

# The Need for a Research Program in Library Problems

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WYLLIS E. WRIGHT ends his article on "How Little Cataloging Can Be Effective?" in the April, 1954, issue of COLLEGE AND RESEARCH LIBRARIES on a plaintive little note—and well he may. After considering various ways to reduce the amount of cataloging necessary in a college library he asks: "Who uses an author's dates, the notation of size, or a series note, and why? Is this title card ever consulted? Does the frequency of use justify the cost of giving collation? Until we know in fairly exact terms how much cataloging is effective, we really have no basis for discussing how little cataloging can be effective."

With these rhetorical questions Mr. Wright points his finger straight at one of the most serious weaknesses of college and university library work. We *don't know* who uses an author's dates, or the notation of size, or the series note, nor why. Our ignorance is bad enough but what is worse is that we make no serious attempt to correct it. In this respect we are too much like Bacon's Jestling Pilate who asked, "What is truth?" but did not stay for an answer. Perennially we ask ourselves these and other questions but perennially we do not stay for an answer.

Such questions could be answered if we really set ourselves to the task. They are

no more difficult than the questions the chemist or the physicist or the biologist poses every day. This comparison simply points up the contrast between library research and industrial research. One of the greatest differences between the two is the amount of money spent on each.

Robert Leigh has reported in his *The Public Library in the United States* the amounts which were spent on research in various professional schools for the period 1948-49. During that year a million dollars were devoted to research in the eight engineering schools included in the Public Library Inquiry sample. Graduate schools of business and education in the same sample received \$100,000; law and architecture got \$15,000; journalism \$8,600; and nursing \$6,500. During the same period the eight library schools in the sample received only \$4,320 for research. Is it any wonder that, with so little money to spend on research, librarians do not know the answers to many of their most important questions?

Money is not everything and libraries have long been notorious for their poverty, but willingness to spend money on research is an indication of the seriousness with which any profession takes itself. Industry learned long ago that its very life depends upon continuing research. It cost the Boeing Aircraft Corporation five million dollars to build the first American jet transport plane. Much of that money went for research. The aircraft industry could not

advance without a well-planned and well-financed research program.

Within the last twenty years all industry has become convinced of the value and importance of research. Of course, some industries benefit more from research than others. Chemical, pharmaceutical, engineering and aircraft manufacturers spend fabulous sums each year to keep abreast of the latest research in their fields. DuPont spends hundreds of thousands of dollars annually in research to develop new products. Until recently Squibb spent \$25,000 a year just to index and abstract periodical articles for the use of its research teams. General Motors spends millions to design and test a new car.

The "new industrial revolution" in Great Britain may be cited as a final example of the importance of research in industry. After the war Britain was forced to step up her exports in order to survive. To do this it became necessary to pour more money into research and development than ever before. The Imperial Chemical Industries, Ltd., for example, now spends about \$10,000,000 a year on research alone. That last year's unfavorable trade balance in Britain was no more than 560 million dollars was due largely to the research which improved or developed such items as Dacron, radio telescopes, jet transports, and radioactive isotopes.

Thus does industry express its faith in the value of research. In view of this attitude on the part of industry toward research the question naturally arises: Why do libraries spend so little on research? Why do they not also invest in research which would answer the questions librarians keep asking themselves over and over?

Lack of money is undoubtedly the chief reason. Libraries, unlike General Motors and DuPont and Imperial Chemical In-

dustries, simply don't have the money to spend on costly research. The library offers service and does not seek to make a profit and consequently it does not have large sums of money at its disposal to spend on research.

Although libraries will never have as much money as Squibb or General Electric to spend on research, there are some ways in which funds could be secured for much needed investigations.

Libraries have long lobbied for federal aid. This plea for federal funds has usually been made on the grounds that library service is unequal throughout the country and that those areas which do not have library service can be helped only by federal funds. However, librarians themselves have often objected to this plea for federal aid on the grounds that federal aid would mean federal control. Since one of the strong points of libraries is their individual and independent character it is only natural that librarians should oppose a plan for aid which might bring with it control.

Recent requests for federal aid on the part of libraries have been based on a different concept. These requests have been for funds to finance demonstration libraries which would show what could be done if money were available for library service in areas which are now unserved. Put this way these requests do not hold any threat of federal control.

However, might it not be wiser to approach the problem of federal aid from still another angle? Libraries could request federal funds to be spent for research into their most pressing problems. Money earmarked for this purpose would carry no threat of federal control. For after all, scientific investigation must be free or not be at all. And library research would benefit all types of libraries: school, special,

public, and college and university. By answering questions which now go unanswered research thus financed would contribute to improved library service everywhere.

