
Administration of Small Libraries

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A SMALL UNIVERSITY LIBRARY often seems large to a high school or special librarian, and the difference in size between very large and small public libraries is tremendous. The sophisticated librarian would cross off of his list many small libraries, of which there are tens of thousands, as not deserving the name "library." For this article, a search was made for a yardstick large enough to include the good small libraries without being big enough to get into many of the organizational problems plaguing large libraries. The one most suitable seemed to be that used by the McDiarmid study: ¹ ". . . those with staffs of less than ten people." Uppermost in mind, however, will be the small library that struggles along with only a few on the staff.

It seems reasonable to consider administration in terms of size rather than function, because many problems of administration are directly affected by the factor of size. As to the reason for small libraries, it is simply that they are ample for many needs. A small college, with a very limited undergraduate enrollment, certainly does not require the library plant essential in a large university. The village of five hundred population would find a big city library something of a white elephant if it were set down on Main Street. In special libraries, a small library is very important to a company involved in a lesser research program, and a library big enough to serve a large industrial complex would in no way be suited to it. Small libraries have their place, and a very important one in the total picture.

This article is concerned with administration in all kinds of small libraries. It will discuss the elements and principles of the administration of small libraries, using the outline employed by L. R. Wilson and M. F. Tauber.² The elements of administration vary in importance with the size of a library, and this will be taken into account. Planning, staffing, budgeting, organizing, directing, coordinating, and reporting will be considered. Although the principles of administration are the

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same for small libraries as for large ones, the emphasis differs. The principles to be discussed are division of labor, authority and responsibility, discipline, unity of command, unit of management, subordination of individual interests to the common good, remuneration, centralization, the hierarchy, span of control, departmentation, line and staff, order, equity, stability of staff, initiative, and esprit de corps.

Planning is important for all kinds of libraries. It involves not only the unit itself, but that larger thing of which the library is a part, whether it be a university, a city government, a school, or a research institution. As in chess, every move must lead toward a predetermined end. Planning states the objective and routes the movement towards it. In today's large library, motivated by a democratic type of administration, planning is benefited by the participation of a large professional staff. The small library suffers from the lack of such participation. Some of this can be overcome by outside professional advice. For a special project, such as a new building, such advice can be hired. For other matters, the small staff can profit greatly by attendance at professional meetings and by professional reading. In planning, as in all administrative phases of his work, the head of a small library is usually handicapped because of work pressure. He tends to be more involved in the operation of the library, as distinct from the administration of it. The smaller the library, the more likely this is to be true. An awareness of it on the part of the librarian will do more to cure it than anything else. Planning is often made difficult in the small unit also by the fact that the place of the library in the larger budget structure is less clear, less secure. In general, larger libraries have a better idea of the amount of money with which they will have to operate. The planner in the small library is hampered continually by lack of adequate funds and by uncertainty, and this probably explains a certain stagnancy in the growth of small libraries in general. A case could be made for the proposition that planning is even more important in the small library than in the large, in that as much as possible must be extracted from the limited resources available.

Although the small library has fewer positions to fill, it needs to exercise great care in filling them. Members of its staff find themselves doing a wider variety of things, and should be capable of adjusting to a wider range of activities. The clerical help must be of high calibre because it often must fill in when professionals are absent. In the large library, if an inadequate person has been hired, he can be transferred to some part of the staff where his shortcomings are less

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evident. This is impossible in the small library. In most, but not in all types of small libraries, the salaries are smaller. This is only one reason that it is harder to attract people to positions in them. There is less opportunity for advancement, and less chance to specialize in any certain aspect of library work. Because small libraries are more likely to be understaffed than large libraries, work pressure is also greater. On the plus side, it certainly can be said that the librarian in the small library comes to know more thoroughly the public he serves, and thus is often able to render better service to the individual. Again, while the new staff member is in training in a small library, he finds himself benefiting from close contact with the whole staff. In a library of any size, administration must be concerned with personnel policy, hence salaries, hours of work, convenience of physical surroundings. These are all of concern in the small library as elsewhere.

