



Decentralization in Academic Libraries

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THE CHANGE TAKING PLACE in all areas of human knowledge is increasing at a tremendous rate and is exponential in character, i.e., where change occurs new information is generated, which in turn creates change, *ad infinitum*. This growth of information by compound rather than simple progression is reflected in the upward spiral of publication and an accelerated growth of library collections. The end result is an ongoing spatial problem which has become critical.

The prime question is, of course, what alternatives are available (other than new construction) when a library's collections approach the limits of its stack capacity. Keyes D. Metcalf suggests three major possibilities: transfer of material from an overcrowded unit of the library to another unit; storage; and rejection of material—weeding for gift, exchange, sale, or outright discard.¹

This paper will consider the various approaches to relocation or decentralization as possible solutions to the spatial problem. There is and has been considerable discussion in the literature of librarianship on the topic of decentralization. All of the traditional arguments on both sides have been presented in a very capable manner; however, the problem of decentralization is interesting and becomes more complex with the growth of what has come to be called the multi-university. Perhaps the only excuse for yet another examination of the topic was ably stated by Metcalf: "As long as there are universities with large libraries, the question of centralization or decentralization will be a live topic for discussion; and, if I am not mistaken, the question will never be settled permanently one way or the other."²

Robert R. Walsh divides the forms of decentralization into "two *species*." In the first he includes that type of division based on kinds

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of forms and materials, i.e., separate libraries for rare books, map collections, documents, and so on. He identifies this pattern as "operations-oriented." The second or "user- and subject-oriented pattern" includes graduate and professional school libraries, laboratory collections, and separate undergraduate libraries.³ It is proper at this time to note other terms linked to decentralization that have appeared in the literature. The University of North Carolina has engaged in "planned decentralization" in contrast to "expedient decentralization." The result is the creation of large multi-disciplinary libraries, or "cluster libraries."⁴ Douglas Bryant of Harvard used the term "coordinated decentralization" to describe the administrative integration of ninety units of the university library system.⁵

A detailed historical background of the topic can be found in Lawrence S. Thompson's evaluation of the trends in the development of departmental and collegiate libraries.⁶ An earlier document was issued by the University of Chicago in 1924.⁷ Most of the traditional arguments for and against centralization are developed here, and, as Wilson and Tauber point out, it was a unique study in that "it was the product of a faculty committee which approached it from the points of view of building requirements and subject interrelations."⁸ Many other singularly outstanding discussions have been presented, among them Miller,⁹ McAnally¹⁰ (particularly the administrative aspects), and Rush.¹¹ Within the last fifteen years at least two symposia relating to the topic took place. The first concerned itself with divisional library needs for undergraduates,¹² and the second took up the problems of centralization and decentralization in academic libraries.¹³ Despite these periodic examinations the questions of whether or not to decentralize, and to what extent, remain unanswered.

Decentralization by form of material, i.e., rare books, manuscripts, government documents, map collections, etc., has been practiced for many years. Whether these materials are housed, as is usual, in separate quarters in the central library, or in separate buildings which contain rare materials such as Harvard's Houghton Library, Yale's Beinecke Library, and the Lilly Library at Indiana, is not pertinent to this paper. The above is merely illustrative of the early tendency to decentralize library holdings by form of material. The prime advantage of housing such materials in separate quarters lies in the specialized service afforded scholars who use these collections. Service is more personalized and tailored to individual need.

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Another advantage is that collections consisting of rare books and manuscript material that are housed separately will attract more donors. There are three obvious disadvantages: 1) operational problems, 2) a necessary duplication of some reference and a large amount of bibliographical material, and 3) possible user frustration over access to the collection. However, due to the very nature of these materials, libraries will continue to create special areas for their preservation and service.

Before turning our attention to the user- and subject-oriented pattern of decentralization, specifically the widely dispersed subject departmental library and the more centralized subject divisional approach, we will assume that graduate and professional school libraries, such as law and medicine, will continue to be separated from the main library and enjoy variations of administrative autonomy depending on the local situation. The trend appears to be in the direction of establishing libraries in more of the professional schools such as engineering, education, etc.

The concept of subject departmentalization which supposedly originated in the seminar collections established by members of the faculty was not exclusively a product of the academic world, for by the first quarter of the twentieth century most major public libraries were organized on this pattern.¹⁴ As universities grew and more departments were added, the proliferation of departmental libraries went on. The main disadvantages with this type of organization are in the administrative area:

1) Administrative control (coordination, cooperation, and communication) is difficult to achieve.

2) The cost of administering such branches is indicated in the following statement by Wagman: "Fully 30% of the personnel budget of my library system is spent in staffing the many branches in less than adequate fashion. In addition, a very high cost is incurred by the catalogue department. . . ." ¹⁵ Added to these is the expense of duplicating materials.

3) The problems of access and security increase. Other disadvantages such as the parochial attitudes developed by faculty members and graduate students, and the usually inadequate space and facilities, are of a lesser nature than the administrative problems outlined above.

