



The Interpretation of Public Services

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THE WORD "interpretation," as applied to college librarianship has been defined as "the act or process of bringing information about the college to bear on library functions and policies, and the interpretation of library functions, policies, and procedures to the public served by the college library."¹ With some modification, this meaning also applies to the interpretation of a library's public services, and the following is offered as a working definition: the act or process of informing a library's users of its services to them. Since interpretation requires communication, a library naturally utilizes all available media: annual reports, exhibits and displays, newspapers, radio, television, handbooks, guides to collections, and other library publications as well as direct contacts between its staff and clientele (including all forms of instruction in library use). To attempt to discuss all of these media in the present article would be impossible not only because of limitations of space but also because libraries usually do not distinguish the interpretation of their public services from that of all other services. Therefore, this review has concerned itself with three of the most important ways of interpreting public services: all types of instruction in the use of the library, library handbooks, and guides to collections. Since the college and university libraries are far more active in these areas than other types of libraries, this paper draws heavily but not exclusively upon their experience.

Why has instruction in the use of the library been described as "one of the most neglected of all library responsibilities"² and as one of the "persisting problems [which] need vigorous new attack"?³ The question is neither a new one, nor one which librarians have failed to be aware of and to write about. The idea of instruction in the use of the library was apparently widespread by 1876,⁴ and it is one to which librarians have continued to give attention, as a few representative examples demonstrate clearly. In 1914 the U.S. Office of Education published the results of a questionnaire sent to 596 col-

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leges and universities and 284 normal schools to obtain data on the place of "book arts, bibliography, library economy, or any instruction in the management of libraries" in their curriculums;⁵ in 1926 the American Library Association *Survey of Libraries in the United States* included data on this point.⁶ Harvie Branscomb's *Teaching with Books* deals with this as part of the larger problem of integrating the program of the library and that of the faculty,⁷ and K. J. Brough discusses it as one form of personal assistance to the reader.⁸

Librarians have devoted considerable attention to the problem, as evidenced by well over a hundred articles listed in *Library Literature* in the last twenty years (excluding those dealing with instruction in elementary and high schools). If formidable in quantity, however, this literature does not impress one with its quality. For one thing, with few exceptions each article has not attempted anything beyond presentation of a case study—solution of a specific problem in terms of the needs of a particular situation. Moreover, there are no reports on failures—that is, the institutions which found programs of library instruction unsatisfactory or unsuitable. Finally, in recent years there has been nothing in the way of a comprehensive picture. According to the Office of Education report there were seven colleges and universities which had required courses in library instruction and twenty which had elective courses.⁹ The A.L.A. *Survey* reported that half of the college and university libraries of more than 20,000 volumes offered some kind of library instruction,¹⁰ but, in spite of all the published reports, we simply do not know what the picture looks like in 1954. Clearly there is a need for thorough investigation of the current practices of college and university libraries in providing instruction in the use of the library. The present paper perforce bases its observations on the published accounts which have appeared in recent years.

The statements, frequently seen, that the college should offer some kind of library instruction rest, of course, upon the assumption that large numbers of college students are often ignorant of the most elementary facts about libraries, that they know little about the catalog, reference books, and bibliographies. Available data, although small in quantity, support this view. Lulu R. Reed, analyzing the scores of 650 college students who took her test on the use of the library, summarized their shortcomings as follows:

1. Students have not acquired specific and detailed knowledge of reference tools, such as dictionaries and encyclopedias.
2. Students have not learned to associate types of questions with types of books most likely to answer those questions.

3. Students have not learned to associate authors or editors with types of material.

4. Students have not learned to associate topics with general fields of knowledge and consequently do not benefit, to a maximum degree, by labels indicating divisions of the classification scheme.

5. Students have not learned to use parts of books effectively and have inadequate knowledge of bibliographical features such as footnotes, bibliographies, and indexes.

6. Student interpretation of specimen entries from *Readers' Guide*, *New York Times Index*, and document indexes reveals inability to understand and locate information by means of these tools.

