

Standards for College Libraries

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THE SEARCH FOR STANDARDS for American college libraries can boast a venerable and distinguished history spanning almost four-score years and challenging the intellects of some of the premier worthies both within and outside of the profession. Marked concurrently by considerable zeal on the one hand and by chronic frustration on the other, it has been likened to the Quest for the Holy Grail, although its partial success probably renders that simile inapt.

Much of the persistent frustration at the academic library community's inability to fashion tenable standards for itself can probably be attributed to the fact that it looks so deceptively easy. Like defining "pornography," the unwary falls easily into the trap of assuming that, given a little time and motivation, any modestly informed person could do it. Many knowledgeable librarians have tried unsuccessfully to make standards, however, and the very high failure rate among these efforts bespeaks clearly the formidable character of the task.

Although a definitive history of academic library standards-making remains to be written (indeed *deserves* to be written, probably as a dissertation), several helpful résumés have been prepared of the experience.¹ Although it is not a chore to be undertaken as a part of this paper,² a brief enumeration here of the early landmark efforts is useful in placing more recent labors and concerns into a time perspective.

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A Brief Background

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, all efforts to devise academic library standards took place in state and regional associations of colleges rather than in the library community, but the results were seldom, if ever, rigorous or demanding. Indeed, the most exacting among these early trials called only for minimum collections of “8000 volumes exclusive of public documents.”³ In the late 1920s, and with substantial funding from the Carnegie Corporation, a number of leading librarians also became exercised about the matter, and several draft sets of standards were produced. Carl Milam published his “Suggestions” in 1930, and William M. Randall issued his proposed standards as the concluding segment of his study of *The College Library* in 1932.⁴ Randall’s draft was reprinted and widely disseminated, although he never sought official adoption of it.

By the late 1930s, however, the regional accrediting associations, led primarily by the North Central Association, had largely given up imposing any specific requirements at all—including library requirements—upon their member institutions, and had chosen rather to develop more flexible bases for adjudging library adequacy in terms of institutional purpose. Although several leading librarians aided and supported this newer concept, most were uneasy about forgoing specific, hard-number requirements, feeling that without them, “standards” were reduced to well-intentioned and high-sounding, but largely feckless, platitudes.⁵

As a result, in 1943 the ALA adopted its own specific numerical standards for academic library book collections, staffing patterns, salaries, and book funds.⁶ Hard minimum numbers for book collections, professional staff size, percentage of institutional budget to be allocated to libraries, and number of library seats were subsequently incorporated into the ALA “Standards for College Libraries” adopted in 1959.⁷ The 1975 revision of these standards, which remains in force today, specified numerical requirements for book collections, professional staff size, and building size.⁸

Thus, for almost forty years academic librarians have, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, espoused some quantitative standards for their libraries. For a like period, however, regional accrediting agencies have eschewed them. Although relations between the two groups have been marked throughout the years by considerable dialogue, substantial cooperation and notable goodwill, neither side has felt constrained to move toward the position of the other. Librarians feel that their opera-

tions must be judged against quantitative standards; associations of colleges feel just as strongly that they must not.

Qualitative versus Quantitative Standards

It has been the aggregate judgment of the academic library community that, to be most useful, standards must comprise both qualitative and quantitative elements. Qualitative standards for libraries are easy to draft, and they easily gain consensual support. Almost everyone in higher education will agree that a college should have a "good" library. Vast disagreement arises, however, as soon as someone tries to attach numbers to the degree of "goodness" agreed upon, as soon as someone proposes that it is patently not possible to offer baccalaureate work with a library of fewer than x number of volumes, no matter how carefully chosen those volumes may be. Immediately a chorus begins—"How did you arrive at x ?"; "I believe y is a better number"; "I vote for z "—except that the chorus is not orchestrated. Everyone has his own number, born of his own personal experience, predilections and insights. The preponderance of librarians, however, appears to subscribe to the notion that in certain aspects of library service (such as collection or staff sizes) quality and quantity are separable only in theory, and that although it is possible to have quantity without quality, it is not possible to have quality without a definable irreducible quantity.