Foundation grants suggest a second possible source of funds for library research. Admittedly, foundation funds are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, especially in the field of librarianship. One reason for this is that foundations have seen little good come from the funds they once lavishly poured into libraries. As a result of this indifferent record they are understandably reluctant to toss more money down the same hole.

Foundations might, however, be willing to devote some of their funds to library research. They would undoubtedly recognize that money so spent would aid all libraries and not just one. From their experience with other projects they would be more inclined to sink money in research than in buildings and books, which in the past have not yielded any startling results. Certainly they would recognize that here they could make a contribution which could be achieved in no other way. If a community is seriously interested in maintaining a library, it can have one, but few communities can afford to finance a research program in library science.

Thus it seems possible that a strong and successful appeal could be made for foundation funds for library research. At any rate, it would be worth trying to secure foundation funds for such a purpose.

A third way in which money might be raised for library research is through inter-library cooperation. Libraries could contribute to a fund which would be used to finance research teams and projects. The individual library would receive a long-term return on its investment in the way of improved methods and techniques. It

would receive a short-term return in the way of published reports on research immediately applicable to its problems.

In order to get such a research program under way it might at first prove advisable to solicit or organize contributions from libraries by type. College and university libraries would seem to be a logical starting point for such an experiment. Because of the climate in which they operate they should not find it too difficult to convince the powers that be of the value and need for research.

If they demonstrated that such a plan is practicable, it would not be too long before other types of libraries adopted a similar scheme. As the over-all program developed, the special needs of different types of libraries could be integrated into a unified program for library research which would serve all types of libraries.

The amount which each library would have to contribute to such a fund would depend on the number of libraries taking part in the program. At first these self-assessments might be prorated on a service basis similar to that employed by the H. W. Wilson Company. This would be justified on the grounds that the larger libraries which would contribute more would also benefit more. All in all, such a plan is not wholly impractical or impossible.

The problems which could be turned over to a library science research team are almost unlimited. Wright in the article referred to above has indicated some of them. We need to know who uses the bibliographic information which appears on a catalog card and how and why. Kenneth Brough in his recent work on the *Scholar's Workshop* suggests some of the problems of college and university libraries which need to be investigated. As he points out, we don't know how a scholar or research worker uses the library. We don't know

what use he makes of subject entries in the catalog if any.

The problem of bibliographic control is one which stands in need of considerable research. According to Samuel Bradford, bibliographic control of the literature of science and technology can be achieved by means of cooperation through the use of the Universal Decimal Classification. However, the problem is larger than even Bradford realized and calls for extensive research. And it is this kind of research which could be undertaken by a team financed in one of the ways outlined above.

These are only a few of the problems libraries face today which could be attacked by research. The solution of any one of them would be of great value to all libraries.

The advantages of a coordinated research program for librarianship would be innumerable. The professional status of librarianship depends to a large extent on research. The fact that there has been, relatively, so little research into library problems undoubtedly explains the confused status of librarianship as a profession. With a broad and continuing research program and the benefits which it would bring, librarianship would be in a much better position to claim professional status.

Of course, the most obvious and immediate advantage would be the solution of problems which now impede the progress of library science. All libraries would eventually benefit from research devoted to these problems. Indeed, this is the most persuasive reason for initiating such a program.

Still another advantage would be the availability of a trained team for trouble shooting. Industry has quickly learned the value of trouble shooters who can be sent in to attack a problem as soon as it arises. Libraries could adopt a similar policy. Research workers could be turned

loose on a problem as soon as it became apparent. Libraries would no longer need to rely on the slow and painful method of trial and error. Much of the guesswork would be taken out of library service.

Not the least of the advantages of a sustained research program would be the development of a large and useful body of research literature. Such a literature would contribute to the professionalism of librarianship. More important, it would form a reservoir from which all libraries could draw in time of need.

But a well-financed research program will not spring into being of its own accord. It must be planned for and fought for—and it must be backed by a belief on the part of librarians that it is worthwhile. Only then will it be possible to initiate such a program. As long as librarians prefer trial-and-error methods to research, we will have neither a research program nor the benefits that can be derived from it.

Without a long-term cooperative research program librarianship must of necessity stumble ahead as best it can. Several years ago Bernard Berelson pointed out the advantages of research in librarianship to the individual librarian. At the 1948 Library Conference on Education for Librarianship at the University of Chicago he called attention to the youthfulness of a great many university librarians. He expressed the opinion that their early success was partly the result of the research which they had undertaken.

What is true for the individual would no doubt be true for the profession as a whole. A well-organized research program would enable it to forge ahead more rapidly. Like the individuals cited by Berelson, the profession would reach maturity sooner and so have more time to contribute the best that is in it. It would have a longer life of greater usefulness.