Departmentalization and Circulation Work: Problems and Relationships

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Circulation work in the majority of libraries today is conducted within a physical and organizational framework differing markedly from that of only a few decades ago. The growth of departmentalization, with its division and dispersal throughout the library building of both book resources and public services, has created new relationships which involve circulation work at many points. The resulting problems have not always been solved—or fully recognized—and no survey of the various aspects of circulation work would be complete without some consideration of these matters. Other applications of the principle of the division of labor have been made by libraries, notably in such volume operations as book delivery and charging, with a resultant emphasis on the use of clerical assistance and an increasing reliance on simple mechanization. These changes too have introduced problems affecting circulation work which deserve description and discussion. It is the purpose of this article, therefore, to describe briefly the present pattern of service within the library, to identify some of the problems growing out of the changes mentioned, and to discuss the methods of dealing with them.

Both public and academic libraries have been affected by these changes in organization and method, but individual libraries of both types may differ considerably in the degree to which they have become departmentalized or have adopted labor-saving devices and in the extent to which they have succeeded in compensating for the resulting problems. To treat separately of the several kinds of libraries and the varying degrees of departmentalization would make these remarks unbearably lengthy and complex. What follows, then, is a general statement of general trends and problems. Because it is general and therefore over-simplified it will inevitably seem to exag-

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gerate both the extent and the effect of departmentalization and the other innovations. Concerning this defect it can only be said that the conditions and problems described are characteristic of many large public and academic libraries and of numerous smaller institutions, that each reader will have to reject what is not applicable to a particular situation, and that since libraries generally are growing and expanding rapidly even the extreme problems cited quite probably have potential if not immediate relevance to all but the smallest institutions. As a concluding note to this introductory statement, it may be mentioned that the reader will find here no precise definition of the term “circulation work.” The delivery and charging of books occurs at many points in the modern library building. Wherever it occurs, other activities also occur or should occur. It is a thesis of this article that in many circumstances many of these activities constitute part of the circulation function.

It seems safe to say that throughout the centuries the most active single influence shaping library service has been growth. Certainly in the last thirty or forty years most of the changes libraries have made have been necessitated by growth in the numbers of books in their bookstacks, in the bulk and variety of printed materials in which man’s knowledge is recorded, and in the number of persons using libraries. In adjusting both to the physical problem of handling a vastly increased bookstock and the intellectual problem of acquiring and making available a knowledge of what is in books (books both in the library and not in the library), libraries have followed a common pattern. First, the library added staff. Having increased staff, it divided labor. As more staff members were added the library departmentalized, first by separating the public services from the processing activities—a functional division. With continued growth libraries continued to departmentalize, but in several different ways. In the processing division, the work continued to be divided according to function performed—acquisitions, cataloging, binding and labeling, etc. In the services division too, function provided the basis for the next steps in departmentalization: reference service was split off from circulation service, and in some cases shelf work also was assigned to a separate department.

In the public library, after this point had been reached, further departmentalization occurred not by function but by age group (separate juvenile or adult departments), or by form of material handled (periodical rooms, documents rooms, map collections). Finally, in addition to and supplementing the already-existing units, subject de-
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departments were established. Usually music and the fine arts came first, and next, perhaps, business and economics, with special services to the business community; or a teacher's room, or a science and technology department. In the late 1920's and early 1930's this gradual evolution of departmentalization received both sanction and new impetus when three large public libraries erected new buildings planned to implement the concept of almost complete subject departmentalization, in broad classes, of all library materials regardless of form, circulation restrictions or function (Cleveland, 1925; Los Angeles, 1926; Baltimore, 1932).

