



## Current Concepts in Library Administration

E. W. McDIARMID

THE TERM "ADMINISTRATION" in librarianship has been subjected to various interpretations and definitions. One may readily recall the typical course in library schools labelled administration, which dealt with such diverse things as the mending of books, posting of bills, and relations with the library board. In many respects, the term library administration was synonymous with librarianship or library work. And in the minds of many people today, there is still difficulty in distinguishing administration from library work generally.

In the literature of library administration of recent years, however, one may see certain limitations to the former inclusive interpretations. Two types seem to be emerging: that to certain kinds of library activity, such as board relations, personnel, and budgeting; and that to certain levels of activity, such as planning and organizing. Under the former, for example, cost accounting would be included almost completely, even the detailed activities involved in keeping cost records. Under the latter, the activities in cost accounting involved with planning, organizing, and personnel would be labelled as administration, but not the detailed maintaining of cost records.

Is there a workable definition of library administration? This writer knows of no one which would delimit the subject clearly for the purposes of this paper. For, though there are numerous definitions of administration, they usually involve either a very broad concept, or one that is almost too narrow. Obviously, a broad description would mean a change in the title of this paper to "current concepts in librarianship." A narrow one could, on the other hand, limit the subject to the activities of only one or two persons connected with the library organization. Neither would be desirable, and the dilemma will be avoided by discussing, instead four attributes of administration: alternatives, analysis, authority, and accountability.

The author is Dean, College of Science, Literature, and the Arts, University of Minnesota.

### *Current Concepts in Library Administration*

The first element, alternatives, separates administration from routine doing. The administrative process enters when two or more pathways are open and custom or rule has not designated the route or method. But this is not enough if administration is to be distinguished from such an operation as deciding which stairway to take on the way to the card catalog. The second factor, analysis, remedies this deficiency, by requiring that the administrative process include consideration of choices. For some alternatives, one might need extensive collection and analysis of data; for others, careful subjective evaluation of possible outcomes. But the administrative process must involve some analysis of data and the weighing of anticipated results. The third attribute of administration, authority, means simply the right to make decisions and expect them to be followed. The fourth, accountability, is almost inevitably associated with authority in any good organization. This term is used in two senses, responsibility for success or failure of a given process or procedure, and responsibility for communicating information regarding success or failure. These four attributes—alternatives, analysis, authority, and accountability—characterize the most widely accepted concept of administration in librarianship today, one which phrased in less verbiage might be described as that of administration as management.

A second concept current in library and other fields of administration is that of central administration. This is almost antithetical to the idea of administration as management. The latter term implies administrative processes as permeating the entire organization and involving many members of the staff. Central administration tends to emphasize concentration of directive processes in the hands of a very few people. Though this author knows of no library where there is actual use of the term central administration, a glance at the literature of librarianship indicates a good deal of feeling that the main practitioners of administration are the librarian or director, and his immediate staff.

A part of the influence behind this concept would seem to be the military organization, where the general staff connotes in the minds of many people a central group, as contrasted with a departmental or regional group. Furthermore, in large organizations the tendency is for administrative decisions to be based upon staff analyses of data and materials—hence the presumption that the staff officers make the decisions. Perhaps the most notable example in higher education is at the University of Chicago, where a certain part of the hierarchy was specifically labelled as the central administration. In other large

colleges and universities now, even though there is no officially adopted term, the phrase is used frequently.

The use of the concept of central administration has certain advantages as well as disadvantages. First, it implies single-minded devotion to the objectives of the organization and its greatest good. Second, it involves the thought of a central pooling of information and data, and an analysis and evaluation of this for the benefit of the organization rather than fragmentary regional or departmental analyses. And, finally, it emphasizes accountability and responsibility. The disadvantages of the concept of central administration lie in the fact that it implies some bifurcation or separation, the central administration being somewhat remote from the actual operations of the organization and looking at them in terms of a few budget figures rather than of specific activities for achieving goals.

Central administration should not be permitted to become a divisive element. This means that it must communicate regularly its concern with the achievement of even the specific goals of separate units, and on the other hand that the various units must make certain that central administration is informed about their specific activities.

A third concept current in library administration seems also to be influenced by developments in other areas and particularly in the field of business administration, namely that of economy. This would be a suitable place to review and discuss some of the arguments regarding librarianship as an art or a science, and likewise the always interesting issue of library service as a mass service to popular needs vs. a limited service to quality needs.

