
Student Use of New York's Libraries

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THE SIMPLE FACT that the libraries of New York City are heavily used by college and university students is news to no one. It has become almost traditional for the *New York Times* to run a picture of the Christmas holiday hoard of students that regularly flood the Reference Department of the New York Public Library, and it is the rare urban public librarian who cannot expound on the college student "problem," at times in strong and positive terms. But in only a few instances has any specific information been assembled about the amount of this use or the reasons behind the extensive and apparently growing interlibrary migration of students.^{1, 2}

To acquire this kind of information for a study of the potential of interinstitutional cooperation, a survey of student use of New York's libraries was made during the spring of 1960. The findings were used to blueprint a long-range cooperative library program designed to satisfy the requirements of college students in metropolitan New York. The project was sponsored by the Council of Higher Educational Institutions in New York City.

The purpose of the study was to determine in detail the amount and the nature of the use which higher education students make of metropolitan New York libraries to supplement the library resources provided at their own schools. The findings reported here are based upon responses to a questionnaire sent to a carefully drawn sample of 5,000 students enrolled for credit courses at every higher education level on either a full- or part-time basis. Since slightly more than 200,000 individuals were enrolled for credit in the eighty metropolitan area higher education institutions at the time of the survey, the sample represented about 2.5 per cent of total enrollment. Over 66 per cent of the questionnaires were completed and returned, strong evidence of the active interest students have in the library resources available to them.

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Students were asked to identify "other" libraries used during the 1959-60 academic year, to note the frequency of use, and to indicate reasons for this use. Additional information was requested to permit analysis of use in relation to three possible determinants: (1) the academic characteristics of the students; (2) the geographical relationship between the location of the library used and that of home, school, or work; and (3) the quality of the library service available to the student at his own school. The responses were tabulated and the results analyzed in a report prepared for the Council's Library Advisory Committee.³ The principal findings of the general parts of that report follow.

How Heavily Do Students Use Metropolitan Area Libraries?

More than eight of every ten students who returned a questionnaire indicated that they had used a metropolitan area library at least once during the 1959-60 academic year. (Unless otherwise indicated, the library at each student's own college is excluded in all discussions and tabulations. This report is concerned only with student use of "other" libraries.) This gross use figure varied by only 11 per cent among the several categories of general schools, i.e., universities, large colleges, smaller colleges, and junior colleges. Among the group of specialized institutions, represented in the sample by medical, music, theological, and scientific schools, this use dropped slightly; but even here, over two-thirds of the students made some use of other libraries.

Making this high sheer use figure even more meaningful and impressive is information on the number of different libraries used by students and on the frequency of use. More than half of all respondents reported using two or more different libraries during the course of the year (Table I).

TABLE I
Number of Different Libraries Used

<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Used one other	31%
two others	31
three or more	21
Total users	83%
Nonusers	17
	100%
Total number	(3,322)

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The following paragraphs, selected from comments made by students in their responses, indicate something of the complexity of this extensive migration. One wrote: "I used the Academy of Medicine for special assignments in my physiology courses. The 42nd Street Library was used for the same reason. The other Manhattan branches were used for other course assignments and reading for enjoyment. . . . The Municipal Library was used for information on public health course assignments dealing with various departments in New York City."

Another full-time student, an undergraduate majoring in classics at a Manhattan university and living in New Jersey, wrote: "I used the 42nd Street Library for certain obscure items I could not get at [my school]. I used the Bronx branches for ordinary circulation items that were already borrowed. . . . The only Manhattan branch I used was the Music Library at 58th Street, which I used quite often since my role as accompanist of our Glee Club demanded it. I used the East Orange Library, which is near my home. . . . I also used the Newark Public Library very often, going so far as to buy a non-resident card there, because their circulation collection is in my opinion, better than that at any public library system I have seen. . . ."

A chemistry major, a junior, probably typifies many "three library" users in this brief statement: "New York Public, 42nd Street,—used this library on weekends for convenience rather than traveling to college library. Used specifically for term papers. Branch library—for general reading. Chemists' Club—for specific work in field of chemistry."

Frequency of use is an equally important element of the pattern, since one student using a library monthly or more often through the year is, from a service standpoint, the equivalent of several users making less frequent visits. Almost half of all respondents indicated that they were in this "regular user" category, and three-fourths assessed their use as something more than infrequent (Table II). It should be noted that the tabulation of the responses showed that the most frequent users of metropolitan area libraries are also likely to be the users of more different libraries.