Financial administration involves not only budgeting, but dealing with such things as bookkeeping, purchasing, fines, the financial situation of the larger organization to which the library belongs, and relations with other parts of the larger organization which have some responsibilities for library finances. The small library is perhaps unlikely to have someone on the staff who takes care of the library's financial affairs as a full-time task. Either the librarian or the business office of the parent institution handles it. Although every library should have a budget system regardless of its size, many small libraries are without that. One of the effects of this situation is that the library must live on the leavings of the larger budget from which it feeds. The budget of the small library is relatively simple and commonly is made up by the librarian in charge. This means that the librarian is in somewhat closer touch with the budgeting than in the larger library, which often has a staff officer to handle such work.

In the small library having more than one person on the staff, the nature of the staff helps determine the departmentalization. If there is only one professional worker, of necessity those tasks that can only be performed by a professional person must be discharged by him. This often means that the librarian is so busy in selecting, ordering, and cataloging materials that little time is left for service to the public. Inasmuch as the latter certainly calls for a professional type of service too, the next step in organizational growth should be to have a person for the public service, including reference work. Beyond this, the head of the library should be given more and more time to devote to administrative duties. At all stages, clerical work should be done by

clerks whenever possible. Work relationships should be clearly defined, so that each individual understands his responsibilities, and position descriptions should be established for each post. With "directing," as with organization, there is less concern in the small library than in the large. However, as soon as the staff increases beyond one, someone must direct, and someone must give thought to the effect of this on future policy. The "chain of command" and "keeping in channels," so important in a very large system, seem relatively unimportant in the small library. Coordination, too, is a somewhat simpler matter in the small library. Again, however, the minute there is any departmentalization, coordination becomes a problem—for instance, those who select, order, and catalog materials must know the needs of the public for which this is done. Poor coordination in this sphere could lead to the creation of a book collection unrealistic in terms of the needs of the readers.

Reporting is important for the small library as well as the large one, and when the reporting is to persons who are not librarians it is particularly so. In this case there is a responsibility on the part of the report writer to "educate" the recipient in the real meaning of library service and in the possibilities of that service if it is properly supported at the top level. There have been cases where properly written reports have resulted in greatly increased funds for a library. Material for them must be gathered with the purposes of the reports in mind, being a part of the administrative responsibility. It should be added that the librarian should keep firmly in mind the over-all aims of the institution which the library serves. The effectiveness of the library in furthering these objectives may be most important to the reader of the report.

The art of administration is perhaps so-called because so much is involved in the way it is done. In discussing the principles of administration of small libraries, it must be remembered that the method of applying these principles is very important. Each individual will use them differently, and therein often his success or failure will lie. It is in such utilization that the chief disparity between large and small libraries appears. In the following discussion of these principles, particular applications to the small library situation will be noted.

The head of a library is responsible for all of its activities, whether or not he delegates any of his responsibility. If he does pass on some of his duties however, he can hold responsible the person to whom he delegates them. In case that person proves unreliable, the authority

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given can be withdrawn. As long as a department head, for instance, has responsibility for his department, he, and not the library director, runs that department. He in turn may hand over authority to someone within his department. In a small library this is done somewhat less than in a large library because the librarian finds less need to depute authority.

Related to this is unity of command. A worker should receive orders from only one superior and should be responsible to only one. Department heads should not give direction to assistants in other departments. Also, the librarian should not give orders directly to assistants of department heads to whom he has delegated authority. A small staff certainly makes adherence to this principle more difficult, as there is more of a temptation to by-pass when contact is close.

A considerable amount has been said here about division of labor as an element in organization. It is also an important administrative principle. When a library is beyond the one-man stage, each task should be the responsibility of one person. If everyone were to do part of each task, there soon would be confusion. Assignment of tasks should be reasonable in terms of time and place and should conform to local usage. The small library must often, being a smaller unit and more dependent, do more than others might do to conform to the habits of a parent institution. Also, a small library patently can not always avoid setting up a job requiring less than the full time of one person.

