directors firmly expressed the wish that our committee were not in existence! He gratuitously went on to say that, in his opinion, subject background training for librarians was unnecessary except for art, architecture, and music. How the business and science, drama and law, medical and technical librarians would have guffawed at this. It is not to be inferred that this educator is typical of most library school directors, but there may be a few like him, and the specialists will not be provided for until such a viewpoint is completely obliterated.

One is also depressed by the considered reflection of teachers. The following quotation from Lowell Martin is an example:

The introduction of sufficient subject or interest-area content into
the one-year professional curriculum to develop college graduates into specialists appears to be a forlorn hope unless we are prepared to sacrifice far more of the training in library skills than now appears either practicable or advisable.

Three alternative possibilities suggest themselves for training subject or interest-area librarians. One is to recruit and train general librarians who will then acquire additional content training in the form of higher degrees in subject fields.

The second alternative is to recruit specialists already trained who will acquire knowledge of library techniques by experience or education. In this instance, library schools would occupy a secondary role in the preparation of members of the profession. The [library] profession has trouble enough competing with other disciplines before their members are trained; and, in attempting it, librarianship would court the possibility of getting the least qualified on both subject and personal grounds.

The third alternative for producing subject or interest-area librarians is to enrol students in library schools at an earlier level—after the second year of college, for example—and to put them through a combined professional and subject program over a period of several years. While it has not done so thus far, this approach could lead to a new curriculum rather than to a modified traditional program. The core of such a curriculum would be the bibliographical organization of knowledge. The difficulty is the necessity for young people to select librarianship as a career at an earlier age than is customary—but not, it should be noted, at an age earlier than in several other professions.

This was written seven years ago, but it prognosticated a current trend toward the five-year integrated program advocated by the Board of Education for Librarianship of the American Library Association. The A.L.A. Bulletin for January 1951 printed a rather grudging recognition by the Board of the existence of specialization. The Board recommended the following: “That instruction for specialized service in libraries may occupy a place in this basic program but not at the sacrifice of necessary academic and professional preparation.” This statement, it will be noticed, is permissive of, not conducive to, special library training. Furthermore, the statement is so lacking in definition that it is of little practicality.

Martin’s utterance was and remains gloomy because, although the three methods are now in use, he thinks the production of specialists is a “forlorn hope.” This is defeatist to begin with, and implies that special library education is less important than all the usual library
Special Library Education

skills. Such an implication this writer must contradict whole-heartedly
and point to institutions which are facing up to the problem, e.g.,
Carnegie Institute of Technology \(^9\) and Simmons College.\(^{10}\) Their solu-
tions may not be ideal, but they indicate interest, endeavor, and prog-
ress.

The writer can not be sanguine about Martin’s first alternative.
The second, however, has been going on for years and with consid-
erable success, perhaps to the vexation of the library schools. Here the
chief trouble is lack of systematization and organization, not in the
quality of the end product. Moreover, Martin was ill-advised to com-
plain of other professions exerting a competition which librarian-
ship cannot meet. He spoke with veracity, but librarianship itself, li-
brary education in fact, is largely to blame. The third alternative, also,
is in existence now for a general program (e.g., the University of Chi-
cago and the University of Illinois). There is no reason why a full five-
year curriculum should not be devised for persons wishing to become
special librarians, but the content of these curricula awaits formu-
lation. Eileen Cunningham’s article “Library School Undergraduate
Curriculum,” \(^{11}\) is relevant and suggestive of further thought. It is not,
however, an introduction to Martin’s third alternative.

There are both special and general librarians who, without forsaking
the service they render to others, want to vie with professional col-
leagues not engaged in library work. These are the ones, in university
circles, who want faculty rank. Lawrence C. Powell says there is great
need of such librarians and he expresses it in strong terms: “A desper-
ate need exists for more librarians who have knowledge and interests
of the same kinds as the faculty. On every academic library staff I
have any acquaintance with, I can count on a few fingers the number
of persons who can establish intellectual camaraderie with the faculty.
Until this can be done by the majority of the staff, talk of equal rank
with the faculty is a waste of breath.” \(^{12}\) This would seem to be another
type of librarian (in the formation of which specialization is very much
involved) the library schools do little to produce because, perhaps,
the usual skills and technics of library science cannot be satisfactorily
adjusted or abbreviated.

