

The Conception and Birth Pangs of OCLC—An Account of the Struggles of the Formative Years

*The efforts at academic library cooperation that culminated in the creation of the Ohio College Library Center (OCLC, Inc. *) in 1967 really began no later than 1951. At that time a small group of head librarians from one municipal and several private colleges got together to cooperate among themselves so as to improve their resources and services. They were soon joined by others, including their counterparts in the largest state-assisted and private universities in Ohio. It required the strenuous, often agonizing efforts of academic librarians and college presidents, working through the Ohio Library Association and the Ohio College Association, to conceive and deliver OCLC sixteen years later.*

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE 1980s, it seems almost impossible to imagine contemporary American librarianship without the presence of this multimillion-dollar bibliographic utility which, octopuslike, has spread its tentacles to some 2,400 institutions in all fifty states and Canada. The period of phenomenal growth since 1967 has been well documented in numerous periodical articles and several monographs.¹ The earlier period of struggle to develop cooperative projects among the academic libraries of Ohio has not been so well chronicled. Thus, a few comments by two participants in those earlier years may be of interest.

In a sense, OCLC may be said to be the product of a century of cooperation among Ohio's colleges and universities. The Ohio College Association (OCA) was founded in 1867 with twelve charter members, including both state and private institutions.² The century that followed saw a fivefold growth in membership and a pattern of cooperation at

*Present name is Online Computer Library Center, Inc.

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the institutional level. It was within this general context that the librarians of Akron, Denison, Kenyon, Oberlin, Ohio Wesleyan, and Wooster met in December 1951 and formed a group to explore cooperation among Ohio's academic libraries. At the time, all of these (except Akron, which was municipal) were private institutions—small, good, liberal arts colleges for the most part.

A Joint Committee on Inter-library Cooperation was formed in 1952, with representation from the Librarians' Section of the Ohio College Association and the College and University Round Table of the Ohio Library Association (OLA). The appointment of the joint committee brought several of the state university libraries into the effort, most notably Ohio State University, because Lewis C. Branscomb, director of libraries, was also chairman of OLA's College and University Round Table. Bowling Green State, Kent State, and Cincinnati (then still municipal) followed. Thus both public and private institutions became involved. Discussions centered around the need for a regional union list of serials, a book depository, and lending services—activities somewhat like those of the then relatively new (1949) Midwest Inter-Library Center (MILC), now the Center for Research Libraries. Other ideas included

cooperative purchase and sharing of expensive sets and some linkage to MILC. Ralph Esterquest, then director of MILC, met with the group.

In 1953 the joint committee recommended to OCA that a survey be undertaken to determine to what extent Ohio college and university libraries could cooperate. OCA voted to sponsor the survey, but only if a foundation grant could be secured to underwrite it. The search for foundation funding was not successful, and this delayed the survey for a decade.

Another development of consequence was the formation of the Inter-University Library Council (IULC) in 1953. It consisted of the head librarians of the state-assisted university libraries in Ohio (at that time Ohio State, Ohio University, Kent, Miami, Bowling Green, and Central State). These were among the largest academic libraries in the state and their directors soon became heavily involved in the committee work that preceded the formation of OCLC.

The year 1957 saw a flurry of activity but no lasting accomplishments. A subcommittee of the joint committee (chaired by J. H. Lancaster, Ohio Wesleyan) wrote to Walter Brahm (then state librarian) in support of a new five-million-dollar building to be shared by the state library and the state historical society. Among the expanded services to be expected from the state library were: supplying to college and university libraries the same types of backup in collections and interlibrary loans furnished to public libraries; becoming a repository for infrequently used books and periodicals; promoting cooperative acquisitions among college libraries; maintaining a regional collection of federal and state documents that could relieve individual libraries of the need to retain seldom-used documents; a college library research specialist; photo-duplication; coordination of the State Library Union Catalog with other bibliographic services that might become available; and studying the feasibility of a book-exchange program.³ Nothing came of this grand design.

Another abortive effort in 1957 was the attempt to have a survey of Ohio's academic libraries included in plans for a Governor's Commission to Study Higher Education in Ohio.⁴ Perhaps one clue to the failures in 1957 was opposition to a state repository from

within the academic library community. John Nicholson, Jr., of Kent, in particular, was deeply concerned that the budget for such a cooperative endeavor would result in less money for the state-assisted university libraries.⁵

By 1960, matters had begun to take a more positive turn. Nicholson was appointed chairman of the joint committee and was to serve in that capacity for the next six years.

Foundation funding continued to be elusive, but the joint committee made progress in clarifying its ideas and expectations. The emphasis shifted to union catalogs as a basis for cooperation. Rivalry developed between Cleveland and Columbus as to whether the Cleveland Regional Union Catalog, primarily research-library-oriented, or the State Library Union Catalog, primarily public-library-oriented, should be the basis for further efforts. Ralph Esterquest conducted a study in which he recommended that the Cleveland Regional Union Catalog be discontinued on December 31, 1961.⁶ Esterquest thought that a reduced scale of service to Cleveland and northeastern Ohio might be feasible and this was continued for several years.