Key questions, of course, exist as to who should determine irreducible quantities, and how they should go about doing it. There may have been a time in the adolescence of the profession when such quantities could be determined *ex cathedra* on the basis of expert testimony, as William Warner Bishop could opine that "the college with less than a hundred thousand volumes is but ill prepared to give modern work in the humanities and in sciences."⁹ A half-century of democratization in the library community, however, has reduced even experts to "one-man, one-vote" status, and probably eliminated such sources from the profession's tool-kit forever.

Quantitative standards, in recent decades, have sprung from the aggregate experience of the profession—to the degree that can be determined—rather than from the experience of individual experts. Standards must, almost by definition, arise from the possible; here, as in medicine, prescription can arise only out of previous description. Thus, the more the academic library industry knows about itself, the better able it will be to define its "normality," to identify "normal behavior" among libraries, and then to expect it as a prerequisite to peer group

acceptance. If this suggests a strong relationship between quantitative standards and norms, so be it.

Preparing the 1975 Revision

In her excellent article in the October 1972 *Library Trends*, Helen M. Brown described thoroughly the antecedents and the intent of the 1959 "Standards for College Libraries," as well as their use up to 1972. The present report will begin where her account left off, with preparation of the current revision of the "Standards," how it came into being after 1972, and its impact upon college libraries up to the present time.

Brown reported the appointment in 1968 of an Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) subcommittee to prepare a revision of the 1959 "Standards." That year, however, saw the beginning of a period of revolution in American society, and codified standards, as codified laws, tend to be unpopular in times of revolution. Thus, in an effort to reflect the spirit of the era, that subcommittee brought in a draft not of hard standards, but of general recommendations, which it denominated "Guidelines for College Libraries." By the time the document was completed and presented to the ACRL college section membership for approbation in June 1971, however, the "revolution" had ended, and the group rejected the draft on precisely the basis that had first been considered its strength, namely, its avoidance of quantitative requirements.

It took ACRL some time to regroup, but by mid-1973 the association had received one of the J. Morris Jones—World Book Encyclopedia—ALA Goals Awards (an award renewed the following year) and had appointed a new ad hoc committee to revise the 1959 standards with Johnnie Givens in the chair. In planning its work, the new revision committee determined that it would observe certain principles throughout. These principles were as follows:

1. the revision would be sufficiently flexible to allow for variation based upon the unique purposes and profiles of individual institutions;
2. the revision would contain both qualitative and quantitative components;
3. the document would be brief and couched in terminology which was comprehensible to informed laymen;
4. wherever possible the revision would be capable of accommodating likely future developments;
5. the revision would be sufficiently "political" to gain the approbation of ACRL;

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6. since the committee was unable to engage in original research on its own recognizance, the revision would reflect only existing knowledge or belief.

There was nothing new about these principles; implicitly or explicitly they were similar to those that had guided the 1959 standards committee as well.

Similarities between the 1959 standards and the resulting 1975 revision are substantial. Both begin with definitions of the kinds of institutions they are designed to cover. Both address directly the issues of collections, staff, buildings, budgets, administration, and services. The 1959 document also contained a standard on interlibrary cooperation, but this is omitted in the 1975 text because cooperation was felt by the revision committee to be a *means*—an important means perhaps, but nonetheless a means, rather than an end in itself. Both contain quantitative requirements concerning collections, staff and buildings. The 1959 rendition also included a quantitative statement on the percentage of institutional expenditure to be allocated to libraries, but in 1975 this is relegated to an accompanying gloss.

There are also a number of notable differences between the two sets of standards. Among the more obvious differences are the format and auxiliary verb forms used in the two texts. In 1959 a continuous textual format was used, but the 1975 committee, concluding that some parts of its document were requirements while other parts were exegesis, divided the document into two sections: "Standards," and an accompanying "Commentary" which attempted briefly to explain the rationale for the standards. This separation permits all standards to use the auxiliary verb form *shall* (reserved, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "for solemn assertions of the certainty of future events") rather than the somewhat weaker form *should*.