7. Students are not able to evaluate sources of information readily.

8. Students do not understand the functions of various library departments.¹¹

The results of a comprehensive examination on the use of the library given to 354 graduate students at the University of California and Stanford University included the following: 34 per cent received lower than C grades on the use of the card catalog; 42 per cent failed to answer correctly any of five questions on general reference books; 53 per cent had never used any of the following: *Union List of Serials*, Library of Congress depository catalog, *United States Catalogue*, *British Museum Catalogue of Printed Books*, and *Library of Congress List of Subject Headings*; 56 per cent made grades of D or E on questions on periodical indexes; 58 per cent did not know whether or not there was a good index to United States government publications; 89 per cent did not know whether or not there was a general index covering all state government publications.¹²

On the other side, Miss Reed's study does indicate the value of instruction. She reported that freshmen who had had a brief orientation course scored about as well as seniors; "In other words, by means of some definite instruction, students attained in a short time the same degree of proficiency as they acquired independently in four years of college."¹¹

For convenience in discussing the problem here it may be divided into three parts, corresponding to three levels of instruction: (1) undergraduate, (2) upper division and graduate, and (3) professional. The first has received most attention from librarians, but recent publications record a growing awareness of the problem for the second and third levels as well. Progress in achieving a satisfactory program of instruction, however, has not been uniform by any means, and each of these levels deserves separate consideration.

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Library instruction for undergraduates falls into two broad categories: (1) that which utilizes informal teaching methods and is limited to a single contact such as the orientation tour, and (2) that which utilizes formal teaching, usually with problem assignments for the student, and which is designed to give him sufficient skill in library techniques to be able to cope effectively with most of his library needs up to advanced levels. Of course, there are many variations of each type, especially of the latter which ranges from a few hours of instruction in English or rhetoric classes to semester courses, both elective and required. Some colleges make use of both types.

The informal type of instruction is probably more common and is usually included in the college orientation program conducted during the Freshman Week, although it may come after classes have begun or even as one period in a required freshman course. It usually takes the form of a talk by the librarian or some other library staff member, often done as he takes the group through the library and points out the catalog, reference books, periodical indexes, etc. While such tours have the advantage of showing students the location of library tools, practical difficulties often prevent the instruction from being really effective: the group walks along, pausing briefly, while the guide points out and explains the catalog, periodical indexes, etc., but some students cannot hear what he is saying, while the mood and timing is hardly conducive to the students' asking questions. Moreover, if the tour comes during Freshman Week, it loses much of its impact, for then it is just one of many phases of college life which the students hear about; while if it is given as one meeting of a course the instructor often prepares the class poorly or not at all, so that it fails to see the relevancy of the discussion to the course. Other devices, such as motion pictures, slides, and exhibits in the library, or even an evening reception during Freshman Week, have been tried on occasion and may prove more effective in meeting the demand for brief library orientation and instruction. One interesting recent suggestion contemplates the use of an automatic slide projector capable of showing thirty slides in three minutes and repeating the series continuously as long as desired. Supplementing other methods of instruction, the slides could provide answers to routine questions of a general nature, such as explanation of the items on the catalog card, the use of the dictionary, etc.¹³

Teaching the use of the library on a more formal basis usually requires a number of hours of class time either in such courses as English composition or rhetoric or else by means of a whole course, en-

tirely separate, on how to use the library. The former occurs with more frequency than the latter, although many teachers are reluctant to give up enough class hours for an effective program. If such arrangements are made, the question arises as to whether the English staff or librarians should teach the unit. There are at least two reasons why the library staff should do the job: (1) it is competent to explain the library, whereas many faculty members are not themselves sure of library techniques, and (2) the contacts established probably make the students more willing to ask questions subsequently. A full course on how to use the library is occasionally offered on a noncredit basis, but at best this seems to have little to recommend it, and certainly does not enhance the status of library science as a subject. Usually the course on how to use the library meets once or twice a week for a semester and carries one or two hours credit. In a few institutions, like Louisiana State University, it is required, but when it is offered on an elective basis, the enrollment often proves disappointing. This is a question which should also be investigated. It would be interesting to know why college students fail to enroll in such courses. For the present we can only speculate that crowded curriculums (now moving in the direction of more required courses and fewer electives) a failure to realize the need for, or value of, such instruction, and the term "library science," which often has unpleasant connotations to the student, may combine to discourage him from registering in such courses as are available. A comparison of three lists of topics usually included in such courses reveals substantial agreement on the following points: card catalog, periodical indexes, major reference books, compiling a bibliography.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Other points which may be discussed include the following: parts of the book, note taking, arrangement of books, government documents, buying books, and introduction to subject bibliography.

Perhaps at this point one may observe that although, as previously mentioned, we lack statistics, it would appear that a large proportion of our colleges and universities do not offer courses on how to use the library. On the other hand, extensive offering of such courses, especially if required, would place a heavy burden on the library, and special provision would have to be made for adequate instructional staff. One writer estimated in the thirties that for a university having a thousand prospective students, the cost of a required course in library science would probably be prohibitive.¹⁷ More recently it has been suggested that schools with more than 2,500 students should establish a separate department of bibliography to handle library instruction.¹⁸

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A partial solution to this might be to require students to demonstrate proficiency in library techniques either by a satisfactory grade on a comprehensive examination or by satisfactory completion of a course. Such a system would not only save expensive instruction costs by reducing the number of sections but also allow students to avoid an unnecessary course. Stephens, Goucher, and Southwestern colleges use such a plan, and this permits the library to concentrate instruction on those who show need for it.

