



Introduction: Why Do We Need Standards?

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THE DESIRABILITY of developing and attaining standards has occupied the thinking of the library profession again and again for more than a generation.¹ This movement toward standards has been increasingly successful in the U.S. Recently it has also made headway in other countries, e.g., in Great Britain, Canada, and the German Federal Republic.

These efforts have not always resulted in precise standards, but at times in somewhat vaguer "guidelines." Perhaps we should start, then, from a definition of the term "standard," in order to avoid the confusion which seems to exist in the minds of some librarians. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1966) says: "Standard," in general, "can designate . . . any measure by which one judges a thing as authentic, good, or adequate. . . . Standard applies to any authoritative rule, principle, or measure used to determine the quantity, weight, or extent, or esp. the value, quality, level, or degree of a thing." *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1969) defines "guideline" as "a statement of policy by a person or group having authority over an activity." Its definition of "standard" is much more specific and much more binding: "An acknowledged measure of comparison for quantitative or qualitative value; criterion; norm. . . . a degree or level of requirement, excellence, or attainment."

While these definitions apply to standards in general, there is a most helpful and specific statement on standards for libraries in the introduction to *Standards for South African Public Libraries*: "Library standards may be defined as the criteria by which . . . library services may

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be measured and assessed. They are determined by professional librarians in order to attain and maintain the objectives they have set themselves. Standards may be interpreted variously as the pattern of an ideal, a model procedure, a measure for appraisal, a stimulus for future development and improvement and as an instrument to assist decision and action not only by librarians themselves but by laymen concerned indirectly with the institution, planning, and administration of . . . library services."² It would be difficult to find a more fitting definition.

The value of such standards has sometimes been questioned by administrators who hate to be reminded of the obligation to improve libraries under their supervision, and by "sophisticated" members of the library profession. Against these critics the wise words of two outstanding leaders of our profession are cited. The late Joseph L. Wheeler observed: "National standards, set forth to contrast with local performance, and adequately publicized, have doubtless done more—more promptly than any other device—to help good administrators improve conditions in public libraries."³ Robert B. Downs tries to calm the fears of some of his peers who believe minimum standards for university libraries might be regarded by administrators as maximum standards: "The same criticism could be made, of course, of public, college, and other library standards. There can be little doubt, however, that the overall effect of standards has been to upgrade libraries, providing substandard institutions with yardsticks by which to measure their deficiencies."⁴

Downs's last sentence sums up, in a way, the observations this writer made during the six years (1957-63) he served as chairman of the ACRL Committee on Standards. Sketched here are a few of the lessons he learned working on the "ALA Standards for College Libraries" (1959) and the "ALA Standards for Junior College Libraries" (1960). He was fortunate in having on his committee several fellow librarians who were intimately familiar with the nationwide situation. They knew the pressing problems of the academic libraries and had the statistical evidence at their fingertips. But, above all, this committee had a vision of what progress could and should be attained in the next decade. This position was fortified by securing advice from many leaders of the library profession, from notable academic administrators and from accrediting agencies. The aim was to establish clearly the role of the librarian as an educator—a highly qualified professional who was entitled to faculty status. Committee formulations never distinguished between libraries in liberal arts colleges, teachers colleges, and institutes

Introduction

of technology, thereby implying that all had to strive equally for excellence, even though preserving a different emphasis. Neither were concessions made to regional differences. This writer questions even today the wisdom of formulating statewide standards, for they often interfere with the proper application of national standards.

The committee was certain that any reference to a dollar sign would be a mistake, since severe inflationary trends were already evident. It did insist on certain quantitative standards, in spite of (or perhaps because of) its primary concern for higher quality. The library's slice of the general and educational budget of an institution was set at a minimum of 5 percent for a well-established library with an adequate collection. Precise figures for a basic professional staff, for the size of the collection in relation to the enrollment, and for the desirable seating capacity were given. These few quantitative standards helped to revolutionize the college and junior college libraries in the last decade. Their impact grew when the generous federal grants program of the later 1960s used the committee's figures as a yardstick, thereby dramatically raising the level of the collections in the weaker libraries.