It was the revision committee's judgment that, although the qualitative components of the new standards could be stated in uniform language and still be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of individual colleges, institutional uniqueness would necessitate variant treatments in the quantitative standards. The 1959 document, for example, had based the library collection size requirement upon the single institutional variable of enrollment. However, subsequent experience—recorded first in the Clapp-Jordan concept,¹⁰ and later verified and adapted in several state education agencies¹¹—had identified several other institutional characteristics that affect collection size, and had determined appropriate weightings to accompany those characteristics. Thus, the 1975 revision bases an institution's collection

expectation not only on its enrollment, but also on the size of its teaching faculty and the level and extent of its academic program.

The 1959 document also used enrollment as the only institutional variable in determining the number of seats in the library building. Again, however, subsequent experience, as documented both in textbooks and in the work of several state agencies,¹² enabled the revision committee to take institutional profiles more fully into account, and to provide a fuller basis for adjudging the spatial adequacy of library buildings.

Insofar as staff size is concerned, the 1959 standards had called simply for a minimum of three librarians, and in its initial deliberations the 1975 committee could find no sound statistical basis for enlarging upon that requirement. Under membership pressure that arose late in its work, however, the committee was obliged to provide an expanded formula anyway, and Standard 4 (Formula B) was developed, taking into account not only enrollment, but also collection size and growth rate. Although the committee was reasonably confident that these were likely the appropriate factors to be considered, it was unable, within its resources or the time available, to refine or confirm the weightings which were incorporated into the final formula. Thus, unlike Formulas A and C, Formula B rests on a somewhat shaky foundation, and will probably be the first to fall in the face of rigorous research.

A major innovation in the 1975 revision was the provision of letter grades representing the degrees to which individual libraries fulfilled these three quantitative standards. Borrowed from its earlier application to college libraries by the New York State Department of Education,¹³ this scheme for the first time provided for all libraries, except the few that met fully the numerical requirement (and are likely to be too proud to slacken their efforts anyway), a continuing stimulus to seek improvement. In determining the percentages of fulfillment that would qualify for particular letter grades, the committee simply took current Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS) statistics and "forced" bell-curves so that approximately 12 percent of all covered colleges would receive *As*, 20 percent *Bs*, 35 percent *Cs*, and 20 percent *Ds*, while 12 percent would prove unacceptable. The general growth of collections since that time has no doubt resulted in some "grade inflation" in that category; staff reductions, on the other hand, may have brought about some deflation there.¹⁴ At any rate, periodic review and revision will be needed to keep these grading percentages useful.

Some other, less obvious differences between the 1959 and the 1975 standards include:

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1. the 1975 standards do not require a college to hold legal title to the books made available to its students as long as the books are well selected and can be supplied as quickly as if they were college property;
2. the 1975 standards permit collections to assume "no-growth" status after the numerical requirement is fulfilled;
3. online catalogs and joint catalogs of the holdings of several institutions are allowed in the revision;
4. students as well as faculty are now called for on library advisory committees;
5. the librarian may now report to the "chief academic officer of the institution" in lieu of the president;
6. it is no longer necessary for librarians to be on duty at all hours that the library is open; and
7. the 1975 rendition mandates that an institution's nonprint resources be administered by the library.

Understandably, the 1959 and 1975 renditions also differed somewhat in the emphasis each placed upon certain aspects of library activity so as to reflect the sixteen years of changes that had occurred in the college environment. The revision, for example, lays greater stress on the faculty character of the librarian's task and on the library needs of students in extension centers than had the 1959 standards.

Gaining Approval of the Revision

It is the fate of library standards in the United States that they can be effective only through the moral suasion that they can bring to bear upon the library peer community. Many have wished that an appropriate body would assume responsibility for the hard enforcement of academic library standards, but that seems highly unlikely to occur here for a long time to come. Unlike a ministry of education, the U.S. federal government lacks Constitutional authority to impose its will upon colleges. State governments, moreover, control only their state-supported institutions, and regional accrediting agencies have long been unwilling to be specific in their requirements. Thus, the full burden of gaining implementation of the college library standards lies, as it has for a half-century, upon the shoulders of the peer group of academic libraries, and peer groups rely heavily upon persuasion and pressure to attain homogeneity before they resort to ostracism. Thus, it is essential for any set of college library standards, if they are to have any effect at all, to gain majority approbation in ACRL.