In the case of academic libraries, problems of growth forced the general library of the college or university to departmentalize by function in much the same way that public libraries did. But with respect to subject departmentalization the historical picture is more complicated. On many campuses there existed a cluster of collegiate and departmental libraries which typically were independent of (and which in some cases antedated) the general library. In many such cases the stresses of growth, made greater by lack of adequate financial support for the departmental units, tended to force some of the departmental collections into the general library—usually at a time when the latter acquired a large new building with ample expansion space. Thus, under certain circumstances growth caused a consolidation rather than a fragmentation of resources. In general, however, whatever consolidation occurred was more than matched by a trend toward increasing departmentalization which was not to be slowed until, in quite recent years, the divisional plan of organization was introduced. The university library acquired some departments by the extension of administrative control over existing, once autonomous units; others it created itself, usually to support the work of new academic departments offering instruction and conducting research in fields and disciplines new to knowledge or new to the particular institution. Moreover, in recent years academic libraries, in establishing undergraduate libraries, have utilized (much later than the public library) departmentalization by age group. But whatever the path to departmentalization, the academic library today is, like its public counterpart, highly departmentalized.

In thus specializing and departmentalizing its operations, the library made the classic response of all organized human endeavor to problems of growth and size. For the last twenty-five years it has also employed a steadily increasing number of other responses designed to enable it to handle efficiently a rapidly growing body of materials
and a constantly heavier service load. It has attempted to simplify operations through such devices as brief cataloging, the employment of vertical files for handling ephemeral material, and the transfer to the reader of some of the burden of making out charging records. It has sought to combine operations, for example, by utilizing for authority in cataloging a title, the information gained in searching the title prior to ordering it, by producing both book cards and catalog cards at the same printing, etc. It has eliminated operations by abolishing accession numbers and double and triple charging records, and by throwing the bookstacks open to the readers, thus reducing or eliminating the paging of books. It has reaped another advantage of the specialization and division of labor by breaking down some library tasks into several basic parts, each of which can be rapidly handled by easily-trained, relatively inexpensive clerical assistants. Finally, it has introduced mechanical devices to handle repetitive or large-volume routine operations (charging machines, mechanical sorters or collators, and Photoclerk cameras).

The total impact on public service of all these labor-saving and organizational changes has been substantial. The effect can be illustrated by contrasting “circulation work” as it once was understood with the pattern of public service in the typical library today.

In the majority of libraries forty or fifty years ago, and even as recently as the early 1930’s, "circulation work” or “loan work” meant not only placing a desired book in the hands of the reader and making the necessary records, but also recommending the book itself or helping the reader to decide what books it was he wanted. It meant the handling of information and reference questions, instruction in the use of the library, and the stimulation of reading, and it included the conduct of what later became known as a “readers’ advisory service.” It signified, in short, all the activities that took place at the service desk of the one-man library, or of the somewhat larger library that had not yet departmentalized beyond the point of separating its processing and its circulation operations. Frequently the person who handed the reader a book across the circulation desk had selected the book for purchase, had read it, and was prepared to discuss its qualities with the borrower.

Today, in all but the smallest libraries, these same services have been assigned to several, perhaps many, departments. Where once the reader found all his problems handled at the same spot, today’s inquirer at the charging desk will find himself referred to some other department of the library or, since there is at least a fair chance that
any particular question or interest may cut across subject disciplines and the arbitrary subject arrangements of the library, he may well find himself visiting several departments before his needs are satisfied. Again, the materials he desires may be held only in microfiche, which perhaps means a trip to another special department; or they may be in a storage collection, which requires negotiating for their retrieval and probably a wait of a day or two. If he is referred to the card catalog, he may run into some puzzling example of brief cataloging or some esoteric symbols indicating location, or he may find that certain analytical entries that would have been helpful to him have not been made—all circumstances which will leave him with problems that can be cleared up only through consultation with a staff member. Even that much-advertised boon to the library user, the open bookstack, poses problems for the modern reader, although he may not be aware of them. Any librarian experienced in reference work knows what oblique approaches the reader often takes to his problems, and how difficult it is for him to clarify in his own mind the precise nature of his interest. It seems a fair assumption that many a reader enters the bookstack with the same vague conception of what he wants, and one may ask how successful he is likely to be without human assistance—and how likely it is that he will attempt to seek out such assistance.