There is no gainsaying the fact, however, that the concept of economy figures largely in library administration today. The reasons for this are obvious. Population growth, which provides more potential users of library work, together with the increasing flow of materials useful to library objectives, the rising cost of service in materials and personnel, balanced against the traditional slowness with which public support is given to public activities, illustrates the setting of the problem. It would be easy to cite example after example of the steps that have been taken to meet the issue: the cooperative library storage activities, the review and analysis of library routines—all of these have had behind them a large share of concern for economy. In many respects the major criteria in a given decision is that of expense, and in recent years methods of obtaining respectable cost information have been designed for libraries and have been employed in libraries.

### *Current Concepts in Library Administration*

In days of rising costs on all sides, one should certainly not decry the emphasis on economy if one is aware of the dangers. The easiest way to achieve economy would be to sacrifice quality. And in an organization whose greatest service may be through quality, this would be disastrous. Another way of seeming to achieve economy would be by an increase in quantity. This, too, has perils. Luckily, in librarianship today there seems to be a healthy appraisal of the proper place of economy, and its use has resulted more in improvement and simplification of library methods and procedures than in their dilution.

The fourth concept is that of lay participation in administration. Lay participation in administration seems much more common in educational institutions as schools, colleges, and libraries, than in business or professional organizations or institutions. While in a big business concern it might be said that the board of directors represents lay participation in administration, this is hardly comparable to the lay public library board or the citizens' advisory committee, or the parent-teacher association, or the alumni association. Furthermore, in recent years there seems to be a trend towards greater lay involvement in the affairs of educational institutions than formerly. The most notable example of late has been the widespread activity in trying to influence the standards and goals of education—a literally astounding outcry of ideas, pet theories, judgments, and proposals to improve the educational system by whatever means the particular individual happened to hold most dear. Such efforts have been directed towards influencing decisions, without authority or accountability, and, in the minds of many people, frequently without analysis. This illustrates the grave danger of over-emphasis upon lay participation. The lay person has little time for learning the details of an institution, and therefore must rely upon his own experience and knowledge in other fields, treating it as transferable to the institution he is concerned with at the moment.

The great advantage, of course, of lay participation is the gain in communication and in public relations. Certainly the more people that are concerned and informed about a library or any other institution, the better chance it has of gaining public understanding and support. At the same time, there are corresponding values of interpretation to the institution or organization itself. One of the great benefits of the current discussions of public education is that educators at all levels are now more aware of some of the difficulties faced by institutions at other levels than their own, and some of the things that are expected of their products. If people could now do less shouting at each other,

and get together to see how each could serve the other better, great good would be achieved. Generally speaking, the concept of lay participation in administration seems to be moving in the direction of responsible action through such groups as boards and advisory committees, with such groups made more intimately acquainted with the organization concerned.

It would logically follow here to introduce a comparable concept in library administration, that of staff participation. This entails an anomaly, for it seems apparent that there can be no organization of any kind involving professional people without staff participation. The question is one of degree, and the discussions of staff participation concern whether or not a staff should participate in every administrative activity or decision, rather than whether or not it should participate.

The arguments for wider staff participation in administration revolve around two factors: first, the wider base of information and experience upon which decisions can be based as more people are drawn into the discussions of them; second, the great increase in morale that is presumed to occur when staff members feel they have a part in shaping decisions which directly or indirectly affect them.

The dangers of wide staff participation in administration are well known: (1) the delay that is involved in bringing many persons into a situation which otherwise might be settled effectively and efficiently, and (2) the likelihood of irresponsible decisions being made, either through the influence of people who have no accountability for them, or by the accountable person but influenced by the effect anticipated upon those participating.

In view of the general acceptance of staff participation in administration, it seems almost heresy to suggest certain qualifications. It is proposed, however, that the basic gain to be achieved here, that of improved morale, is to be attained through understanding and communication, rather than through wider participation in the administrative process of facing alternatives, analyzing them, acting upon them, and being accountable for them. It would follow that staff participation should be looked at carefully with a view to growth in staff understanding, rather than to actual administration.

Observation in the field of higher education, where participation is currently of great interest, certainly supports the above view. In one institution where there seems to be very high morale, decisions are made by those charged with the authority for making them, but communication and the conveying of information are regular and ongoing

### *Current Concepts in Library Administration*

activities. On the other hand, reports come occasionally of another institution where there is much more widespread participation in administration but apparently not superior morale. Coming back to the library, one might well applaud the current concept of the importance of staff participation if it is reasonably directed towards widespread discussion and information, rather than to unwise delegation or shirking of responsibility and authority.