As did the 1959 committee, therefore, so also did the revision committee take great pains to seek out the advice of a wide spectrum of interested groups and individuals and to keep relevant publics informed at every point in its deliberations. Innumerable ideas and suggestions were forthcoming in the many meetings and public hearings that were held, and heavy correspondence resulted from the circulation of early drafts. *CRL News* reported on one session held by the committee with representatives of professional associations and accrediting bodies, noting that "a faculty member attacked the standards for being too weak on faculty status, college officials challenged them for meddling in the affairs of presidents and boards of trustees, and library administrators criticized them for prescribing how a library should be run."¹⁵ Continuing and ad hoc pressure groups filed reports calling for stronger statements of concern in their areas of special interest. Enthusiasts for bibliographic instruction, interlibrary cooperation, faculty status, intellectual freedom, and a host of other issues helped the committee understand more fully the significance of their concerns. Most respondents felt that the numerical requirements proposed were either too high or too low, or were inappropriate, or should be recast. Several librarians supplied copies of standards that they themselves had written, suggesting that these standards be substituted for the committee's rendition.

All of these responses, of course, helped in their way to sharpen the committee's working drafts, to bring them more fully into accord with latent professional consensus, and ultimately, to make its revision tolerable to a substantial majority of the persons in attendance at the ACRL 1975 membership meeting in San Francisco. This last draft was then formally adopted by the ACRL Board of Directors at the same conference on July 3.

Subsequent Developments

The 1975 standards were put to work immediately. Local libraries applied them to themselves for purposes of upgrading and development. States from Wisconsin to Mississippi used them to assess the quality of college library service within their boundaries. Their appearance was particularly timely for the massive study of all libraries in the nation, undertaken that year by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science and published under the title *National Inventory of Library Needs, 1975*.¹⁶ Members of the revision committee were called upon to advise in their implementation by individual institutions, by state agencies and by state and regional library associations.

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The standards' influence was felt abroad as governments and library organizations in other countries reviewed them for ideas and concepts applicable elsewhere. In June 1979, the ACRL Board of Directors approved the recommendation of the ACRL Standards and Accreditation Committee that "An Evaluative Checklist for Reviewing a College Library Program" be adopted and published, and this was done.¹⁷

Lest the 1975 standards become dated or inapplicable, however, ACRL promptly appointed monitoring bodies to keep watch over them. An ad hoc group was appointed in 1976, with members drawn from ACRL's College Libraries Section and its Standards and Accreditation Committee, with instructions "to review, and to revise when necessary, the 1975 Standards for College Libraries."¹⁸ Three years later the College Libraries Section also appointed its own ad hoc Committee on Standards and Guidelines for the College Library.¹⁹ Both of these committees have made substantial studies in efforts to determine where in revision appears to be warranted.

Generally speaking, all studies to date have reported fairly high levels of satisfaction among academic library directors with the effectiveness and appropriateness of the 1975 standards. The most comprehensive of these studies, conducted in 1981,²⁰ found that between 83 and 86 percent of college library directors felt that each of the eight numbered standards was either "useful" or "moderately useful." As regards the three quantitative requirements for collections, staff and building space, the same study found that 72, 78 and 80.2 percent, respectively, of responding library directors felt that they were either adequate or close to adequate. More than 94 percent claimed to be "familiar" with the standards, and only 13 percent reported that they had not used them in one way or another for the betterment of their libraries. A survey of the perceptions and use of the 1975 standards among directors of libraries in predominantly black colleges in several southeastern states reported somewhat similar findings, although at a little lower level of satisfaction.²¹

Meanwhile, a study comparing the three quantitative components of the 1975 standards against such data on these matters as could be gleaned from the 1977 HEGIS reports confirmed the intent of the revision committee that only small percentages of American college libraries would meet 100 percent of the formulas, earning, in effect, grades of "A."²²

Efforts to use the 1975 standards and studies into their effectiveness have revealed occasional misunderstandings regarding them, misunderstandings which may arise either out of their lack of clarity or out of

careless reading of them. Among the most frequently recurring misunderstandings are the following.

