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American College Libraries in the Postwar Era

Mr. McEwen, librarian of Carleton College, read this paper at the meeting of the Association of College and Reference Libraries, June 23, 1942.

PROPHECY concerning the future of any profession or institution is always hazardous. Tracing the history of the college library in America can be done with much greater objectivity and with much greater assurance than suggesting what one thinks will be the trends in a coming generation. And prophecy is especially difficult in times like these.

It happens that I had occasion to make a similar attempt somewhat earlier this spring. A few days preceding that occasion I was sitting in the faculty lounge at Carleton with two colleagues and the conversation turned to the future of college librarianship. It was the seventh successive cloudy morning and my mood, as usual, reflected the weather. I said, "But who knows anything about the future of the liberal arts college library?—or the future of the liberal arts college, for that matter?" The instructor in classics set down his cup of coffee and said, "Who knows anything about the future?" And my second colleague, who is a philosopher, ended the conversation. "Who knows anything?" he inquired.

The problem of prophecy, of course, is to reach some assurance that the future

will not be utterly unlike the present, that, in this case, the problems and programs of college librarianship in the postwar era will have a sufficient continuity with the past through the present to permit our positing some directions with assurance. There are values in our present programs of library service and in our present conceptions of college librarianship which we want to carry forward into the postwar era. We do know, however, that the coming years will be considerably different. For us simply to reaffirm our confidence in our present programs might be only whistling in the dark. Even if it is hazardous and necessarily subjective we need prediction, we need what foresight into the nature of the situation we must all face that may be possible. And it is just as true for the problems of college librarianship as for the broader problems of building the framework of a free world that this is the time to begin, not when the war is over.

We must assume, in our thinking, that America will continue to be free, that Americans will continue to believe in freedom and, therefore, in freedom of inquiry. We can assume that we will want and will see that we have such freedom of inquiry in higher education directed at preparation for the life of free men. We see no lessening of the traditional American faith in education as the basis for

democracy but rather a rapidly growing awareness that the complexity of modern society requires more education than we have had if democracy is to function effectively. There will be colleges and universities in the postwar era.

And there will, therefore, be college and university libraries. The principal thesis of this paper is that, increasingly, there will be *college* and *university libraries* rather than libraries on college and university campuses. This trend may not be hastened as a direct result of the war but it will, in my opinion, be the dominant trend in the postwar era. There will be a sharper definition of the function of print and near-print materials in the program of higher education. The relation of reading to various types of courses will be more fully studied. The result cannot but be a demand for library service planned to meet the reading needs of the college program. We have often heard the statement that the library is the heart of the college. That is good sentiment but not sufficiently specific. The college library must be the workshop of the college—the laboratory of the humanities, to a great extent the laboratory of the social sciences, and an auxiliary agency to the laboratories of the physical and biological scientists. The college library will be increasingly an integral part of the teaching process. Its goals will be the goals of the college. It will have no other purpose.

Handling Technical Problems

This may all sound a bit trite and platitudinous. I wish it were. But the unpleasant facts which Dr. Branscomb brought to our attention in his book published two years ago point in another direction. He properly found the most sig-

nificant characteristic of college and university librarianship during the past forty years in the handling of technical problems created by the phenomenal growth of book collections. That expansion necessarily centered attention on books, not on students, on accessioning and marking and classifying and cataloging and shelving books, not on curricula or teaching methods or reading for honors projects or reading habits.

It was inevitable that there was a tendency to think of a college library as first of all a library. College libraries shared these technical problems of the organization of books with public libraries. The same routines could commonly be used and were. The qualifications of a librarian seemed to be about the same. Even library buildings expressed this point of view. One college library with which I am familiar is housed in a building identical with that of the public library of a Midwestern suburb. The two buildings were built at the same time and were both products of the generosity of the same family.

We have been moving away from these attitudes for some time. But I am convinced that we will move farther and faster in the next generation. And it seems important to call attention to this trend, to predict its furtherance, because there is no little resistance to it. Part of the resistance is sheer inertia. It is always easier to continue the administration of a set of routines inherited from the past, routines which seem to work fairly smoothly, than it is to maintain a continuing analysis of those routines in view of their purposes, with the continuing study and changes that such an analysis requires.

Libraries Are Routine-Bound

On a few occasions when I have been a hospital patient I have had reason to inquire why it was necessary for a patient to be awakened at five-thirty in order that his face be washed. The explanation always was that the task was assigned to the night nurse and that she went off duty at six. The answer never quite satisfied me. If the hospital exists as a healing agency it would seem that the patient's rest would be more important than any particular staff schedule. But after a few years as a college librarian I don't think I can criticize the hospitals for being routine-bound. I know how hard it is to modify routines.

There is also resistance to this trend from those who feel that the college library, as a library, has justifiable objectives and aims and interests of its own. We still have with us the genteel tradition of librarianship which thinks of the librarian as a booklover, one of whose natural tasks is to promote an esoteric interest in early printing, fine presses, first editions, illustrators, bookbinding, and the rest. As a hobby for the librarian, even the college librarian, such interests are probably at least as desirable as chess or stamp collecting. But they will have no more place in college librarianship than any other hobby—except in such institutions as include these interests in the scope of their curricula and look to the librarian for instruction in that field.