In libraries of all sizes the problem of discipline must be effectively solved through good leadership. The head of a small library has a greater opportunity to judge disputes fairly, because he has more opportunity to know the facts in a case. He should not be a strict disciplinarian, but make each person realize that everyone on the staff, himself included, is bound by agreements which will render the library an effective operating unit. It is important that there be an over-all feeling of fair play, respect for authority, and freedom from the burden of discipline applied by a strict taskmaker.

The principle of unit of management stresses the need for organizing in such a way that the planning and operation for each kind of work, e.g., acquisitions, be done on the basis of units. Such arrangement must, of course, fit into the total plan, but each minor part must have its separate planning and administration. The smaller the library, the less emphasis is needed on this principle. However, it becomes more important with the addition of each new staff member.

The number of persons with whom the top administrator must deal is not much of a problem in a small library. However, if the library is departmentalized, the administrator may well deal directly only with department heads. Certain types of library work, such as cataloging, call for more detailed supervision. If the library is in two places rather than one there is a limitation on the control that can be exercised by one person. If work in an area is homogeneous, supervision is relatively easy. In whatever case, the larger situation forces the administrator to relinquish his direct supervisory duties, creating a hierarchy in which authority is exercised through "channels." Orders go down the line and requests come up. At each "landing" there is a "line" chief who has administrative authority over those directly below him. "Staff" officers are advisory and are usually asked to do special jobs for which they are especially fitted. Their status in the hierarchy is not changed because of this. The small library is not much concerned with "line and staff," but the principle entailed in it holds good for all libraries staffed by more than one.

Determining "what is a fair salary" may be more difficult in the small library than in the large, since formal compensation schemes may be not so likely to exist where there are few persons on a staff. Yet the remuneration of an individual should be just in relation to the wages paid to others having more or less the same qualifications and doing work of equal importance. Good employees should be rewarded by raises, as an incentive to do better work. In turn, the library assistant should subordinate his interests to the common good in library matters.

In the matters of equity, stability, initiative, and esprit de corps, the whole staff of any library, small as well as large, is involved. In equity, equal pay for equal work and non-preferential treatment are important. The former assumes that the holders of comparable positions are equivalently qualified, and the latter that individuals ordinarily do not deserve special consideration. Stability of staff, which these days is endangered by the scarcity of librarians and the resulting turnover, is something to be sought. If a staff is full of excellent people, stability may decline because of opportunities to move to better positions in other libraries. The alternative is to load the staff with librarians who do average work and will be less likely to resign. Perhaps a combination of the two is best. A completely stable staff would hold some who might better be lost, which would be unhealthy. Initiative should be encouraged, and staff members who suggest and carry out projects are happier and work harder than would be possible otherwise. This

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can be carried too far, of course, but in moderation it is excellent. The administrator can do a great deal to help develop an esprit de corps. An "open door" policy, plus proper application of the above mentioned principles, will lead to a feeling of general well-being. The administrator should be friendly and willing to help in difficult personnel situations.

In the small library there should be a higher degree of centralization than in the large library. The duplication of bibliographical tools and in book purchasing otherwise necessary is impractical in the small situation. Moreover, departmentalization usually does not reach such a stage of development that a subject arrangement of materials is feasible, and it is this arrangement that is the usual motivating force towards decentralization.

Another principle concerns the correct placing of work and personnel. Even in a small library the work flow should be such that incoming materials progress logically from one point to the next in an efficient manner, and that use of the materials later, by staff and public, is distributed efficaciously. Personnel-wise, this means that each person should be in a place suitable to his experience and talents.

This discussion has shown that in administrative matters small libraries differ from large libraries only in the manner and degree of applying administrative elements and principles. The chief dissimilarity seems to lie in the ways of employing the principles. The closeness of the administrator to his library operation, the relatively uncomplicated organizational structure of the library, and the small budget, are all factors in this application. Although administration is not the problem in the small library that it is in the large one, the librarian of the former would do well to study it, thinking in terms of his own library activity.

References

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