Resource Allocation in University Libraries in the 1970s and Beyond

C. James Schmidt

Until recently, university libraries grew and increased several fold in size and cost of collection and of staff. Data available from fifty-one academic research libraries (i.e., members of the Association of Research Libraries) indicate that from 1951 to 1974 collections increased 158 percent, acquisitions expenditures increased 810 percent, expenditures for salaries and wages increased 880 percent, and total library expenditures during this twenty-four year period increased 770 percent for the fifty-one libraries.¹

According to Richard de Gennaro, "the last two affluent decades may well have been a temporary aberration or perhaps the glorious end of an era in the history of the growth of research libraries."² (Emphasis added.) Various ingenious devices were developed to impose some measure of rationality on the allocation of this growth.³

However, since 1968, universities have passed from a period of what Kenneth Boulding has called "growth and grandeur" through bombs, bricks and barricades to a period of at least stable if not declining resources. A comparison of volumes acquired by Association of Research Libraries' (ARL) members reveals the following trend since 1968:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1967/68</td>
<td>+11.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968/69</td>
<td>−2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969/70</td>
<td>+5.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970/71</td>
<td>0.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971/72</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972/73</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973/74</td>
<td>8.53</td>
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In 1973/74 ARL libraries added 8.53 percent fewer volumes than in the preceding year. This percentage represents 692,201 volumes.

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As Boulding has pointed out:

The present generation of educational administrators at all levels have grown up in this period of rapid growth and have been selected presumably because they were well adjusted to it and capable of dealing with it. Perhaps the most serious immediate problem facing education, and especially facing higher education, is that many skills which were highly desirable and which were selected in the last thirty years may no longer be the skills which are needed in the next thirty years. One of our first priorities, therefore, should be to raise up a new generation of administrators who are skilled in the process of adjusting to a decline. Yet we know so little about decline that we are not even sure what these skills are.4

This article will assert the following propositions: that university libraries will in fact be dealing with the management of decline for the remainder of the twentieth century; that a change in priorities from ownership (holdings) to access has to some extent begun and will continue; that this shift in priorities will allow for major redeployment of staff; that resource allocation will become less focused on acquisitions and more on personnel; and that unionization and faculty status will make redeployment of staff more complex and difficult.

The Management of Decline

There seems to be general agreement that enrollments in higher education will peak by 1980 and will decline thereafter. The most frequently cited figures indicate that enrollments will be one-third less in 1985 than in 1980. Lest there be any doubt about these projections, consider the following three arguments.

First, it seems unlikely that the proportion of the college-age cohort (18-22 years) attending schools will increase significantly. Nationally, approximately fifty percent of this cohort attends college and in some states (e.g., New York) it is over sixty percent. As the percentage increases, the differential reward for persons who continue their education decreases, so that there ceases to be an economic incentive for doing so. The effect of a decline in incentive is compounded by the state of the present job market for degree holders.

Second, broadly available postsecondary education has generally failed to produce any relative redistribution of per capita real income. Census data indicates that the relative distribution of real income is about the same in 1971 as it was in 1947. In other words, the same
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proportion of the national income goes to the same proportion of the national population.\(^5\)

Third, the differential reward theory for the degree holder is being questioned. Suppose, for example, that an amount equal to the cost of tuition, books, and room and board for four years were deposited at the going rates of interest for forty years. An individual retiring at age sixty would have a sizeable sum against which to balance a possible difference in income as compared with a degree holder during the working years.

It seems probable, therefore, that if the demographic projections are correct and the arguments raised above valid, enrollments in higher education will decline in absolute numbers in the 1980s and beyond. When this decline occurs, libraries in universities cannot escape its effect. It may be the case that the data from ARL libraries cited above indicate the beginning of this decline.

Change in Priorities from Ownership to Access

In 1967, the National Advisory Commission on Libraries made the distinction between bibliographic and physical access. In his inaugural speech as president of ARL, de Gennaro spoke of the distinction between holdings and access. More recently he has put this issue in these words: "The traditional emphasis on developing large local research collections must be shifted toward developing excellent local working collections and truly effective means of gaining access to needed research materials wherever they may be."\(^6\) (Emphasis added.)