It may be argued that the preceding paragraph has overstated the difficulties of using the present-day library. It seems at least equally possible that it has understated them, for only some of the more obvious problems are touched upon. In either case the essential point cannot be denied, and that is, that as a consequence of departmentalization and the library’s other quite commendable gestures toward greater efficiency of operation, the library has become a far more complex tool to use, and therefore the dependence of the reader upon human guidance has been considerably increased.

This being the case, it is unfortunate that these same changes in library service have had the effect of making it more difficult for the reader to have access to human guidance, and more difficult for the library to provide full and accurate assistance. The general circulation or charging counter, which in most libraries remains a major point of public contact, in many cases has been stripped of all functions save those associated with the delivery and charging of books. Here, the reader finds that “circulation work” has come to signify, in the strict contemporary definition of the term, those library operations that take place after the patron knows the specific title he wants and
either requests it at the delivery desk or procures it himself from the shelves and brings it to the desk for charging. The activities are limited to handing the book to the reader, making and clearing the charging records, and performing whatever bookkeeping and notification operations are necessary to secure the return of overdue books and assess overdue and lost book charges. The desk is staffed almost entirely by clerical personnel, and their labors are aided by charging machines and other mechanical devices. The atmosphere is business-like and impersonal, and general questions are discouraged—either unconsciously because of the climate itself, or deliberately because the clerical staff is not equipped to answer general questions and the library has established other information sources for that purpose.

Two circumstances make this an unsatisfactory situation. The first is that the library reader persists in bringing up and discussing a variety of matters with the staff member who hands him his books or charges them. And the second is that the reader tends to be resistant to suggestions that he take his problems elsewhere in the library, even when the clerical assistant correctly perceives and comprehends the reader’s problem and then knows precisely where to send him. More frequently than we are ready to admit the result is that the reader’s problem remains unsolved, or the suggestion he has for the library remains unrecorded and unacted upon. It may be pointed out, in passing, that the library as a consequence of its own organization actually strengthens and encourages both of these reader attitudes. Typically, when subject departmentalization occurs in a library, not only books, but circulation and reference and bibliographical functions as well are transferred to the new units, which thereafter offer all these services in addition to the availability of a specialized book collection. The old, all-embracing conception of circulation work therefore flourishes at such desks, under the same roof that also houses a stripped-down, mechanized, clerically-staffed general circulation or charging desk. The reader is used to receiving full library service at such desks, and he naturally tends to expect the same service and the same opportunities to discuss problems and exchange viewpoints at every desk in the library.

But if the inaccessibility of qualified assistance is a deficiency of the contemporary general circulation desk, a possible deficiency of the departmental circulation desk is the inability of its staff to give complete and accurate information about the resources and services available in other subject or general departments of the library. Even if there is a general reference department or a general information desk
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staffed by a knowledgeable professional, readers will ask a great variety of questions at the departmental desks. Frequently they do not get the proper answers. In part this is because many departmental desks also are manned for a large part of the time by clerical assistants. In part it is because the busy professional librarians staffing the department do not have the time, and frequently have not been given the means, to inform themselves in sufficient detail of the resources of the library as a whole.

By way of summary then, and with the caveat that no generalization can have full applicability to all situations, it can be said that the larger public and academic libraries present library users with a number of obstacles to effective use of the library—obstacles which the library must perceive and take steps to remove. These obstacles include the dispersion of resources throughout the building, the arbitrary and always somewhat unsatisfactory division of the book collections, the location of some volumes in depositories of little-used materials, diminished cataloging control of the total resources of the library, the prevalence of various self-service devices coupled with a reduced provision of professional assistance, an impersonalized and mechanized main charging desk, and the use of clerical help to the exclusion of professional staff at major points of public contact. The library, in short, has been made a more complex tool for the reader to use, but the availability of assistance in its use has diminished, and the staff members who are available may not have the desirable range of knowledge of the library's resources outside of their own department.