Another factor certainly to be recognized here is the role of the expert. Turning again to the academic scene, no one would argue that the faculty generally should advise and decide in which direction a certain professor of English should pursue his research in the next few years. One may well doubt therefore whether the research professor of English should have a strong voice in deciding which new building was most needed by the university.

The sixth concept in administration deals with organization, or the grouping of activities into units or departments. Whereas formerly there was a tendency to consider the organization as static or stable, the current concept treats it as dynamic, subject to change, and indeed frequently changed. When library administration some years ago was drawing upon the experience of public and business administration in evaluating the bases for departmental organization in libraries, substantial discussion occurred regarding the forms of administrative organization most suitable for libraries. There were arguments in favor of organization by region, type-of-reader, type of material, and subject. Generally, as one reviews the experience of libraries, this trend has served to determine, with some stability, the major bases of organization, yet leaving the boundaries and groupings of various units more flexible than, for example, political boundary lines.

While continuing and strengthening the basic types of organization, however, libraries and other educational institutions have subjected these to modifications and variations. There have been groupings of several lesser units into a single larger one; there has been the accretion of certain functions of library service in a department which formerly did not have them; and there has been the example of formerly independent or separate departments actually merged or combined into one.

There are two basic reasons for these developments. The first is that as institutions increase in size and complexity, activities formerly performed relatively simply become complicated and require distinct administrative units, which must be recognized in the administrative organization.

As for the second reason, it is very clear to any administrator of a large agency that the chances of finding exactly the right person for each administrative part in that organization is very difficult, and with the increasing shortage of personnel this has become a problem of even greater moment. As a consequence the institution, instead of going out to find the person ideally qualified to head the particular activities which are combined in a division at the moment, chooses the one who most nearly fits the qualifications. If he has other responsibilities these are frequently added to the section which he is promoted to head. There seems to have been much more of this in the auxiliary services, such as personnel, purchasing, budgeting, than in the line departments such as reference, circulation, and branch libraries. In a few instances, such changes have been made to reduce the span of control at a certain level, that is, to group into one unit as many diverse functions as can be conveniently placed there, in order to cut down the spread which the officer above will have to encompass. But, generally speaking, the major direction has been to utilize the talents of the person involved, rather than to fit the individual's talent to an organizational scheme or framework.

At the moment, this trend appears to be struggling against another in institutions of large compass, namely, the maintenance of the organization as it exists and the establishing of new administrative qualifications. If one reads the literature of business today, with its strong emphasis upon the need of liberal arts training for the successful executive, he cannot but surmise that practical problems of personnel are partially responsible. It is no longer possible in many organizations, and indeed in many libraries, for the mine-run executives to have had basic practical experience in all of the units. As a result, for persons who have authority and accountability over widely varying activities the important thing is to be broadly and liberally trained, and able to remedy deficiencies in practical experience by broad leadership and understanding qualities, those which a liberal education is designed to provide. In this sense, the search is for persons who can fit into the organization rather than for those who may amend or alter it to suit their competencies.

It is obvious that a little of both is essential to good administration. An organization should neither be constantly overhauled, nor be so rigid and static that it becomes confining. This is an area in which administrative theory could be tempered by careful analysis of the practical problems involved; and in institutions of education, includ-

### *Current Concepts in Library Administration*

ing libraries, this tends to happen. Thus, administrative organization changes, not according to whim or the vagaries of the time, but upon reappraisal of objectives, alteration of functions and activities as times change, and the qualifications of the individual for whom the organization is but a framework for accomplishment. The concept of organization as dynamic deserves to be widely understood and accepted in educational administration.

The seventh concept is that of administration as reflecting in some mysterious or esoteric way the wishes and needs of the community to be served. In libraries, as in other educational institutions, the function of administration has been held to be that of providing for community needs. The educational institution does not exist to create needs, which it then attempts to supply; it exists to analyze, appraise, and recognize needs which are either present in our society or implied, and which therefore require attention. Now this concept, which certainly has had a great influence in educational institutions, often produces more confusion than clarification, arising perhaps from the fact that the problems of communication are difficult, indeed almost insurmountable.

To be more specific, two of the questions upon which libraries receive from their clientele most communication, using the term broadly, concern things people think ought not to be on the shelves, and things of which they believe the library should have more. In educational institutions generally the questions are (a) why does the institution bother with this type of service? or (b) why doesn't the institution offer this type of service? Communications on such questions can be helpful, but hardly guides to administrative action, since they may be temporal, one-sided, or influenced by special interest. As long as the library is thought of as existing to serve certain needs, either better ways must be found of providing the communication necessary to appraise these, or the library must face its problems with imagination and insight rather than by direction.