No one, least of all the writer, wishes to quarrel with the library
schools. However, if they claim the responsibility for training the coun-
try’s librarians, they should measure that responsibility in its broadest
terms, not merely by the framework of a core curriculum leading to
the first degree. If other professions ran their educational systems with
no more regard for specialization than librarianship does, one shudders to think of the state our society would be in. This does not say that the library schools can provide all that is wanted, but their responsibility is to see that specialization is obtainable for persons as librarians and as part of their library training.

In many meetings one hears the question of economics, both present and future. If special courses were instituted would there be any students for them? If there were would they find employment? These are reasonable queries to which real answers are not forthcoming, but many in the profession think that special librarianship would expand rapidly if trained personnel were readily on call. A set of questions was addressed by this writer to about a score of large university and public libraries, divided half and half, to see if some light could be thrown on a very complex situation. The questions were:

(1) Does your institution employ special librarians for professional work (i.e., subject specialists in fields such as law, medicine, drama, music, business, journalism, science and technology, etc.)? Approximately how many?

(2) Does your institution maintain a policy, when filling such positions, of engaging special (subject) librarians who have had formal library training, or does it engage persons who have only expertise in their respective fields?

(3) If you employ special (subject) librarians, do their services command more remuneration than those of regular librarians? The same? Or less?

(4) Are good special (subject) librarians difficult to obtain? Have you tried to convert regular librarians into special librarians, or vice versa? With what success?

(5) If you have openings for special (subject) librarians, where do you look for candidates?

The directors who received these inquiries have been unusually generous in responding. Among them are some of the most important and influential librarians in America.

It will surprise no one to learn that all of the institutions approached employ special librarians. Most of the institutions prefer persons with library training, but also, most of them were gratifyingly flexible and allowed exceptions. Only one, a large library in the Middle West, stated categorically that its professional workers, general or special, had to have a library school degree. The exceptions were of two kinds
Special Library Education

—they were extended to persons whose practical experience equaled formal library training or to persons whose personality and subject accomplishment were such that they could not be rejected. Three institutions actually prefer subject competence over library training, and one admitted it has adopted no policy in the matter. Another reported that it tries to secure the best special librarians available; if they have library training, so much the better. This surely implies a preference for the subject specialty.

The number of specialists working in these libraries varied greatly, a phenomenon owing perhaps to a lack of definition of the term. A number of directors failed to state how many specialists were on their rolls; others had 7, 8, 13, 17, 24, 26, 54, and 58. The last two figures (the first two as well) were not from institutions of comparable size, and the entire quantitative range seems to support the belief that there is no acceptable definition of “special librarian.”

The question about remuneration was answered identically by all the public libraries. In these institutions specialization does not lead to a larger salary. The universities varied considerably on this point, some finding it difficult to analyze the problem and consequently giving an unclear response. Four universities admitted that specialization might be expected to offer a slightly higher stipend.

There was near unanimity regarding the discovery of good special librarians. They are difficult to find. Only one institution found the problem not too difficult, and by expressing itself in this manner gave a qualified answer.

There was also considerable confusion in explaining the means of finding special librarians, a fact which shows that there are no recognized sources of supply. The largest library responding simply said that it looked everywhere for the likeliest persons. Another very large institution looked to the subject field first, then to the library schools. Still another sought desired personnel among its alumni, a curious procedure to say the least. Special library associations are consulted regularly. Library schools were frequently mentioned, but they seem to be rather unfruitful when specialists are needed.

The procedure of conversion, general to special and vice versa, seems to be considered useful, but chiefly as a measure of expediency. Only two institutions, however, admitted using the device in both directions, and another declared it was impossible if not done with exceptional persons. One director indicated that it was feasible to convert a specialist into a general librarian, but claimed the reverse would not
work. On the other hand, another administrator feels the exact opposite is true.