In turning to a consideration of the steps that libraries take or may take to eliminate those obstacles or reduce their importance, the librarian is immediately confronted with the realization that if departmentalization and the specialization of labor have made the library a more complex and cumbersome instrument for the library user, they have also made the library a far more complex instrument for the library staff itself to manage. The pattern of service in the modern library represents a fragmentation of an operation once performed in its entirety by one person or one department. The unity of the larger operation has thus been destroyed, and somehow the library must restore that unity so that the organization may achieve its service goal. Basic to the achievement of unified service is a smoothly-working system of interdepartmental relationships, but such a system does not exist and function automatically. Rather, it must be established and encouraged, and must also be continuously adjusted and supervised,
either by the department heads themselves or by a coordinating officer.

The administrative difficulties involved in controlling the complexities introduced by departmentalization have not been generally recognized. The chief librarian sees that when he expands the number of his departments from four to five, he increases his direct relationships with department heads by one person. He is likely not to recognize that by this same simple action he has increased the number of possible combinations of departmental group and cross relationships (quite apart from any relationships he has with the departments) from the existing forty to an impressive ninety-five. This rapid multiplication of group relationships results from the fact, as Graicunas has pointed out, that such relationships increase at an exponential rather than a direct rate when a new supervisor (or department) is added to the organizational structure. Thus, if our chief librarian should later be led to organize his library into twelve processing and service departments, the number of possible group and cross relationships among the heads of these departments would reach the astounding total of 24,696!

It must be conceded at once that in practice the number of active relationships in both the five-department and the twelve-department library will be much smaller than the maximum figures given above. The number is diminished considerably by the fact that the work of some departments does not often impinge upon the work of the other departments. It is diminished still further because some departments perform routine work, which necessitates fewer and simpler relationships with other departments. Finally, the number is decreased wherever departmental relationships are not technical or functional in character. Despite these abridging factors, however, a substantial number of new relationships are created whenever departmentalization expands, and as E. A. Wight has mentioned, "The working out of this principle undoubtedly explains much of the necessity, as well as the difficulty, of effecting coordination in a large . . . library."

The importance of this problem can be indicated by glancing briefly at some of the many "circulation" activities which depend upon smooth interdepartmental relationships for proper handling.

There are first of all the matters which relate to the work of the preparations departments. There are binding problems, which range all the way from making certain that the circulation assistants cull out books in need of binding, through the determination of whether the book should be given "rush" treatment or can safely be put in the "deferred" category, to problems of working out departmental binding...
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quotas and scheduling the sending of materials to the binding department. These are relatively simple problems, but they may involve training to the same standard a dozen or more assistants in as many departments and coordinating the flow of bindery books from those same departments to a central point where they must be handled efficiently and without undue delay. There are problems associated with the inventory, typically conducted by or with the assistance of the circulation staff, which again require library-wide coordination to see that a detailed procedure is consistently observed throughout the system and that the separate departmental inventories are timed and spaced so that the inevitable flood of withdrawals and catalog and shelf list corrections does not swamp the cataloging department. There are decisions, usually involving several service and processing departments, concerning what analytics should be made or discontinued, or what cataloging provision is to be made for reprint series in microfacsimile, or what treatment should be given other special materials. All these are matters in which the circulation staff has an interest. Finally, there are also a host of such minor but nevertheless potentially confusing matters as the clearance of records for lost books, the need to rush the cataloging of badly-needed volumes, the establishment of uniform and library-wide tracing and replacement operations, etc.

A second group of activities includes those, already dealt with at some length, that may be described as shared responsibilities for reader aid. A reader presents a problem to a staff member, and three things must happen: (1) the staff member must comprehend the problem; (2) he must refer the reader to the one place and the one person best able to handle the problem; and (3) the reader must be given the best answer the library's resources afford. The successful accomplishment of these three steps depends heavily upon the existence and correct functioning of a system of interdepartmental relationships. The third step especially is possible of accomplishment only if the operations of the several departments have been thoroughly correlated in all their aspects—from the making of the decision as to which department shall develop what subjects, and which department shall house and service each title claimed by more than one department, to the assignment of service responsibilities in such a way that no needed and legitimate service is overlooked, and to the development of a spirit of service that will subordinate individual and departmental whim or convenience to the best interest of the library user.