This matter has a reverse side, the difficulty of communicating to the community itself, even where the goals of the library are relatively clear, what these goals are. The old saying, "One is judged by what he is rather than what he says," is pertinent here. The library is judged more by what it is to any given individual than what it says to that individual, and this means many varying attitudes in the community. And because there are many varying needs and interests, the library evidently is forced into trying to be all things to all people. Because of

the problems and difficulties of adequate communication, it cannot clearly limit and define its functions and services so that these may be fully understood, appreciated, and supported.

There may be no serious harm in this. Indeed it may be for the good of society that such instances occur, provided the library is not duplicating or competing with other institutions, and also provided that it is not permitting other institutions—using the term in the broad sense—to slough off onto the library some of the functions they should be performing. This latter difficulty comes out in many discussions of educational problems. Educational institutions are expected to take over certain of the functions that formerly were provided by other agencies in the community.

Broader and wider communication, both within the library and between the library and its public, is to be commended, and all that can be done to improve it would be beneficial. But since communications problems will never be completely solved, it would be highly desirable for the library to realize that there are limitations; and the fact that there are limitations should not affect the administration of the library in its major concern with the central purposes of the institution.

The final concept in library administration to be discussed is that of research. The suggestion is that the major emphasis upon research in librarianship so far has been in the direction of aiding the decision-making process, rather than of evaluating or testing fundamental assumptions or hypotheses. Further, this emphasis is an outgrowth of the traditional goal of library service, that of helping the scholar or student in his investigations.

The establishment of the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago aimed largely at stimulating fundamental research in the various areas of librarianship. The studies of C. B. Joeckel, Douglas Waples, Pierce Butler, and Leon Carnovsky were in keeping with this end. It was hoped that the original influence would reach to other library schools and libraries, and that there would be built up a large reservoir of research data permitting the re-assessment of library aims and library methods.

This goal, however, is yet to be achieved, for as research procedures began to be used more widely they tended to be directed toward the solution of practical problems. The methods used in making library surveys, for example, began to be employed more in libraries as a means of determining how to do the jobs better. Thus, research in

### *Current Concepts in Library Administration*

librarianship today tends to be more of the hardware type than the basic variety.

There is no easy explanation of why this is so. One reason, already suggested, is that one of the library's main activities throughout its history has been to aid the scholar in his search for knowledge. The library acquires material that he needs, organizes it for his use, and helps him discover and interpret what he requires. It is only logical that in its own discipline, librarianship should think of and use research as an aid in its daily work.

Second, it seems that librarianship's practical concern with its manifold activities makes it difficult to find the time for fundamental philosophical, sociological, and psychological studies. The hope that as library schools tended more and more to be associated with universities there would be greater interchange with the academic disciplines has not been realized. Library schools are so busy educating students with limited staffs, and libraries are so hard pressed to find people to fill their positions, that they have little time for research.

Here it seems is one of the major problems of librarianship today—a problem of long standing and hardly nearer of solution than it was years ago. Until there is basic research in the theory and philosophy of librarianship, as well as in most of the areas of library science, librarianship will tend to be a practical art, where administration consists largely of the application of tradition and custom to newer problems as well as to the increasingly complex older ones.

In discussing concepts in library administration as a part of a volume on current trends in library administration it is obvious that changes are taking place, but it is doubtful if there are clearly marked trends. There is discussion of library administration that seems to indicate progress and growth, but advances as yet are unsystematic in character and extent. It would be well for librarianship to associate itself more closely with discussions and research in administration generally, to the end that concepts might be more carefully defined and appraised, with the long-time objective of achieving a more definitive body of administrative theory.

### *General References*

Abbot, F. C., ed.: *Faculty-Administration Relationships*. Washington, D. C., American Council on Education, 1958.

McDiarmid, E. W.: Scientific Method and Library Administration. *Library Trends*, 2:361-367, Jan. 1954.

E. W. MC DIARMID

- A New Look at Administration. *Library Journal*, 82:3137-3164, Dec. 15, 1957.
- Wasserman, Paul: Development of Administration in Library Service: Current Status and Future Prospects. *College and Research Libraries*, 19:283-294, July, 1958.
- Wight, E. A.: Research in Organization and Administration. *Library Trends*, 6:141-146, Oct. 1957.