Naturally there were certain advantages to which proponents of

this type of division could point. We cannot argue that they provided a greater convenience for those who find them geographically accessible, nor could we depreciate the possibility of a more personalized and individual service on the part of the library personnel assigned to a departmental branch. Perhaps we could even agree that there would be better faculty participation in the affairs of their own library. However, the disadvantages of having such small units as departmental libraries far outweigh any of these advantages. Departmental libraries may fill a need but they are far too costly. The fight to save these decentralized subject libraries serving one or two individual departments still goes on, but with the concept of the unity of knowledge, especially in the sciences, departmental libraries are giving way to a larger subject division approach.

A broader, more centralized subject divisional organization became possible with the accelerated construction of library buildings during the last twenty-five years. Before 1940 there were few examples of broad subject organization in academic libraries. During the late 1930s the University of Colorado began experimenting with such an approach, and Brown University consolidated its science departmental libraries into two large divisions, a biological science library and a physical science library. By 1945, Nebraska had developed a subject divisional organization which was created in an unusual manner due to the fact that geographic centralization was not feasible. A science and technology division was created with a number of sections; the divisional reading room was located in the main library, and various branch libraries remained both on and off campus. Cornell's reorganization was completed in the 1960s with a relocation of all science and technological material into three large divisions with separate facilities: agriculture (inclusive of the biological sciences), engineering, and the physical sciences. Preceding this move, a new graduate research library opened in 1961, and the renovated main library for undergraduate services became operational in 1962.

Briefly stated, the advantages of a more centralized subject divisional approach are: 1) closer administrative control, 2) expansion of available resources by a pooling of the material of overlapping subject fields, and 3) better utilization of the professional staff.

A possibly serious disadvantage could be the loss of the type of faculty involvement that would take place in the departmental library. Loss of the proximity of the materials might disturb some faculty but the recent trend to provide adequate library areas in the

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large inter-disciplinary building complexes should alleviate this complaint.

Another divisional library approach would be the establishment of separate undergraduate library facilities. This concept has found wide acceptance, for in the last decade at least a dozen such libraries have opened. In 1949 the Lamont Library at Harvard set the trend for separate quarters. Other major universities followed: Michigan, Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Stanford, and so on. At other universities such as UCLA and Cornell the original main library buildings have been renovated for undergraduate use. At this moment more are under construction, and many, like Oklahoma, are far advanced in their planning for such a facility.

An interesting set of papers was presented in 1955 on the topic of the undergraduate library. Lundy¹⁶ and Wagman¹⁷ argue that the undergraduate is deserving of a particular facility geared to his needs. Wagman feels that the undergraduate is frequently overlooked in the research and publication interests of the university. Dix¹⁸ does not feel that separate facilities are needed, for the stimulus generated by using a general instead of a selected collection would be lost. There is no doubt that separate undergraduate libraries help solve the spatial problems occurring in main libraries, but their educational efficacy is still open to question. It appears that the trend toward construction of separate undergraduate facilities will continue on major university campuses.

After reviewing the literature to date I find that there are perhaps only two principle disadvantages concerning decentralization. The first is the cost that occurs in the duplication of services and materials. If we assume that service of equal quality must be rendered in branch libraries, then there will be an extra economic burden dependent on the size of the branch unit. For example, with the decentralized facilities at Rutgers nearly 35 percent of the total book fund is used to purchase duplicate materials for its various libraries.¹⁹ It was pointed out that this duplication is unavoidable due to the geography of the campus and the attached satellite locations. Increased salaries for librarians, the constantly rising cost of materials, and the financial pinch which occurs in times of little money merely accentuate the problem. The second is that administrative control of libraries, whether it is due to their number (as in the case of departmental) or geographic distances, becomes difficult. The older the departmental library, the more difficult it is to wrest administrative control away

from the particular department. The addition of satellite campuses with their attendant libraries contributes to problems of coordination. In such a situation the delegation of authority and the extent of such authority must be clearly defined. Administrative control over all units on campus is much easier to achieve than the extension of such control over libraries which may be located ten or twenty miles away.

Of the many advantages of decentralization noted in the literature, the following are most often mentioned. First, it affords the patron the opportunity for readier access to needed materials, and second, it creates the desire in a faculty member to take more of an interest in library activities. The latter is probably more true in the case of departmental situations, but with the increasing interdependence among subject fields the same desire to participate in book selections, etc., will be transferred to the larger subject divisional unit.

We may conclude that:

1) Consolidation of small units into larger and larger divisions will continue to take place. This constitutes partial decentralization or partial centralization, depending on one's point of view.

2) There are no easy answers to the questions of how much and what kind of decentralization should take place. There are many factors which must be considered: governmental structure of the university, financial ability, size of the library, number of professional personnel, etc.

3) The type of library service planned for the future will have some bearing on decisions to centralize or decentralize, as will the library's proposed use of technological advances.

Some twenty-three years ago the results of a survey conducted for the Cornell libraries were made public and I believe one observation not only has merit but has enjoyed general implementation:

Some degree of decentralization is necessary and desirable to facilitate instruction and research in order to provide the most useful library service. On the other hand, the multiplication of departmental collections too small to be staffed or serviced economically or which will require an extensive duplication of books is unnecessary and undesirable. As new building plans mature around the campus, it should be quite feasible to merge departmental libraries in closely related fields into larger units, perhaps along broad divisional lines, such as biological sciences or physical sciences, especially if the teaching departments they serve are contiguous.²⁰

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