Anybody who has ever negotiated with administrators, trustees, and state budget directors knows that they are not impressed by vague "guidelines" such as those that were unfortunately proposed for college libraries in 1970-71. These practical men and women want to know what an authoritative body of experts considers essential; they insist on facts and figures. David Roy Watkins, Helen M. Brown, and James O. Wallace will discuss this in their chapters, but the issue editor, having carried the brunt of this fight for many years, feels he ought to make his conviction on this point crystal clear.⁵

Finally, he believes that all library standards ought to be written in lucid, forceful prose. They are meant not only for the eyes of library officials, but they should make attractive, enlightening reading for the concerned layman, that is, the administrator, the trustee, the member of the city council or faculty library committee. Our committee aimed at such a wide public and was pleased to see the standards printed in unassuming form and sold at a modest price to thousands of readers. Alice Norton's well written pamphlet, *Your Public Library: Standards for Service*, fulfills a similar function within a somewhat different framework.⁶

The issue editor is happy that almost all leaders of the profession he approached were immediately willing to contribute to this volume of *Library Trends*. All were given full freedom to present their points of

view on the basis of their own philosophy and wealth of experience. The editor sought no uniformity of approach or opinion. He felt it would do no harm to find a few contradictions and overlappings in the text. He is especially pleased that not only the major facets of the American situation are described here by authorities, but also that the startling progress made in England and Canada along these lines is presented by experts. The emphasis of the issue is clearly on standards for various types of libraries, but it seemed advisable to review also the standards in library technology and the efforts for international standardization in libraries in order to provide a comprehensive picture.

Lowell A. Martin discusses how libraries were caught in a "crunch" at the time when the first official standards for public libraries were promulgated in 1933. We have traveled far since the depth of the Depression, but let us have no illusions about the dangers which now threaten many American libraries. The signs of the times seem to indicate that more and more institutions, among them some of the most prestigious, will be forced into a period of retrenchment. It may be hard for them to maintain in the 1970s the great advances made in the 1960s. At this critical juncture we need clearly defined, carefully reasoned, unequivocal standards for our libraries. This is no time for platitudes and ambiguous generalities! May this issue of *Library Trends* contribute to the recognition of the relevance of such standards.⁷

References

1. Very helpful to readers interested in the literature on the whole subject of standards for libraries is: Ottersen, Signe, comp. "A Bibliography on Standards for Evaluating Libraries," *College & Research Libraries*, 32:127-44, March 1971.
2. South African Library Association. Sub-Committee on Public Library Standards. *Standards for South African Public Libraries*. Second rev. ed. Potchefstroom, 1968; see also Humphreys, K. W. "Standards in University Libraries," *Libri*, 20: 144-55, 1970.
3. Wheeler, Joseph L. "What Good are Public Library Standards?" *Library Journal*, 95:455, Feb. 1, 1970.
4. Downs, Robert B., and Heussman, John W. "Standards for University Libraries," *College & Research Libraries*, 31:28, Jan. 1970.
5. Felix E. Hirsch has frequently written on the significance of standards. See, for example: "New College Library Standards," *Library Journal*, 84:1994-96, June 15, 1959; "How Can We Implement the ALA Standards for College Libraries?" *College & Research Libraries*, 22:125-29, March 1961; "Goals for the Nineteen Sixties: The Significance of the New ALA Standards for Junior College Libraries," *Junior College Journal*, 31:135-39, Nov. 1960; "Raising the Standards: College Libraries," *Drexel Library Quarterly*, July 1966 (issue editor); and "College Li-

Introduction

braries Today and Tomorrow: Progress and Problems," *American Association of University Professors Bulletin*, 52:283-89, Sept. 1966. (In this paper he presents also his general outlook on academic librarianship.); See also his chapter on "Evaluation Trends," *Library Trends*, 14:191-202, Oct. 1965.

6. Norton, Alice. *Your Public Library: Standards for Service*. Chicago, ALA, 1969.

7. Two important communications were received by the issue editor, after this introduction had been completed. Charles H. Ness, chairman, Pennsylvania Library Association, College and Research Division, called his attention to recommendations by a seminar on "Standards/Guidelines for Academic Libraries" held by the Division at Pennsylvania State University in April 1972. It had arrived at many severe criticisms of the proposed ACRL Guidelines for College Libraries. In particular, it had emphasized: "While there was no objection to including philosophic statements, it was felt that quantitative standards are essential, if the document is to be meaningful." Secondly, the minutes of the meetings of the ALA Committee on Standards held at the June 1972 ALA Conference in Chicago include the information that an ALA Standards Manual is in an advanced stage of preparation. A third draft of this manual, compiled by Ruth Warncke, will be presented to the committee at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in January 1973 and then hopefully passed on to the ALA Council.