1. Although in the "Commentary on Standard 8," a statement is made that "library budgets...which fall below six percent of the college's total educational and general expenditures are seldom able to sustain the range of library programs required by the institution,"²³ this is not a standard, it is simply an observation.
2. Likewise, where the "Commentary on Standard 2" avers that collections "can seldom retain their requisite utility without sustaining annual gross growth rates, before withdrawals, of at least five percent,"²⁴ no standard is being stated; this is a simple assertion.
3. Microform materials can be counted toward fulfillment of the collection requirement through the use of a volume-equivalency conversion ratio incorporated into Standard 2, Formula A.

Future users and students of the 1975 standards should be cautious to note these areas of potential confusion, and future revisers should take care to make them clearer.

The Future

It is probably unrealistic to hope that the 1975 standards will serve for sixteen years, as did the 1959 standards; changes are taking place in the environment too fast today to permit that to happen. The revision committee aspired to produce a document that would last for ten years, and that hope now appears likely of fulfillment. Seven years have passed already, and since both of the previous drafts required two years from assignment to adoption, the 1975 revision seems certain to serve for at least nine years, even if a new revision were to be commissioned today.

At any rate, it is reassuring to see that ACRL has appointed committees to review the current utility of the 1975 document and to recommend such changes as are warranted. The 1975 document itself pointed to some additional areas wherein standards even then appeared needed, if it had been possible to develop them. "These include measures of library effectiveness and productivity," it states in its introduction, "the requisite extent and configuration of nonprint resources and services, and methods for program evaluation."²⁵ The recent study by Hardesty and Bentley indicated continued high interest in developing standards on these matters, but only "medium" optimism that it is possible even today to find sufficient industry-wide consensus to permit their promulgation.

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Research findings, of course, which can substitute sure and certain knowledge for opinion, belief and faith, should provide the proper foundations for quantitative standards. The advent over the last couple of decades, slow though it may have been, of more sophisticated and powerful research methodologies onto the library scene augurs well for future standards-makers. Optimizing and regression techniques, modeling, input/output analyses, and other research processes utilizing the capabilities of the computer, all promise better and more tenable standards in the years ahead.

There will continue to be the inevitable time lags between the discovery of new knowledge and its admittance into the professional canon, as well as between attainment at the theoretical level and utilization at the applied level. It takes time for knowledge to displace popular belief, especially knowledge originating in the rarified atmosphere of the research laboratory. Standards in the future, as have standards in the past, will require consensual support to be effective, and consensus comes only through diffusion and adoption. Those tend to be slow processes indeed.

It also appears that college library standards could be better written if the college library community could agree on a specific purpose for them. Different librarians want standards for different purposes; indeed, often the same librarian wants standards for different purposes at different times, as perhaps to prove to his colleagues how good his library is, and to his president how poor it is.

This diversity of intent is well expressed in an oft-quoted statement introducing the *Standards for South African Public Libraries*: "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."²⁶ Now that is a lot to expect from a single document. An "ideal" is, by definition, unattainable, but an attainable goal serves much better as a "stimulus" for improvement than an unattainable goal. The 1975 document emphasized the stimulation of improvement, and in so doing presented a set of conditions which a few bellwether libraries may already have fulfilled, thereby denying to that small minority the benefit of stimulation made available to the majority. In that sense, the present standards are not of equal utility to all institutions. Whether or not future standards-makers will be able to redress this inequity remains to be seen.

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2. For more information, see Milam, Carl H. "Suggestions for Minimum College Library Standards." *ALA College and Reference Library Yearbook* 2(1930):90-92; "Selected Bibliography." In *College and University Library Accreditation Standards-1957* (ACRL Monograph, No. 20), compiled by Eli M. Oboler, et al., pp. 39-44. Chicago: ACRL, 1958; Ottersen, Signe. "A Bibliography on Standards for Evaluating Libraries." *College & Research Libraries* 32(March 1971):127-44; and listings under appropriate terms in the DIALOG Information Services database. (Anyone wishing to make an exhaustive search, however, should be cautioned that none of these lists is comprehensive.)
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19. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.
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22. Carpenter, "College Libraries."
23. *Standards for College Libraries, 1975*, p. 12.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
26. South African Library Association. Subcommittee of Public Library Standards. *Standards for South African Public Libraries*, 2d rev. ed. Potchefstroom, South Africa: SALA, 1968, p. 11.

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