There is a third category of reader-library contacts which thus far
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has only been glanced at, but which is of great importance to the library—the contacts during which the library learns something from its patrons. Staff members handling circulation work, whether in the general circulation or the subject departments, are perhaps in a better position than any other class of staff member to hear of the inadequacies of the library's resources and services. In the area of book resources, they regularly hear comments covering the whole range of unfilled desires—from the lack of a specific title to the weakness of the collection in an entire subject area. In the matter of meeting demands for titles enjoying great popularity, only they, in both academic and public libraries, have the contacts with the public which enable them to estimate demand for particular volumes or for books on particular topics, and to act in such a way that these demands are met, either through the duplication of copies or by placing the title in a reserve circulation category. In public libraries staff members are in a position to note the development of new interests on the part of the library's public, whether this is a common and widespread though unorganized interest, or whether it is stimulated by a new program sponsored by some social group or adult education agency. In an academic library setting, so frequently characterized by poor faculty-library communication, it may be the circulation assistant who first becomes aware of new teaching emphases or research projects which may have an effect on the library's service or acquisition program. It is at the circulation desk, central or departmental, that complaints about service are most frequently heard or overheard, and it is here too, that the unvoiced difficulties the reader experiences in using a highly-departmentalized library system may be observed, noted, and if properly handled, made a subject of investigation and an object of correction. All such information can be successfully channeled to the persons in a position to act upon them, and can then be acted upon, only if the library has a carefully coordinated and supervised system of interdepartmental relationships.

Granted the importance of active and smoothly-functioning internal relationships, what are the means available to achieve the desired unity of effort? There are many, and many of them are widely employed. Basic to all the others, however, and sometimes overlooked, is the provision of coordinating officers who will make certain that the other devices which promote the exchange of information and the integrated functioning of the whole library are actually utilized.

In this area, existing deficiencies are likely to be of several kinds. Frequently not enough "middle management" officers have been intro-
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duced into the organization to make manageable the hundreds or thousands of relationships that exist in a large enterprise. The largest workable span of control is hard to determine, particularly in libraries, but if the span is too great important matters may be overlooked or fail of action. There are a large number of university library public service divisions having fifteen or twenty or more departments ranged under one divisional chief or coordinating officer, but which nevertheless function with relative success, largely because of the similarity of problems faced by the departments and the absence of any large number of directly impinging group or cross relationships. But even in these apparently successful operations it is probable that the reader relationships described in the earlier parts of this article are not adequately provided for, that staff knowledge of the library’s total resources leaves much to be desired, and that important matters are not acted upon.

In other public and university libraries which have only lately reached substantial size and a high degree of departmentalization, all department heads, both processing and service, report directly to the chief librarian. These libraries tend to exhibit two common characteristics first, the chief librarian almost without exception has more responsibilities that he can do justice to; and second, because he cannot possibly find time to devote to the necessary coordinating activities, the individual department heads tend to conduct their operations in a way that will enhance their own prestige, or the resources of their department, at the expense of the over-all effort of the library. In such organizations, the interposition of a coordinating officer, either line or staff, with the primary task of unifying and integrating the service effort of the library, would help to achieve unity not only through the direct actions of the officer, but also because the very presence of such an officer places a premium on cooperative rather than individual effort. The degree to which public libraries have recognized these problems and provided for the coordinating function is to some extent indicated in the already-mentioned survey published in 1952 by Wight.\(^7\)

Given the necessary coordination, other devices may be successfully employed. Some of these take the form of written statements brought to the attention of all members of the staff both by direct distribution and by posting. These are of two major types, both of which are necessary: general announcements describing staff changes, special bibliographical and other services, hours of service, etc.; and printed procedures, jointly prepared where desirable, which outline both the
policies and the routines of the library. Some libraries have a carefully-planned system of staff meetings, not just of division heads meeting together, and department heads meeting together, but also of meetings of the staff members of the individual departments wherever the departmental staff is large enough to benefit through such meetings. Communication upward, from the newest page to the chief librarian, is of course as important as communication downward through the same range. Other devices include the preparation and distribution to the staff of descriptions of the holdings and the services of the special collections and departments within the library, the routing of departmental reports, and a regularized program for the exchange of personnel among departments.