In the two decades following World War II, the first priority for academic research libraries was clearly collection development. At least implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, these libraries espoused the objective of self-sufficient collections. With hindsight, it seems that no one ever realized this goal. In fact, as libraries grew, so did their need for interlibrary borrowing.

It seems that the search for the grail has ceased and instead we search for Excalibur, for as the priority shifts from ownership to access, quality and size of service staff become paramount. It is hard enough to provide prompt and precise access to materials owned. It takes ingenuity, wit and alertness to provide access to materials in other locations. Fortunately, as acquisitions decline, personnel can be shifted from work generated by acquiring materials to work involved in providing adequate access to unowned materials.
It seems clear that in the past libraries have allocated staff in ways which confirm the theory that a major portion of the workload is attributable to acquisition of materials. One has only to think of the variety of tasks and files involved in selecting, ordering, receiving, paying for, cataloging and maintaining catalogs for materials acquired. Two forces are at work which seem likely to affect and change this pattern. The first, discussed above, is the shift in priority from ownership to access with its obvious consequences in the form of at least constant if not reduced acquisitions on individual campuses. The second force is technology, specifically computer technology. The experience of a number of libraries with on-line cataloging demonstrates clearly that the impact of these systems is profound in the changes imposed on the nature and amount of work performed by people. One simple example may suffice: it is not uncommon for on-site catalog card production to be reduced by more than one-half by an on-line cataloging system. In academic research libraries such a reduction in workload may well affect as many as ten to twenty people. Redeployment of this dislocated labor force is the obvious alternative, except that certain individuals may not be suited to other tasks.

Suitability aside, questions arise as to what size labor force is needed in other major functional areas in the library. For too long, technical services and, to a lesser extent, circulation services have been the measured (i.e., quantified) operations. As redeployment of staff becomes possible and necessary, the search for indicators of how many of which kinds of personnel are needed will begin anew and will focus especially on functional areas which have not yet been satisfactorily measured. Whether they can or will be remains to be seen, although one might expect that they will be, for better or worse.

Unionization and Faculty Status

As the priority shifts from acquisition to personnel, and as allocation or reallocation of resources focuses increasingly on personnel, academic research libraries will experience increasing constraints on redeployment of personnel. Unionization in these libraries, now relatively uncommon, is certain to become the rule rather than the exception. As this occurs, the formalization of certain terms and conditions of employment into contract language may well preclude certain kinds of redeployment. Consider, for example, the employee in technical services who is suited to and able to be transferred to a public
services position. Is the change in hours of work attendant upon such a transfer subject to the contract? If so, what are the constraints—increased security, shift differential pay, change in classification and/or grade or rank?

Another constraint on redeployment will be job security. Is permanent appointment, by whatever name, attached to the person or to the position? If permanency is a function of faculty status for librarians it would seem that permanency is attached to people, not to positions, although few university libraries with faculty status have had to face this issue. But in several institutions the *de facto* situation seems to be that permanency is attached to positions, regardless of the *de jure* policy.

It seems certain that academic research libraries will face at least stable if not declining resources. As the priority changes from ownership to access, personnel resources will become more prominent budgetarily, more redeployable because of the combined impacts of stable or reduced acquisitions and computer technology, and more subject to constraints as a result of collective bargaining. The formulae and matrices devised during the period of growth and grandeur will be of small comfort and little use for the problems ahead. The resource allocation problems in the future will, in the final analysis, be human problems, i.e., how to utilize optimally the available labor force to maximize library services.

Having asserted such a view of the future, one caveat is in order: “There are two equally important principles to be guided by in all matters affecting the present and the future. (1) It is utterly impossible to predict the future. (2) It is utterly impossible to avoid trying to predict the future.”

References

1. These data are available on punched cards from the Instructional Media Research Unit, University Libraries and Audiovisual Center, Purdue University.
JAMES C. SCHMIDT

94th Regents Convocation of the University of the State of New York, Albany, N.Y., Sept. 20, 1974. (Mimeographed)

