

# The Centrifugence Of University Libraries

BY DAVID W. HERON

IT IS PERHAPS infelicitous to compare the evolution of a university library with the gyration which causes water to fly off a wheel or which presses clay against the potter's hand. Yet there is a tendency in the rapid growth of our major academic libraries which can be compared, at least superficially, to the inertia which carries a revolving body away from the axis of its rotation.

There is nothing new, of course, in the ubiquitous pressure for decentralization of university libraries. The development of central library service is recent enough, in fact, to reverse the metaphor, speaking of the librarian's unnatural efforts to gather all of the university's books into one great incomprehensible, unmanageable hoard. Reading and contemplation are still best in solitude, and the scholar's ideal library is still his own study, lined with the books essential to his inquiries.

University librarians cannot afford to forget that our own centripetal point of view may occasionally require explanation. If our libraries are reasonably efficient, however, it should never require apology. The simple fact is that few, if any, universities can still provide even their most distinguished scholars with private libraries, nor can many of them afford private libraries for their departments and professional schools. No one has mourned the passing of the term "library economy" from the language of the profession, but the necessity for central library service to American institutions of higher education can be most simply expressed in these terms: it is an economic necessity. The growth in enrollment, particularly during the two

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decades since the beginning of World War II, the resultant growth in the size of faculties and demand for libraries adequate to their research (and that of their graduate students) are perhaps the most conspicuous reasons. The increase in the number of books and journals published in almost every field of academic endeavor is another, as is their increasing cost.

Still another, and in some ways the most interesting, of these pressures upon universities and their libraries comes from the new relationships which have developed among the various disciplines of human inquiry, the erosion of the barriers which have separated the physical sciences from one another and from the biological—and even the social—sciences. "Erosion" is probably not the word with which to describe the impact of the atom, the rocket, and human fecundity. Society today demands of its universities a new measure of universality.

Only the striking and increasing changes of the last two decades justify exhuming the decentralization question, to which Keyes Metcalf addressed himself so well in 1949,<sup>1</sup> and which Robert A. Miller considered systematically a decade earlier,<sup>2</sup> marshalling the arguments publicized by the University of Chicago

<sup>1</sup> Keyes, D. Metcalf, "Harvard Faces Its Library Problems," *The Place of the Library in a University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Miller, "Centralization Versus Decentralization," *ALA Bulletin*, XXXIII (1939), 75-79, 134.

as early as 1924, when it began the examination of its own decentralized library system.<sup>3</sup>

The most striking of these changes is the last two decades' growth in the size of our universities, lately reminiscent of Paul Bunyan's cottage, "a house that was so high that the last five stories had to be put on hinges to let the moon go by. . . ." The ALA statistics for this period show that our libraries have grown in proportion, most of them more than doubling in size, and several measuring their growth in millions of volumes.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the quality of individual service is not a direct function of the size of a library. Our faculties and students are alarmed to find that although they have many books from which to choose, it is difficult to abstract from these great assortments the particular volumes which they need. Not only do our libraries become more complex as they become larger, but the competition for books is in proportion to enrollment.

It is the faculty to whom this growth and its growing pains are most evident, for they can recall the good old days, and their response is frequently—and not unreasonably—to gather their own collections into their offices, where they can be logically arranged and where they are safe from the dilettante forays of other faculty members' students.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the library books thus sequestered are not entirely safe, and the competitors most likely to track them down are his own colleagues and graduate students. Their efforts, together with the limited capacity of his office, are likely to suggest the establishment of a

department library. He can anticipate the support of his colleagues in this proposal, and that of other departments who have or who want their own libraries. The only opposition is likely to come from the librarian (perhaps supported by the fiscal authorities) and from those departments which have not succeeded in establishing their own collections.<sup>6</sup>

This is, of course, an oversimplified description of a complicated process, and implies disapproval of departmentalization, overlooking many arguments in its favor.<sup>7</sup> As a rule, however, the librarian's most defensible position is in opposition to this form of decentralization because it is generally uneconomical of space, book funds, and salaries. Moreover, unless department collections are composed entirely of duplicates, they isolate significant parts of the library's collection from the whole, with consequences which may be significant to both education and research.