There were a number of extremely interesting comments from the directors of these institutions which, in their totality, reveal a sadly unsettled condition. One man writes that the head of a very large departmental library has a degree in his subject field but no library school degree; then he adds that this information is not for publication! Why? The query is certainly pertinent to the cause of special library education. Another administrator expressed a desire for scholars alone to head his special collections, leaving it to “underlings” to perform the library operations. One wonders how many library directors secretly share this feeling. An institution in the Far West is more interested in persons with “special subject backgrounds” than in those without “definable specialization,” but because the former are difficult to find, it must use employees of ability who develop “in the special subject areas they work in.” Another institution explains that its practices “do not represent anything near the ideal”; and still another speaks of eight specialists of whom “none . . . went to a library school.” This informant added: “There is no school that I know of that trains people satisfactorily for rare book library work.” Perhaps the most unhappy administrator is the one who looks forward to expanding his staff of specialists, but who hopes the results of this informal survey will influence some of his decisions.

It is granted that this survey was not scientific or definitive in any sense of these terms. However, it revealed representative conditions and disclosed several things, namely, that special library education and the employment it supposedly leads to are in a state of chaos. There is no uniformity of concept, no regularity of output, no standard of accomplishment, no recognizable goal to attract more people to such work. Yet one fact is constant—special librarians, by whatever name they are known, are in demand and are being sought. Is the library profession going to provide them or does the library profession propose to absorb them haphazardly and accidentally? If the former, then it must come to closer grips with the problem than it has heretofore, even if that means throwing overboard certain cherished traditions which have accumulated for more than half a century. There is something paradoxical in the realization that librarianship has claims to exercising the most rigidly organized (general) educational system, yet condones the greatest degree of laxity in the preparation of its specialists.
Clearer thinking is needed all along the line. We need better answers to the “how” and “why” and “when” of special librarianship. This writer is not among those who think that the library, in principle or reality, is chiefly an educational institution, but the rigidity of educational methods has hampered its training program. The library commands great respect as an educational center, and well it should, but it offers so much more—recreation, undiluted pleasure, aesthetic experience. It contributes to the safeguarding of health and property, and freely strives to increase the profits of commercial corporations. It is a microcosm of our present-day culture which flourishes in an age of specialization. Functioning as it does it must have specialists to serve other specialists, and the various specialities have each their own rules and discipline. No one course, no one curriculum can encompass them all. There are such courses, to be sure, and they can fill a distinct need. That need, however, is one attaching to the general librarian, not to the librarian working in law, medicine, music, or science. The latter’s needs are bewilderingly different, regardless of whether he is cataloging, counseling, evaluating, purchasing, or administering.

In 1948 Herman Henkle wrote:

It must be recognized that the responsibility of the special librarian varies widely. At one extreme, it may require no more knowledge of a subject than is essential to identify contents in the literature. In the other extreme, it may require the special librarian to prepare an evaluation of data contained in technical literature, with a quality of judgment which can serve as the basis for policy decisions or the foundation for a company’s development program.

It is from these extremes that the confusion arises in the use of the term “subject specialist” in library literature dealing with the problem of special education. The first assignment can be fulfilled by a librarian. The second requires a subject expert. The two can be, but are not necessarily, synonymous, even in the organization of a special library. To such degree as they are synonymous, the special librarian is in effect a member of the research staff, but he need not be that in order to be a good librarian.³

With slight modifications this can be applied to any aspect of special librarianship. It is up to the library profession to decide whether it wishes to train students—or see that they are trained—for both the extremes mentioned above.

There is more than a “forlorn hope” for the development of special librarians. Some compromises in curricula may have to be made, but
these will result in gains, not sacrifices. Special librarians are heartened by the reactions of leading library educators in meetings of the past two years, which show awareness of the specialists' desiderata and are impressed by the observation written in 1948, of Leon Carnovsky, which reads as follows:

In the United States, education for librarianship began in 1887 [School of Library Economy at Columbia]. This was more than thirty years after the opening of the Boston Public Library and eleven after the founding of the American Library Association, an event signalizing the culmination of a long period of public library development in this country. My point is that formal education for librarianship came after a long period of library operation, and problems of curriculum construction were therefore resolved in the light of the library practice then known.13

It seems reasonable to believe that formal education for special librarianship may come after a long period of special library operation, and problems of curriculum construction may therefore be resolved in the light of library practice now known. The time is here for the development to begin.

References

5. Lancour, op. cit., p. 54.
Special Library Education