Accelerated progress came in 1962 when OCA decided to use \$10,000 of its own funds to finance a study to determine the feasibility of several programs of cooperation among Ohio's academic libraries. Wyman Parker, then librarian at Wesleyan University in Connecticut but familiar with Ohio through past service at Kenyon and Cincinnati, was appointed to conduct the survey. He spent two months in Ohio interviewing, traveling, analyzing returns from questionnaires, etc. He made four recommendations:

1. It is recommended that a Bibliographical Center be established by the Ohio College Association for the rapid location and procurement of books through interlibrary loan and purchase. . . .
2. It is recommended that a separate building to house this Bibliographical Center be erected near a large university library. . . .
3. It is recommended that a cooperative purchase program of generous proportions be inaugurated so as to secure as soon as possible a central archive of research materials on microprint. . . .
4. It is recommended that a Director and staff for the center be secured as soon as is practical. . . .⁷

The expenses for the bibliographical center

were estimated as follows: land and building—\$150,000; basic microprint stock—\$150,000; possible annual budget—\$60,000.⁸

In 1963 OCA approved the report in principle and then dissolved the joint committee, which was believed to have accomplished its purpose. It then formed a purely OCA committee charged with "implementation of the recommendations" made in the Parker report.⁹ What could have been a problem turned out not to be. Most of the librarians were involved in *both* OLA and OCA. The new committee consisted of ten librarians, two presidents, and a provost. It was titled the Ohio College Library Project Committee.¹⁰ It was not expected that the presidents and the provost would work actively on the committee, but their appointment was extremely important because of the weight they lent to the implementation of the recommendations. Through these top executives it was possible to have direct access to the powerful OCA Executive Committee. Without this access, it is doubtful the librarians would have succeeded in establishing the Ohio College Library Center. A. Blair Knapp, president of Denison University, was chairman and John Nicholson was executive secretary. Nicholson actually chaired most of the meetings of the committee. He resigned in 1966 and was succeeded by A. Robert Rogers.

The committee sought to publicize its work through OLA, OCA, and the institutional presidents. The latter were especially important in securing consent of college fiscal officers. The remainder of 1963 and the early months of 1964 were spent in study of various automation alternatives. No fewer than eight meetings were held in less than a year. The storm center of debate was whether there should be a microfilm-based union catalog or a computerized one. Proposals were received from IBM, Recordak, Remington-Rand, and Bibliomatics, Inc. After exhaustive review, the committee decided that the two most promising proposals were those of Recordak (microfilm) and IBM (computer). All members of the committee but one favored the Recordak proposal, partly because the estimated cost of initial installation (\$383,683) was substantially lower than that proposed by IBM (\$1,093,700). The advantages of each were listed by the committee as follows:

Recordak

1. Low cost of initial installation.
2. Speedy retrieval of information.
3. Ease of updating.
4. Possible location of three stations within the state.
5. Ease of operation from the operator's point of view.
6. Familiarity among librarians with Recordak film and equipment.
7. Ease of addition of new stations when desired.
8. Possibility of sale of film catalog to other libraries and other states.

IBM

1. Provision of a printed book catalog by author, subject, and title for each member library.
2. Elaborately complete updating process.
3. Complete computer system flexibility for the future.
4. Salability of printed catalogs to retrieve some of the initial cost.¹¹

Because of the different views among committee members respecting the microfilm-based catalog versus the computerized one, the committee made no recommendation on this point in its proposal to the Ohio College Association in April 1964 or to the consultants, Ralph H. Parker and Frederick G. Kilgour, when they met with the committee in September and October of 1965.

When the committee's recommendations to establish a center were announced at the Librarians' Section of OCA, there were strong protests, but a majority voted to proceed. OCA itself cautiously endorsed the proposed center "in principle." Some librarians, opposed to the microfilm-based system, sent letters of protest to the presidents. A report by Verner Clapp, then president of the Council on Library Resources, to the Academy for Educational Development (for the Ohio Board of Regents) recommended that the issue be given more study. By the fall of 1964, it looked as though the whole project was dead.¹² A determined group of library directors in IULC was not about to let this happen. In 1965 they persuaded the OCA Committee of Librarians to accede to what several critics had requested—an appraisal by outside consultants respected in the library field for their expertise in library automation.

OCA agreed with this approach and provided \$2,200, which enabled the committee to invite Ralph H. Parker, then director of

libraries, University of Missouri, and Frederick G. Kilgour, then associate librarian for research and development, Yale University, to review the project and make recommendations. The consultants met twice with the committee in the fall of 1965 and read the considerable amount of documentation which by this time had accumulated. Parker and Kilgour proposed a new approach:

The consultants are convinced that computerization of present library procedures on a piece-by-piece basis cannot be justified. . . .

The present proposal suggests the establishment of a cooperative, computerized regional network in which most, if not all, Ohio college libraries will participate. . . .

The first goal of the system will be to establish an effective, shared-cataloguing program based on a central computer store containing a catalogue for the current holdings of Ohio college libraries. . . .

