

Libraries in Closing Colleges: Or, Where Have All the Volumes Gone?

"200 Small Colleges Could Close in the 1980s, U.S. Report Says," was a page one headline in the June 2, 1980, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Three weeks later an article on and a list of 141 colleges which closed from 1970 to 1979 were run in the same pages. Other predictions offer a more dismal picture of the future, with one projecting that 89% of all private colleges will close by the year 2007. Responses to the situation have primarily been at the institutional level. Through wise planning and innovative fund raising, so goes the argument, our institution will be one of the survivors. This has led to an observation that, unlike the "me" decade of the 70s, the 80s and the 90s will be the "not-me" decades for colleges.

Assuming an average collection size of 40,000 volumes, 5.6 million books were disposed of during the 1970s and, accepting the prediction of 200 for the 1980s, another 8 million will come on the market. Since the ACRL College Library Section's Impact of National Library Policy and National Library Developments on the College Library Committee is charged with reviewing such matters, we felt that 13 million volumes deserved some attention. Where are they going? How are they getting there? Who is deciding?

In attempting to gather information, we found a tendency to ignore the admittedly unpleasant topic of closing institutions. Grants have been made to two groups to develop ways of providing support at the institutional level. Articles have appeared in popular publications reporting the situation, but not much has been written about the process. And there were very few discussions of how to deal with the library in these instances.

In pieces where libraries were discussed, they were treated briefly and with quite different emphases. Obtaining a good appraisal was considered of paramount importance by one writer, while another brought up the need to provide continued preservation of and access to archival material and special collections. Also, ALA was recommended as an excellent source for notifying potential buyers and for obtaining advice on taking an inventory.

We were pleasantly surprised to see ALA invoked, but disappointed that there is no organized effort to provide that support.

To that end we are publishing that report to heighten the visibility of the question and to stimulate discussion. We have, obviously, worked through the tendency to avoid the problem and

are guided by a metaphor we encountered in the literature: "Planning for an orderly abandoning of ship will not cause a shipwreck and may well prevent a disaster."¹

We also wish to offer some specific recommendations:

- Contact should be made and collaboration begun immediately with the groups and individuals identified as pursuing this question at the institutional level.

- Information should be solicited from librarians who have been involved in past closings. We have found this to be a difficult task, since many of those librarians are reluctant to engage in a post mortem. Establishing a contact also presents problems. Of two letters the committee sent to libraries who were advertising an auction, one was returned as undeliverable and the other went unanswered.

- A checklist of actions to be taken once a decision to close is made should be a goal of any group working on this problem.

- A list of libraries willing to assist in collection evaluation by, for example, checking a portion of the closing library's holdings in major databases and bibliographies should be developed.

- A system to provide assistance in matching ongoing libraries' collection development needs with the collections of closing libraries should be arranged. This system might also prove useful to libraries in institutions where there are significant shifts in institutional emphasis. To extend the metaphor cited above, one library's bilge may be another's ballast.

- Assistance should be provided in the relocation of the library staff.

We see this as an opportunity to provide substantial assistance at a time when it is especially needed. There appears to be no other organization planning to offer this help to libraries nor is there any group with the same expertise and, we hope, good will.

If you would like to share your thoughts on this subject or are willing to become involved, please contact either the chair of the College Library Section, Thomas G. Kirk, College Librarian, Hutchins Library, Berea College, Berea, KY 40404, (606) 986-9341; or the chair of the CLS Impact Committee, John Sheridan, Head Librarian, Transylvania University Library, Lexington, KY 40508, (606) 233-8222.—*John Sheridan, for the Committee.* ■■

¹Kevin-John H. MacIntyre, "Preparing for College Closings," *Educational Record* 58 (Summer 1977):298.