An adequate program of instruction in the use of the library should operate on an advanced as well as an elementary level. This paper has already mentioned the poor showing of graduate students on a comprehensive examination on how to use the library. The same study reveals the attitude of such students toward a program: 68 per cent of the total group tested felt they needed "instruction or information concerning the general technique of using a library" at the graduate level;¹² this included 77 per cent of first-year graduate students, 67 per cent of the second- and third-year graduate students not yet admitted to the candidacy for the doctor's degree, and 58 per cent of those fully qualified candidates for the doctor's degree. Among the students in various subject fields the proportion ranged from 50 per cent of those in the physical sciences and those in history to 81 per cent of those in economics.¹² This test was given over twenty years ago, and, although there seems to be no reason why a similar attitude should not prevail in 1954, it would be interesting to compare the views of today's students with these figures. Does a smaller or larger proportion sense the need for library instruction? That there is a definite need is the opinion of many administrators and the reference librarians who all too often have the dubious pleasure of introducing graduate students and faculty members to the *Union List of Serials* or the *Catalog of Books Represented by Library of Congress Printed Cards*. (Since today's graduate students are tomorrow's faculty, from a long-range point of view there are advantages for the library as well as for the students.) How have libraries met the challenge in this situation? It is disquieting to report that for the most part they have done little or nothing to provide instruction except through such informal devices as talks to graduate students in the library or a lecture or two in a departmental course; individual departments usually provide such bibliographical instruction as is offered at an advanced level. L. R. Wilson and M. F. Tauber¹⁹ have summarized the offerings of a number of universities. There are, however, a number of disadvantages to this approach. Too often such courses deal only with bibliog-

raphy of the field concerned, and usually a large portion of the time is devoted to the technique and methodology of the doctoral dissertation. Moreover, such general bibliographical information as they do contain is likely to be duplicated in the offerings of the various departments, at least those in the humanities and the social sciences, and since the professors giving them are usually scholars in specific fields often uncertain of bibliography outside of their specialties one may question whether they are the best teachers. To reduce this overlapping and at the same time to expand and strengthen the instruction, the library ought to offer advanced training in library use for upper division and graduate students. The best vehicle for this is probably a formal course, because, as Andrew Keogh²⁰ pointed out almost forty years ago, "Under ordinary conditions . . . a subject of study must be organized and placed in the curriculum, or it is apt to be neglected." Echoing this sentiment, R. B. Downs²¹ last year wrote of the University of Illinois Library, "Not now offered, but clearly needed, is a course in the utilization of library resources for graduate students in the humanities and social sciences." Such an arrangement should be both practical and efficient. The library would still leave the bibliography of the various subject fields to the individual departments, which are obviously more qualified to teach it; it should not take over responsibility for all bibliographical instruction.²² The college or university that establishes a three-level program (the general course for undergraduate students, the advanced course for upper division and graduate students, and "graduate courses in the bibliography and research methods of each of the principal fields of graduate study"²³) is providing an integrated program of library instruction and offering its students progressively more specialized courses to meet their bibliographical needs.

The University of California took a step in this direction when, following Peyton Hurt's investigation, it offered for a number of years an upper division course covering the following points:

(1) methods of writing footnote and bibliographical references; (2) the extent, nature, and relative significance of types of library materials (books, monographs, pamphlets, periodicals, Government documents, and reference books); (3) encyclopaedic compilations (dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and works dealing with biography, geography, and statistics); (4) reference tools that serve as indexes and guides to printed information (the library card catalogue, bibliographies, periodical indexes, abstracts, and indexes to Government publications); (5) the works that serve as aids to the selection of

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reading materials (book reviews, guides to the literature of subject fields, selected bibliographies, and guides to plays, short stories, novels, and other materials), and (6) methods of procedure in using library materials for information on topics of interest.²³

Iowa State College offers a course in bibliographical research, Library 614, which graduate students may take for credit in a major or minor subject. Its stated objectives with respect to graduate students are these:

1. To enable them to locate references to the books, journals, and other materials which relate to their theses and to other research topics.
2. To show how they can keep themselves well informed concerning current publications.
3. To enable them to develop an appreciation of the continued and active use of books and libraries throughout their professional careers.
4. To give them practice in the compilation of bibliographies in correct form for theses and scholarly publications.²⁴

Such objectives are appropriate to any advanced course and to them might be added one more: to familiarize graduate students with the bibliographical tools used in advanced study and research.