The second function of the central store would be to provide a catalogue of holdings in Ohio college libraries which in effect would supply union catalogue information. . . .¹³

The Committee of Librarians met in January 1966, endorsed the Parker-Kilgour report in principle, and raised some questions that were subsequently answered by the consultants. Among the more important of these were:

1. Will the machine record-kept catalog at the Center in time make the traditional catalog in each local library obsolescent?
In all probability, the card catalog will become obsolescent in the next 15 years. But an individual library would be able to continue its card catalog with the cards prepared, ready for filing, by the regional center.
2. The Committee wished to re-check with the consultants on the possibility of any very recent developments in the automation field that would affect their thinking in this matter. In particular, the Committee was concerned with the automation schedule of the Library of Congress.
The Library of Congress appears to be progressing rapidly in the design of its over-all automation program.
3. What format will the output in each individual library be? Will it be tape print-out, or card print-out, or will it take some other form?
The output to each individual library can take a wide variety of forms to meet the needs of a particular member. The cataloguing output might be in the form of traditional cards, might be complete catalogs in book form, or might be simply a printed index to the magnetic catalog in the Center.

4. Even though the report states that regional centers are more practical, do the consultants ever envision a time when larger libraries in Ohio would have direct lines to the Library of Congress?
With the type of organization suggested, there would be no reason why a library need have direct connections with the Library of Congress. The regional center would automatically transfer the message to the Library of Congress whenever needed.

5. Why are serials being left out initially?
The consultants have recommended the omission of serials at this time since there are problems peculiar to them both in cataloguing and in mechanization of holdings records.
 6. Should contributions by local libraries to the existing state union catalog be discontinued now in view of the possibilities of this project?
Individual libraries should consider the question of discontinuing contributions to the state union catalog, but the consultants would prefer not to give a categorical *Yes* or *No* to this question.
 7. The Committee is desirous of clarification of acquisitions procedures in connection with the Center. What *specifically* would be the utilization of the Center in acquisitions searching?
The individual library would have instantaneous access to the bibliographic records of all libraries in the Center from all access points now available in the traditional card catalog, from the Library of Congress card number, and from various other points such as date and place of publication.
 8. The Committee would like for the consultants to be more specific concerning foundation grants. Which definite foundations might be amenable to the idea of the Center?
The consultants have been of the opinion that specific study grants . . . might be obtained from either private or public sources, for example, the Council on Library Resources, the National Science Foundation, or the United States Office of Education. A grant for system design might be obtained from a combination of these same sources or possibly from Title II B of the Higher Education Act. In some cases granting agencies require that part of the cost of a project be borne by the grantee.¹⁴
- In March 1966, the committee endorsed the plan for the Center, commended it to OCA for adoption, and authorized two of its members (Branscomb and Rogers) to meet with Chancellor John Millett of the Ohio Board of Regents to explore the regents' interest in the Center.¹⁵ In April, incoming OCA President Novice G. Fawcett (Ohio State University) asked that information be

disseminated to all presidents and librarians of OCA and this was done, with a view to seeking early endorsements from OCA institutions. By summer, a digest of the consultants' recommendations and a plan for prorating costs for the first two years had also been prepared and distributed.¹⁶

"On October 30, 1966, the Ohio College Association approved The Ohio College Library Center as recommended by the Committee of Librarians, the Committee of Presidents and the O.C.A. Executive Committee."¹⁷ OCA also empowered Presi-

dent Fawcett to appoint a Committee of Implementation with power to: form a non-profit corporation; employ a director; choose a location; make funding arrangements; and develop procedures for appointing a board of trustees.¹⁸

Victory was sweet. The Committee of Implementation and its various subcommittees worked diligently during the ensuing months and by the summer of 1967 the Ohio College Library Center was a reality, with Frederick G. Kilgour as its first director.¹⁹

REFERENCES

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6. Ralph T. Esterquest, *The Cleveland Regional Union Catalog: A Survey*, 1961.
7. Wyman W. Parker, "The Possibility of Extensive Academic Library Cooperation in Ohio," *Transactions: Ohio College Association* (1963), p.26-27.
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10. Charles S. Wesley to Lewis C. Branscomb, April 11, 1963. The Ohio College Library Project Committee was composed of: A. Blair Knapp (chairman), president, Denison University, Granville; Wanda J. Calhoun, librarian, Heidelberg College, Tiffin; John B. Nicholson, Jr., executive secretary, librarian, Kent State University, Kent; Lewis C. Branscomb, director of libraries, the Ohio State University, Columbus; Richard K. Gardner, librarian, Marietta College, Marietta; Dorothy Hamlen, librarian, University of Akron, Akron; Arthur T. Hamlin, librarian, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati; Mollie E. Dunlap, librarian, Central State College, Wilberforce; Lois E. Engleman, librarian, Denison University, Granville; Lyon N. Richardson, director, University Libraries, Western Reserve University, Cleveland; A. Robert Rogers, acting director of libraries, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green; Thurston Manning, provost, Oberlin College, Oberlin; and Robert I. White, president, Kent State University, Kent.
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