The goals of the college library in the postwar era will be the goals of the college. It will have no other purpose. We are already giving lip-service to such statements as these. But in future we're going to have to mean it. The size of the collection of current novels, for example, will

not depend on the librarian's interest in promoting the "general reading" of the student but on the extent to which the college feels that such reading is a legitimate or important part of a student's program. Whether a particular rare book shall be purchased will be determined, not on the basis of its rarity or its bargain price, but on its current importance or potential usefulness in the curriculum. We will decide whether general circulation should be limited to fourteen days or one year, not on the example of current practice in public libraries, but in the light of the size of the student body, the degree of dependence on reserve collections for curricular reading, the location of the library building on campus. Some of us may even circulate bound periodicals to undergraduates! Displays will more frequently relate to current campus studies. And we will even consider the degree of intelligence required for admission to the college in deciding on the amount and kind of cataloging required for our libraries.

All that has been said thus far is that the next generation will see a redefinition of objectives and reorganization of processes in the college library directed at identification with the goals of the college.

Indicated Trends

We can't proceed much farther without another essay at prophecy. Can we foresee the direction of changes in college programs in the postwar world? Certainly not very clearly. Yet three trends may be suggested, which will influence our policy-making in the college libraries.

(1) I believe we can see that there will be less provincialism, fewer local or national boundaries in the interests of the various college courses.

(2) I think we can safely predict that the postwar era will be a period of economy in the colleges, of economy if not of retrenchment. We can expect that expenditures will be even more closely scrutinized than at present and that luxury purchases and luxury services will be fewer.

(3) There is good reason to foresee a continuance of the present trend toward differentiation in the programs of the various institutions of higher learning with a resulting lessening of competition.

The first trend requires relatively little comment. We and our teaching colleagues will see to it that the materials needed for education for world citizenship are secured. Both the necessity of economy and the growing differentiation in college programs will urge on us the simplification of library processes, the elimination of marginal interests and activities, and concentration on the central functions of the particular institution of which the library is an agency.

In the nature of the case, therefore, it is impossible for anyone to draw up specifications for our college libraries in the postwar era. Only after we identify the college can we specify the program.

We may conclude, however, with some general implications of the situation as we foresee it for two aspects of our programs—book collections and library staffs.

Size of Book Collection

We can expect that the size of the book collection will receive less emphasis in the postwar era. The important thing, as the North Central Association already recognizes in its accrediting procedures, is, not how many books there are in a college library, but whether it has the books

needed for the program of the college. The junior college need not have as large a book collection as the four-year college. College libraries will leave to the universities the building of specialized subject field collections for graduate study. The university libraries will look to special reference libraries for collections in certain fields.

Book collections will continue to grow, of course. But the calm assumption of the past generation that in planning a new library building one should assume the doubling of the book collection every twenty years won't fit many institutions in the next twenty years.

In our book selection, the cooperation of a larger number of our teaching colleagues will be secured. And we will do well to trust their judgment above our own in the building of subject field collections even while we watch their selection for evidence of fads and occasional prejudice. It will be necessary, too, for us to look gift horses squarely in the mouth. Cataloging and storage costs for gift collections that don't fit, that aren't needed, will not be as readily justified as in the past.

The predicted trend toward a complete identification of the library program with the instructional program suggests certain directions also for our thinking about library staff problems. We have long talked of the necessity of a sharper definition of professional library service. We will have to do more than talk about it, at least in college librarianship. I think the time will come, is already here in some institutions, when the first qualification for a professional staff position will be a real interest in education—the same kind of interest that leads one to teaching. Col-

leges would not often employ an expert kindergartner to teach in the college. Should we not expect the same discrimination to be employed in selecting professional college library personnel? Of course the college librarian should be interested in the problems of bibliography and classification—but he should see those problems as part of higher education. He should be a person who is deeply interested in students and their studies.

Routine Processes

We are not, in the postwar era, going to be freed from the responsibility for the routine processes which have so largely filled the time of library staffs in the recent past. Books will still have to be marked and classified and cataloged and shelved. The necessity of economy will lighten the burden a bit. But we must lighten it further by recognizing the fact that the carrying out of many of our routines, once they are established, is simply not a professional task.

Some colleges and universities have a practice of expecting every administrative officer to offer one course in a field in which he is trained. The purpose of such a policy is obvious—to keep the administrative officers in direct touch with students' thinking and attitudes, to keep them constantly aware of the principal function of the college. I recommend the equiva-

lent of that policy as a means toward the kind of library staff which the coming years will require. No professional librarian in a college should be without some direct educational contact with students. This need not always be the formal relationship of teaching a course. It can be done in reference work, if the reference work is correlated with instruction. It can be done in assisting the students in using the catalog, if the catalog is recognized as the college's index to its library holdings.

We have been devoting considerable attention to educating the faculty and students in the resources of our libraries and this is all to the good. But the other side of the picture is equally important—for us as librarians to learn more about the curricular goals and the educational methods of the college.

Trends such as these will, I believe, characterize the American college library in the postwar years. They may appear to limit the freedom of college librarianship, to suggest the acceptance of an instrumental if not subservient function rather than an independent one. I believe they will require just that change. But in that change lies the way to real freedom for college librarianship, freedom through genuine participation in the program of higher education which is our basic function.