To achieve these objectives the content of such courses might follow the general outline presented in the first unit of the Wilson-Lowell-Reed²⁵ syllabus with selections from other units and such adaptations as might seem necessary in view of the local library situation. The following topics appear desirable: bibliographic form, library catalogs, current national bibliographies and book trade records, sources of information about current publications, bibliographies of bibliographies, periodical and newspaper indexes, abstracting services, bibliographies of periodicals, union lists and union catalogs, lists of dissertations and research projects, resources and the special services and facilities for research of the institution offering the course, surveys of library resources, and library cooperation and specialization.

Let us now turn to the third level of library instruction, which presents at this time the most encouraging of the three pictures. There seems to be a trend toward recognition of the essential role played by books and other library materials in professional education, a recognition which is being implemented by instruction. In the field of the medical sciences the fifty-first annual meeting of the Medical Library Association featured a panel discussion on "Teaching of Medical Bibliography." Four of the participants reported on specific pro-

grams of teaching at four different types of schools: medicine, public health, dentistry, and pharmacy. Only in the case of the medical school was a complete course offered, the others having only a few hours available for library instruction, but significantly the instruction in all cases is not optional but required of all students. The dental school²⁶ and the college of pharmacy²⁷ each offered training for beginning and advanced students. A similar panel discussion on the "Problems of the Law Librarian as a Teacher of Bibliography" featured descriptions of the methods and personnel used to teach legal bibliography in four law schools and reported that "It was agreed by all that instruction in the use of legal materials was necessary for all students, and the dawning recognition by faculties of this fact was a very happy sign."²⁸ Furthermore, the law school can accomplish effective teaching of legal bibliography even in large classes.²⁹ In theological seminaries faculty members do not seem to be generally as aware of the need for instruction in bibliography, but closer cooperation between them and librarians may eventually produce the desired result of teaching bibliography in required courses.³⁰ In the field of engineering two examples of recent developments demonstrate increasing awareness of the value of knowledge of library skills to the engineer. Columbia requires a one-point, one-hour weekly course of all undergraduate engineering students, which is offered in several sections for the various engineering curriculums and is normally taken in the junior year (the first in the School of Engineering);³¹ Northwestern offers a two-hour elective course for upperclassmen.³² Neither course assumes any previous library instruction, so consequently both begin with classification, the use of the catalog, and other general bibliographical topics before discussing the literature of engineering. On the whole, however, teachers colleges seem to provide more orientation in library use than any of the types of professional schools mentioned above. Of sixty-one institutions, fifty-one (over 80 per cent) reported they had an orientation program, including sixteen which offered an entire course. Almost all programs attempted to teach the skills generally included in the college course: arrangement of the library, library rules and schedule, use of the card catalog, classification, use of two or more periodical indexes, and use of reference tools.³³

The handbook, long one of the most frequently used media for the interpretation of public services, has continued to be issued, especially by college and university libraries. Perhaps the most important development in this area stems from the growing feeling that the dif-

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ference between the library needs of undergraduates and those of advanced students and faculty ought to be recognized by the publication of separate handbooks. Even before the war a number of institutions, such as Pennsylvania State College and the Women's College of the University of North Carolina, issued one handbook for undergraduates and another for faculty and graduate students. Recently a number of universities, including Cornell, Harvard, Illinois, and Minnesota, have published a second handbook for graduate students and faculty, while Central College (Missouri) and Mount Holyoke are among the colleges which have done likewise. In almost all cases the title of the booklet for more advanced users contains the phrase "for graduate students and faculty," although Harvard entitled its handbook simply *The Research Services of the Harvard College Library*. How does the information contained in such handbooks differ from that in undergraduate versions? Examination reveals a number of points common to most of these new publications: discussion of the library system as a whole, explanation of interlibrary loan procedures, the routine for placing books "on reserve," listing of special services (study facilities, photostat and microfilm services, etc.). As in the undergraduate handbooks, there are floor plans or diagrams of the building. Occurring less frequently are brief surveys of the collection, lists of reference books, procedures for ordering books, notes on the library's administrative organization, and a list of other important libraries in the area. (The Harvard and Illinois manuals have notes about the New England Deposit Library and the Midwest Inter-Library Center, respectively.)

A number of colleges and universities which do not issue a separate handbook for graduate students and faculty do devote a page or two in their general handbook to services and facilities for advanced study and research. For example, the University of Pennsylvania heads one page "For Graduate Students Only," while the Kentucky, Duke, Florida, and Ohio State handbooks have similar sections. This trend will undoubtedly increase, and more institutions, especially the larger ones, will probably issue two handbooks.