Since the sample was not controlled for geographic distribution, a tabulation of the reported use of each library in the metropolitan area would be meaningless. Taken collectively, however, there is no doubt that units of the three public library systems of New York City are second homes, in a bibliographic sense, for a great many students.

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TABLE II
Frequency of "Other" Library Use

<i>Frequency of Use</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Used at least one library:	
at least weekly	17%
at least monthly	30
several times	26
infrequently, or only once . .	10
	83%
Total users	83%
Nonusers	17
	100%
Total number (3,305)	

Academic libraries (excluding, of course, each student's own) were used by about 5 per cent of the respondents while another 5 per cent used libraries of nonacademic institutions such as museums, medical societies, and court libraries. Company and business libraries were used by 2 per cent. The extensive multiple use of libraries by many makes it certain that over 75 per cent of all students in the New York area made some use of a public library unit during the academic year studied.

From these facts, it is evident that most of New York's higher education students use, and use heavily, the wealth of library resources available to them in New York City to supplement, and no doubt, in some instances, to supplant, the libraries provided at their own schools.

Which Students Are the Most Frequent Users?

The fact that the great majority of students made some use of a metropolitan area library during the 1959-60 academic year precludes identification of any significant characteristics that might distinguish the user from the nonuser.

Even when attention is focused exclusively upon the regular or heavy user, only a few of the more obvious possible determinants seem to have even a moderate influence. The factor of employment, for example, has little effect upon library use. Students working up to 30 hours a week use "other" libraries at the same rate as those who do not work at all, and those who work full time report only slightly less use. The related element of course load also seems to have no effect on library use.

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TABLE III
Frequency of Use Related to Degree Program

<i>Degree Program</i>	<i>Frequency</i>			<i>Total number</i>	
	<i>At least weekly</i>	<i>Monthly, or several times</i>	<i>Infrequent or none</i>		
Associate	15%	67%	18%	100%	192
Bachelor	15	60	25	100	2160
Master	20	49	31	100	484
Doctor	24	41	35	100	178

The academic level of a student is a somewhat stronger factor. The most intensive users as well as the largest proportion of nonusers are to be found among the advanced degree students. Undergraduate students, the largest category by far, tend to be "monthly" or "several times a year" users (Table III).

As might be expected, subject field also has a moderate but distinct effect upon the frequency of use. The liberal arts generate more intensive student migration to supplementary libraries than do most professional fields. Education, where professional work is generally closely tied to a liberal arts field, closely follows the liberal arts pattern (Table IV).

Stimulants of "Other" Library Use: The Search for Books

The size of the book collection at a student's own college and his personal evaluation of that collection are two factors that have a substantial influence upon the amount of use made of other libraries.

One of every three students considered the book collection at his

TABLE IV
Frequency of Use Related to Subject

<i>Subject Field</i>	<i>Frequency</i>			<i>Total number</i>	
	<i>At least weekly</i>	<i>Monthly, or several times</i>	<i>Infrequent or none</i>		
Humanities and history	22%	56%	22%	100%	577
Social sciences	16	63	21	100	353
Natural sciences	19	55	26	100	476
Education	21	58	21	100	612
Business	11	58	31	100	524
Engineering	13	51	36	100	280
All other professions	11	53	36	100	378

TABLE V

Frequency of Use Related to Student Evaluation of Own Library

<i>Book Collection Considered:</i>	<i>Frequency</i>			<i>Total number</i>	
	<i>At least weekly</i>	<i>Monthly, or several times</i>	<i>Infrequent or none</i>		
Adequate.....	13%	54%	33%	100%	2089
Inadequate.....	23	62	15	100	1068

own college (or, in a few instances, access to the collection) inadequate for his needs. These students used more "other" libraries more frequently than did their better-satisfied fellows (Table V). The dissatisfaction, while diverse in specifics, stems from too few books, either in general or in a specific subject, from a shortage of up-to-date books, or from too few copies of books in heavy demand.

This judgment of collegiate library book collections tells only a part of the story, however. In all, about two-thirds of the more than 2,700 students who reported use of area libraries reported that they did so to borrow or otherwise use books to supplement the resources of their own school. Almost 1,000 respondents related use to formal course work—assignments, required reading, and term papers. Almost as many who did not specifically relate use to course work left little doubt that such was the case. Five hundred students indicated leisure or nonacademic reading as one reason for "other" library use, but with few exceptions this kind of use was coincident with the pursuit of academic materials.

