

A CLEARING HOUSE FOR DUPLICATE PUBLIC DOCUMENTS

Report of the Agricultural Libraries Section Committee to Investigate the Possibilities of Setting Up a Clearing House for Duplicate Public Documents Other than State Experiment Station and Extension Division Publications.

At the outset of its work the committee assigned to study the possibilities of setting up a clearing house for duplicate public documents referred to the files of existing literature dealing with the general problem of cooperative exchange. This was done in order to determine what plans for the disposal of duplicates had already been attempted or suggested, and to see which of these plans had met with success or failure. Thus learning some of the pitfalls which must be avoided, it was hoped that some practical method could be devised for distributing to the best advantage the large stocks of public documents which are now lying unused in many agricultural libraries throughout the country.

At various times within recent years members of the profession have proposed the establishment of some kind of clearing house for duplicates. The idea of maintaining a central agency to which all duplicates might be sent for storage and ultimate distribution has been considered impractical for various reasons: (1) The provision of adequate storage space would present a great problem; (2) The shipping of the material to and from the clearing house would be costly; (3) The physical handling of the duplicates, i.e. wrapping, unwrapping, sorting, shelving, etc. would involve a vast amount of labor and expense.

Most of the recent suggestions center around a union catalog in which could be recorded the duplicate holdings of all cooperating libraries and to which libraries might submit their lists of wants. According to this arrangement the clearing house would never actually handle the publications themselves, but would merely arrange for the transfer of material between holding and requesting libraries. Such a project

for the exchange of serials was put into operation as an experiment by the H. W. Wilson Company several years ago, but had to be abandoned because the number of exchanges that were effected did not bring in enough commission to put the plan on a paying basis.

In 1932, with the aid of a Carnegie grant, the National Association of State Libraries established a Public Documents Clearing House, the primary purpose of which was to prepare and publish checklists of state session laws, statutes, legislative journals, and other state documents. As a part of this venture a clearing house was set up for the exchange of duplicate documentary material. The headquarters of the clearing house maintained a master card file of wants and offers and arranged for exchanges between cooperating libraries. At one time sixty-nine members were participating in the project and many of them succeeded in strengthening their files by this means, but unfortunately the activities of the clearing house had to be abandoned because of lack of funds. In 1937, when the future of the project was being weighed in the balance, the chairman of the committee expressed the belief that the clearing house could be carried on successfully if the co-operators were required to pay an annual membership fee for its financial support.

It seems to be generally agreed that the clearing house is still the ideal answer to the problem of exchanging duplicates, despite the difficulties which have been encountered in previous efforts to achieve that ideal. The chief obstacle—and it is a serious one—has been the provision of sufficient funds to cover the cost of operation. It is essential, therefore, that any newly proposed clearing house be based on a thorough knowledge of the financial factors involved.

Conclusion of Committee

After examining the various sporadic plans which have been introduced, the present

committee has come to the conclusion that the whole problem under consideration could be handled more efficiently if all libraries represented in the membership of the American Library Association, instead of working in isolated groups, might be united in one large cooperative effort to establish a central clearing house for duplicates. Since the possibilities for exchange would be limited only by the amount of material available and the needs of the libraries involved, there would be a decided advantage in having as many libraries as possible cooperating. As a starting point a committee composed of representatives from all sections of A.L.A. might be appointed to study the problem on a large scale. Before adopting any definite program it would seem advisable for a scientific survey to be made in the effort to determine the number of libraries interested in cooperative exchange, the size of their duplicate collections, the kind of material to be handled, and the amount of capital required to put a clearing house on a sound financial footing. With definite statistics available and a sizeable group of libraries showing an active interest in backing the project, it might be possible to secure a grant to cover the cost of setting up the basic organization. If such a clearing house should become a reality, the handling of documents should be part of its work, for there appears to be no necessity for setting up a separate agency for the disposal of any special type of material when one method of exchange is applicable to all types.