One final word may be said concerning the task of making it both possible and easy for the reader and the library to establish the necessary communication. Only a limited answer is to be found in the physical devices now in use. Some libraries have trained the members of the circulation staff to refer readers to the reference department or a particular subject department. Others place an information desk near the circulation counter and the public catalog so that patrons may be referred or find their own way there. Most libraries provide one or more professional librarians behind the circulation desk to whom the patron is expected to address his problems and suggestions. All these devices are effective to a degree—when the information desk is staffed (and even in well-run libraries it often is not), when the reference assistants are not busy with other patrons and problems, or when the professional behind the circulation counter is not engrossed in setting up tomorrow’s schedule or deeply involved in settling a dispute about a lost or overdue book. Under such circumstances the necessary wait, or the required trip to another desk or another room, may be fatal to the reader’s interest.

Furthermore the library, by the mere provision of information desks, can never fully benefit from situations in which it may learn something from the reader. The reader’s needs have to be surmised more often than they are explicitly stated; his difficulties may more often be observed by a staff member than they are voiced by the patron; the indications are subtle and fleeting, and they must therefore be watched for, perceived, and then acted upon. Such delicate and evanescent attempts at communication will be overlooked unless the staff members dealing with the public at every circulation point are alert enough to catch them, informed enough to know what to do about them, and responsible enough to take the necessary action.
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Current trends in librarianship seem likely to intensify all the problems discussed in these remarks. The continuing growth of book collections and of knowledge itself will place a greater premium on the bibliographical services of the subject-specialist librarians, who therefore will be more and more often relieved of the "clerical" responsibilities of desk service. As a consequence, a still greater concentration of clerical personnel will occur at these service points. This pattern will be reinforced as more university libraries organize service on a divisional basis, because such service units inevitably are larger than departmental units. The tendency will be to staff with clerical personnel at the charge-out points, and to remove the professional staff a small but significant distance from the firing line. One suspects that the public library too will in the future order its materials in very broad divisions rather than in numerous small departments, and that the same growth in clerical staffing at circulation points will occur. At the same time other factors will continue to increase the reader's dependence upon human guidance. Mechanization and the use of microfacsimile will continue to grow. So will the trend toward the segregation of less-used materials in storage libraries—a trend that will increasingly pose problems of selection, cooperation, and service for the circulation as well as the reference personnel of the library. Even the approaches to teaching and to research are changing in ways that will demand more personal attention by the librarian. College instruction, which has progressed from the lecture method, to the use of the single text, to reliance on many texts, has already shifted to the requirement of independent work from students, many of whom are studying under custom-made programs. Research itself, in some areas of knowledge, has shifted or is shifting from a subject to a regional approach, and in almost all disciplines research more and more often cuts across a number of the conventional fields of knowledge rather than concentrating in one. This will continue, and as it develops the library's arbitrary divisions by subject will not only have less meaning than they now do, but will also present increasing difficulties for the reader except as the service staff is able to provide the integrating touch.

The four important desiderata, therefore, both now and for the future, are these: first, the library's administrative staff must recognize that reader-library relationships of all varieties, vital as well as trivial, exist or try to come into being at all circulation points; second, conditions favorable to the encouragement and reception of such matters must be created; third, effective channels for both communication
and action must be provided so that the entire staff can be informed about the library, the suggestions and problems of the reader can be transmitted to the proper staff member, and effective action can be taken; fourth, the supervisory organization of the library must be such that all these matters can be adequately and continuously provided for. If we now, in concluding, seem to be talking about the library’s administration rather than about the problems involved in circulation work, it is because the responsibility for the recognition and solution of these circulation problems lies with the administrative officers.

References