In an effort to assess the relationship between college and university book collection size and student dependence upon "other" libraries, the libraries of the twenty colleges and universities represented in the sample were categorized. The university libraries were grouped by collection size on the assumption that this factor is significant when educational programs are extensive in both scope and depth. The colleges were divided on the basis of volumes per student; this method was judged to be a more realistic measure than total size at the collegiate level.

These units of measure are admittedly crude. They do not take into consideration rate of growth, collection age, serial subscriptions in force, or any of many other pertinent elements. (Though, within school types, it was found that there is often high correlation between

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many of these factors and collection size.) But crude as they are, these measures serve to indicate a definite relationship between collection size and other library use.

Table VI relates collection size to frequency of "other" library use by students in four different groups of schools offering general, as distinct from specialized, programs. In almost every instance, "other" library use drops significantly as the university or college library resources increase in quantity. That the smaller college with the best volume per student ratio also has a relatively large number of resident students is a fact that should be noted, since it accounts for the low level of use of "other" libraries.

The relationship to use of both collection size and perceived adequacy is demonstrated in Table VII. Within each institutional category the pronounced and consistent difference in regular use between the dissatisfied student from the "small library" school and the satisfied student from the "large library" school indicates the effect of objective measures and subjective judgments. In this table, the term "regular" means that another library was used once a month or more often. Students reporting less frequent or no use are not included in this tabulation, so percentages are not totaled.

Stimulants of "Other" Library Use: The Element of Convenience

In the realm of libraries, one operating principle of many students is supremely practical. Simply stated, it is to use the closest accessible

TABLE VI
Frequency of Use Related to Collection Size

<i>Collection Size</i>	<i>Frequency</i>			<i>Total number</i>
	<i>At least weekly</i>	<i>Monthly, or several times</i>	<i>Infrequent or none</i>	
A. Universities				
Below 1,000,000 vols.	15%	63%	22%	100% 327
1,000,000—2,000,000	16	50	34	100 489
2,000,000 plus	9	35	56	100 181
B. Large Colleges				
10—18 vols./student	20	63	17	100 1460
19—27 vols./student	13	55	32	100 196
C. Smaller Colleges				
63—71 vols./student	19	59	22	100 161
72—80 vols./student	3	41	56	100 105
D. Junior Colleges				
Below 10 vols./student	18	66	16	100 169

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TABLE VII

Regular Use Related to Both Collection Size and Student Judgment of Adequacy

		<i>Regular use, expressed as a percentage of all respondents in the category.</i>		
A. Universities				
<i>Book Collection Considered</i>		<i>Book collection size (millions of vols.)</i>		
		<i>Below 1</i>	<i>1-2</i>	<i>2+</i>
Adequate.....	42%	32%	23%	
Inadequate.....	52%	52%	33%	
Total numbers.....	219	320	155	
	99	137	21	
B. Large Colleges				
<i>Book Collection Considered:</i>		<i>Book collection size (vols./student)</i>		
		<i>10-18</i>	<i>19-26</i>	
Adequate.....		51%	37%	
Inadequate.....		64%	41%	
Total numbers.....		844	114	
		588	71	
C. Smaller Colleges				
<i>Book Collection Considered:</i>		<i>Book collection size (vols./student)</i>		
		<i>63-71</i>	<i>72-80</i>	
Adequate.....		42%	12%	
Inadequate.....		62%	0%	
Total numbers.....		109	87	
		50	15	

library that can supply the book or information needed when it is needed.

In a city where most students live at home and not at school, the closest library is often not his college or university library, but rather a public library branch or central building. This tendency is a fact of urban life. Even students at schools with exceptional libraries make substantial use of "other" libraries when such a course is easier. More than 800 respondents identified convenience as the primary reason for their use of "other" libraries. Most specified or implied convenience to home. The relationship between place of work and the location of libraries used seems significant only in Manhattan. The effect of school location is somewhat more important, but is still not a major factor in determining the pattern of use.