Maxine Hegland of the Stanford University Library has recently developed plans for a union catalog of duplicate books, documents, and serials, which is worthy of consideration. In brief, it is suggested that a central cooperative agency be established where duplicates may be recorded and to which members may submit their desiderata lists; that the union catalog be financed by a membership fee and from income derived from sales to dealers and nonmembers; that additional charges to members be based on the amount of use made of the union catalog by various members. Inasmuch as the Agricultural Libraries Section has done much in the past two years to bring atten-

tion to the question of duplicate exchange, it might now take upon itself the task of arousing the interest of the profession-at-large in a large-scale project similar to the one outlined above.

Not for Agricultural Libraries Only

Although our committee is moved to advise against the establishment of a public documents clearing house solely for the benefit of agricultural libraries, we have not wished to ignore the immediate purpose for which the committee was originally appointed, namely, the formulation of some method by which agricultural libraries might exchange their duplicate public documents. Therefore, it was considered desirable to suggest some system which would involve little or no expense to the participating libraries and still serve as a satisfactory means of exchanging documents until such time as the services of a central clearing house can be made available.

Recently a periodical exchange union was proposed by the librarian of Fisk University and endorsed by the Board of Directors of the Association of College and Reference Libraries. Its chief advantage lies in the fact that it requires no money outlay for the maintenance of a central bureau of exchange. The principal features of the plan may easily be applied to the type of publications in which our group is interested. Therefore our committee offers for your consideration the following suggestion for public document exchange, based on the periodical exchange union plan:

Suggestions

1. The cooperating libraries will agree to the policy of free exchange, i.e., libraries will give all that they have which they do not need, without regard to what they may receive in return. This is the principle which underlies the duplicate exchange policies of the Special Libraries Association and the Medical Library Association, both of which have been found to operate to the general satisfaction of their respective members.

2. Member libraries will list their duplicate public documents.

3. The participating libraries will be rated according to their size, i.e., total number of accessioned volumes. The lists of duplicates will be circulated among the libraries in the order of their size, the largest library being given priority over the others. This principle of allowing the largest libraries first choice of available material is practiced by the medical exchange and is reported to be satisfactory to all members. The disadvantage of the size-rating for smaller libraries is offset by the advantages which they derive from being allowed access to the duplicate material of the larger institutions. It has been suggested that a more ideal basis for rating libraries would be according to the size and adequacy of their document collections, but this would be difficult to do because of the varied methods of treating documents in different libraries.

4. As each library checks a list, it will cancel from that list the items which it needs and request them from the holding library. The list will then be passed on to the library next in line. It will be understood that the libraries receiving publications will pay the carriage charges.

To sum up the advantages of the sug-

gested plan: (1) It should bring about the desired result of placing documentary material unwanted by one library on the shelves of other libraries, where it is needed. (2) It requires as little expenditure of time and money as possible, since it involves only postage and the amount of staff time required to assemble and check lists. (3) One of the strongest points in its favor is the fact that libraries will waste no time by making demands on exhausted stock, since all material included on the lists which come to them is presumably still available. (4) The plan can be put into operation fairly easily and will serve to indicate whether or not libraries are actually interested in duplicate document exchange.

If the foregoing plan is approved, it is suggested that the presiding officer of the section appoint some member, preferably a volunteer, to serve as chairman of a duplicate public documents exchange to receive applications for inclusion in the project and to work out the details of its operation.

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Self-Survey Manual for the College Library

Peyton Hurt announces that a recent severe illness has obliged him to postpone all work on his project to prepare a self-survey manual for college libraries, undertaken on a grant from the A.L.A. Committee on Fellowships and Scholarships. He extends his thanks to the many librarians who have contributed to his study of the subject and expresses the hope that he can finish the task when he has fully recovered from his illness. Meanwhile he does not claim or wish to pre-empt this field and will be glad to see the preparation and publication by others of material relating to surveying the college library.