In spite of these hazards, however, a number of university librarians have themselves advocated and adopted various forms of decentralization, even in the absence of strong partisan pressure for department libraries. These departures have frequently been justified in terms of the welfare of undergraduates or of other significant segments of the university.<sup>8</sup> Spatial problems, however, have generally contributed to the process. The need to provide more space for books as well as for students without meeting the formidable cost of a new central library building has often been decisive. The decentralization has taken the form not only of departmental libraries but of undergraduate libraries,

<sup>3</sup> *University of Chicago Commission on the Future Policy of the University Libraries. Tentative Report* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924). See also J. C. M. Hanson, "Central Versus Departmental Libraries," *Library Quarterly*, XIII (1943), 132-35.

<sup>4</sup> See "College and University Library Statistics" in the *ALA Bulletin* and *CRL*.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice F. Tauber, *Technical Services in Libraries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953) p. 266. writes, "There will always be some patrons who will disagree with any classification. The problem which the librarian faces is that of resolving individual dissatisfaction in relation to the whole."

<sup>6</sup> "Whether unfortunately or not, a departmental library is frequently an important part of the physical establishment by which a department's stature and vitality may be judged, and it may be essential for accreditation of a program by outside agencies." Stanford University, informal history of department libraries (MS) 1960, introduction, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Louis R. Wilson and Maurice F. Tauber, *The University Library*. (2nd ed.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), pp. 148-53.

<sup>8</sup> F. H. Wagman, "The Case for a Separate Undergraduate Library," *CRL*, XVII (1956), 150-55.

storage facilities, and special libraries serving groups of related disciplines.<sup>9</sup>

Closely related to the last of these is the subject divisional arrangement within the central library building which aroused considerable interest a few years ago.<sup>10</sup> In addition to providing some degree of flexibility in a congested situation, the subject divisional system has provided interesting opportunities for specialized reference service<sup>11</sup> and some of the convenience to particular departments which they might have expected from departmental libraries.

To regard subject division as fragmentation in the same sense as the formation of department libraries may seem to draw a fairly fine line. It must be so regarded, nevertheless, in terms of inquiries which transcend the boundaries of the disciplines delimiting the various collections. Subject division, like the separation of departmental libraries, will take such an inquirer to two or more different places to find books which in the context of his inquiry should be found together.

The interdisciplinary or peripheral question is likely to be the exception rather than the rule even among faculty and graduate students; undergraduate assignments are certainly more likely to be within the boundaries of the established disciplines than in the uncertain border areas. Departmental or divisional libraries quite obviously provide the best possible service to those disciplines for which they have been set aside, assuming that they are carefully selected and efficient in their operation. Since the majority of inquiries will be circumscribed by these disciplines, how self-conscious should we be when we ask a

member of the minority "to go to more than one library, especially for material peripheral to his field"?<sup>12</sup>

This question cannot be answered satisfactorily without knowing how much time he will spend walking from library to library in relation to the time he spends reading, and how much time his teaching, writing, and committees permit him to spend on either. Nevertheless, it is clear that the fragmentation of a university library has a tendency to discourage the peripheral research which relates one field of endeavor to another, and such a tendency may detract from the strength and vitality of our scholarship. If this hazard is of any real significance, it should perhaps be considered along with the advantages of, if not the actual necessities for, decentralization of university libraries.

Among the scholars who have one way or another identified themselves with this minority is Georges Gusdorf, discussing the relation of the social sciences: "We cannot avoid remarking that the eminent scientists do not understand one another because they do not have a common language. In addition, we ask ourselves, not without some concern, if they have anything to say to one another. Each one pursues his inquiry in an area of his specialty without worrying about the others, aside from the few colleagues who are concerned with the same problems but who profess generally conflicting opinions."<sup>13</sup> Likewise pessimistic is Admiral Hyman Rickover, who feels that one of the major problems of education is that "The gap widens between the experts and the people who depend for their well-being on the work of these experts. This disturbing

<sup>9</sup> Wilson and Tauber, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-56, 469-70.