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TABLE VIII

Circulating Library Use Related to Place of Residence

<i>Library</i>	<i>Per Cent of all students residing in borough and reporting some use</i>	<i>Per Cent of all students not residents of borough and reporting some use</i>
New York Public Circulation Dept.		
Manhattan Branches.....	50	11
Bronx Branches.....	72	4
Richmond Branches.....	85	1
Brooklyn Public		
Main.....	65	4
Branches.....	65	2
Queens Borough Public		
Main.....	37	2
Branches.....	59	2
Total numbers:		
Manhattan	547	
The Bronx	568	
Richmond	55	
Brooklyn	1116	
Queens	441	

Table VIII relates place of residence to the geographic location of circulating public library units in the city. It is obvious that only a small part of student use of library facilities in a given borough is generated by nonresidents of the borough (Table VIII).

The Reference Department of the New York Public Library is a notable exception to the general pattern. Table IX shows that this unit draws its student users from all parts of the metropolitan area to a far greater degree than does any other library. Students use this library less frequently than any other library considered in the study, but more different students (44 per cent of all respondents) use it at one time or another than use any other library in the city. It might be implied from this that "search for books" dominates even the element of convenience when the chips are down. In fact, a more detailed analysis of data than is presented here indicates that this library is the keystone in the remarkable complex of libraries—public and private, general and specialized—used by the thousands of New York City higher education students.

Stimulants of "Other" Library Use: Minor Factors

The search for books, either titles in great demand or those that are less common, and the element of geographic convenience are together the prime movers of students. Other factors affect use and

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TABLE IX

*Use of the New York Public Library Reference Department
Related to Place of Residence*

<i>Place of residence</i>	<i>At least weekly</i>	<i>Monthly, or several times</i>	<i>Infrequently</i>	<i>Not at all</i>		<i>Total number</i>
Manhattan	4%	33%	17%	46%	100%	547
The Bronx	3	32	19	46	100	568
Staten Island	2	25	11	62	100	55
Brooklyn	2	23	16	59	100	1116
Queens	2	30	12	56	100	441
New Jersey	1	23	8	68	100	144
Long Island						
Suburbs	1	14	7	78	100	204
Northern Suburbs	1	22	15	62	100	237

determine which libraries are used, but are of far less importance.

For example, weekend and vacation hours have some effect. One student who reported using the Brooklyn Public Library central building, concluded his comments by saying, "the only drawback to Sunday is that every student in Brooklyn is using the library on that day."

Some looked with favor upon open stacks when the same privilege was not given at their own school. Two-week rather than two-hour loan periods, availability of specialized equipment, skilled staff assistance, and comfortable surroundings were all counted as assets by significant numbers of students.

The working, part-time student has some problems not shared by his full-time counterpart. Because this group is large (one-third of all respondents reported working more than 30 hours weekly) their needs would seem to require special consideration. Sometimes library hours prove a handicap. More often the regulations governing circulation, especially of reserve books, are strongly criticized, since those rules are most often geared to the needs of full-time students.

There was no intent in this study to evaluate the quality of library service provided students in the public and other libraries used, but many respondents volunteered opinions. The limitations of branch libraries, which are of course generally not intended to serve collegiate students, were noted by a substantial number of students. Most adverse criticism related to collections, but other complaints concerned, somewhat ironically, the noise made by high school students, curtailed hours of service, and procedural practices.

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A Postscript

In one sense, the information developed from the study reported here does little more than verify a generally recognized condition. In another way, however, this same information, along with the process of acquiring it, has had a far greater impact. For the first time, both public and academic librarians are conscious of the magnitude and the implications of student migration to "other" libraries.

Based upon this and other studies, and upon discussions among librarians and administrative officers of many institutions, is the report *Cooperative Library Service for Higher Education*⁴ prepared for the Council of Higher Educational Institutions in New York City. As New York's student population grows, and the demands upon libraries of all kinds increase, it is intended that the plans advanced in this report will be put to use to help create more libraries for the use of students.

These proposals call for the creation of a system of supplementary academic libraries to be built and operated in the metropolitan area. Perhaps as many as five such libraries, each located with an eye to transportation facilities, college and university location, and residential concentration, would be developed over the next ten years. With collections up to 200,000 volumes and seating for a thousand or more readers, these libraries would serve to supplement the collections of individual schools. They would bridge the gap between the general collegiate collection and the large research library. At the same time, they would provide a meeting ground for public and academic libraries. But first of all, they would be additional libraries of high quality for the use of college students.

It is anticipated that these libraries would be financed and administered by a regional reference and research library system, such as proposed in a series of continuing studies made under the direction of a Committee appointed by the New York State Commissioner of Education.

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