The handbooks themselves continue to show as much variety in size, style, and content as always, but several tendencies may be briefly commented upon. The first of these is the growing use of the near-print processes of reproduction, which offer not only a cost advantage but also permit a greater flexibility in the use of illustrations. Second, a number of institutions—for example, California at Berkeley, Drake, and Northwestern—issue their handbooks in the form of leaf-

lets, each of which can be revised and reissued as necessary without the necessity for republishing the entire handbook. Another advantage of this form is that the student can take the leaflet which meets his immediate need, avoiding a pamphlet which may seem formidable to him when he is in a hurry. A few colleges—for example, the Chicago Undergraduate Division of the University of Illinois and Iowa State College—combine their library handbook with instructional material on how to use the library. A final trend which we may note is the publication of a number of brief handbooks supplementing the basic one or two; a number of the departmental libraries at Illinois have compiled such guides, which are usually mimeographed, total about a dozen pages, and describe the library's special features and resources.

Public and special libraries' handbooks, with the exception of those of some of the larger city libraries, usually differ markedly from those of college and university libraries; on the whole, they are considerably smaller, often a single sheet of typewriter-size paper being folded to make a four or six page leaflet. This format limits the information to such general items as hours of service, borrowing rules, fine regulations, and floor plans. The *Guide to the Reference Department* of the New York Public Library, just a little larger than a catalog card in size and only twenty-four pages long, shows how much information a compact guide can contain; other handbooks worthy of mention include those of the public libraries of Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit. The Library of Congress issues two handbooks: a general *Information for Readers* and a brief *Special Facilities for Research* for persons engaged in "extensive and productive research involving extensive use of the collections."³⁴

Another type of library publication which aids in the interpretation of public services is the guide to resources. There are guides describing holdings on the national, regional, state, and local levels, and in addition there are a number of surveys of the resources of individual libraries. Such descriptions contribute to the development of library specialization and cooperation by showing the nature and extent of present resources and serve the teacher, scholar, and research worker by locating and describing material which sometimes has not been fully cataloged. The relationship between such guides and union catalogs has been called a complementary one: "Whereas union catalogs list and locate specific titles and editions, the surveys of resources indicate subject areas in which libraries are strong."³⁵ A number of such guides made their appearance in the thirties and early forties;

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the A.L.A. Board on Resources did much to stimulate this activity, especially on the regional and national levels, and in 1938 the first attempt "to study all classes of library research materials distributed over a large region" described the holdings of Southern libraries.³⁶ The notable guides to individual libraries published up to the war include those for Harvard, the New York Public Library, the American Antiquarian Society, and the universities of Chicago and Pennsylvania. Unfortunately the postwar years have not witnessed a continuation of this trend, as only guides to the universities of California and North Carolina have been published. Another major library, Yale, will issue a survey of its collections in 1955,³⁷ but it is certainly regrettable that there are available only two brief guides to the Library of Congress. As Downs³⁸ has indicated, there are a large number of important libraries which not only have not issued descriptions of their holdings but have also been inactive in publishing.

A number of practical difficulties may explain this paucity of publications. Probably the most discouraging problem is that of timeliness, which stems from the fact that in spite of the great amount of labor required for compilation and the considerable cost of publication, the surveys are out of date as soon as they are off the press. There seems to be no easy solution to this problem, although a number of suggestions come to mind. The first of these is the advantage of planning from the start to issue new editions at definite intervals. Preservation of the results of the basic investigation and definite arrangements for some library staff member to have responsibility for noting significant additions, changes in acquisition policies, gifts, etc., would reduce the editorial cost of new editions, while use of near-print processes for publication or issuing the guide in parts at intervals offers promise of lowering publication costs. Between editions brief mimeographed reports could supplement the current compilation. Libraries which issue a bulletin or journal might investigate the possibility of utilizing it as a means to aid the publication of a guide, either by publishing description of resources in subject areas as articles, or by using its pages for the supplementary reports.

At the present time, however, there is an obvious need for the publication of more guides. As one step in this direction, C. W. David,³⁹ at the request of the A.L.A. Board on Resources,⁴⁰ recently described the methodology used in *A Faculty Survey of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries*.

This paper has attempted to review the present status of the interpretation of public services by concentrating upon three important

media. Interpretation, it is clear, is now receiving more attention from librarians than ever before, but it is still not enough. Only further investigation, creative thinking and positive action will remove such matters as library instruction from the category of unsolved problems. The library provides public services, but it cannot neglect its responsibility to interpret those services to its public.

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