<sup>10</sup> R. E. Ellsworth, "Significance of the Divisional Room Plan for University Libraries," *University of Colorado Studies*, XXVI, No. 4 (1941), 33-39; F. A. Lundy, "The Divisional Plan Library," *CRL* XVII (1956), 145-48; J. R. Blanchard, in his "Departmental Libraries," *CRL*, XIV (1953), p. 247, wrote: "Departmental libraries are becoming obsolete in systems where the divisional plan is used."

<sup>11</sup> R. C. Swank, "The Educational Function of the University Library," *Library Trends*, I (1952), 37-48.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice F. Tauber, C. Donald Cook, Richard H. Logsdon, *The Columbia University Libraries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 126, acknowledge Columbia University's "... policy of concentrating on doing the job in one place only, expecting the user to go to more than one library, especially for material peripheral to his field."

<sup>13</sup> Gusdorf, Georges, "The Ambiguity of the Sciences of Man," *Diogenes*, (Summer, 1959), 54.

cleavage exists in the humanities no less than in the sciences."<sup>14</sup>

Arnold Toynbee, in a recent article on general education, relates this reservation more closely to universities and their libraries: ". . . even the disinterested pursuit of science becomes sterile if it runs in narrow ruts. Specialization in particular branches of natural science soon runs dry if it is cut off from its source in comprehensive and philosophical scientific thinking."<sup>15</sup>

Because of the explosive impact of atomic science upon the expansion and interrelation of physics, chemistry, and the biological sciences, it is perhaps appropriate to quote finally from two papers by J. Robert Oppenheimer bearing affirmatively upon university research: "There is a lot of relation in this world of science. It has structure and refers to a beautifully ordered world; it is rich; it is always astonishing; it is always different; it is always subtle; there is order so that things cohere, so that general things encompass special ones . . ." <sup>16</sup> and "We find between the different subjects, even as remote as genetics and topology, an occasional sharp mutual relevance. They throw light on each other. They have something to do with each other. Often the greatest things in the sciences occur when two different discoveries made in different worlds turn out to have so much in common that they are examples of a still greater discovery."<sup>17</sup>

There is no way of measuring the frequency with which a university library is able to provide members of its faculty and its students with evidence of the "occasional sharp mutual relevance" which crosses subject boundaries. Yet, if

<sup>14</sup> Rickover, Hyman, *Education and Freedom* (New York: Dutton, 1959), p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Toynbee, Arnold, "Education: the Long View," *Saturday Review*, XLIII (November 19, 1960), 62.

<sup>16</sup> Oppenheimer, Robert, "Tradition and Discovery," *ACLS Newsletter*, X (October, 1959), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Oppenheimer, "Science and Culture," *Bulletin of the International House of Japan*, (October, 1960), 7.

the discoveries to which Professor Oppenheimer refers are made in our libraries as well as our laboratories—and they must be—then the fragmentation of our research collections must to some degree diminish the chance of their occurrence.

Of more practical importance, however, is the effect of these discoveries upon the boundaries themselves. One need only contemplate the evolution of such new fields of endeavor as the behavioral sciences, astrophysics, biophysics, and nuclear engineering as avenues of inquiry into the mysteries of man and the universe to realize that they are following directions and methods never imagined a quarter of a century ago, and that the libraries must take into account—even though they do not anticipate—the changing relationships among the arts and sciences.

The size of our libraries makes this difficult enough—as the great inertia which may even now foredoom the Dewey decimal structure demonstrates—but the compartmentalization of our collections, not unlike the integrity of numbers, compounds this inflexibility.

Some of our institutions can afford better than others the duplication of books, of space, and of services which is the price of decentralization. Frequently, practical considerations of a spatial, political, or financial nature make the establishing of departmental or divisional libraries the wisest, if not the inevitable, course for a university library. Strong arguments have been advanced in favor of divisional organization in terms of its advantage to instruction, particularly of undergraduates.

It is well to consider its cost, however, and it may be well to speculate upon the intangible but potentially important effects of the centrifugal pressure upon the structure—and perhaps ultimately upon the substance—of university libraries.