

## The Use of Books in a College Library

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COMPREHENSIVE STUDIES have been made of the reading habits of college students. However, no study of the use of books, *i.e.*, what happens to books once they are placed on college library shelves, has been made available. Such a study, in a limited way, was undertaken at the Muhlenberg College Library, Allentown, Pa. Aware of low book circulation, the librarian was impelled to inquire if the cause might not lie partly in the books themselves. Results of the study were most revealing and to a certain extent at least should determine the future library policy in regard to acquisitions.

The following facts are of interest as background for evaluating the study. Muhlenberg College is a Lutheran church-related institution for men. The enrolment averaged approximately 540 regular students a year over the period included in the study. There were, however, approximately 700 active library borrowers. The approximate number of books in the library was 60,000, and the stacks were open to students and others alike.

### *Scope and Procedure*

The study was undertaken in September 1942 and was confined to the 2142

books added to the main book collection during the twelve months from Sept. 1, 1940, to Sept. 1, 1941. Books added to the reference collection and to other non-circulating collections were excluded. The period chosen meant that all of the books included in the study had been on the shelves from one to two years. Circulation count was not confined to the 1940-41 period but included circulation from Sept. 1, 1940, to Sept. 1, 1942, thus taking into consideration not only the immediate reaction to a new acquisition but also what use had been made of it over a longer period of time.

The count included home use and library use exclusive of reserve shelf use, except that one count was given for each time a book was placed on the reserve shelves. This was felt to be fair, as normal circulation was limited to some extent by the removal of books from the stacks for reserve book uses. Although the library encourages borrowers to find their own books in the stacks, relatively little use of books is made in the stacks themselves. All books must be signed for at the main circulation desk whether they are to be taken from the library or used in it. Therefore the circulation figures given are reasonably correct for the total use made of the library holdings, exclusive of reference books, books from special collections, and reserve books after they were

placed on the reserve shelves.

The procedure was relatively simple. Monthly mimeographed lists of new acquisitions are issued by the library, and these served as a checklist. The actual work was done in the stacks, and each book appearing on the monthly lists was examined for the information sought. The information obtained consisted of the number of gift books and the number of purchased books, the total number of books circulated, the total circulation of each book, and the number of renewals included in the total circulation.

Information on the library bookplates revealed the number of gift books and purchased books. The book cards showed the number of books circulated and the total circulation of each book, with each signature counted as a circulation. The book cards also indicated which books had been placed on the reserve shelves, and one circulation count was recorded for each time a book was so placed. Renewals were indicated on the book cards by the word "renewal" instead of repeating the borrower's name. Information was re-

corded directly on the twelve monthly lists, alongside the call numbers of the books. In this way actual titles were studied as well as the broader classifications.

#### Findings

Of the 2142 books added to the main collection from Sept. 1, 1940, to Sept. 1, 1941, 11 were no longer on the shelves by September 1942, the time of the study. Therefore, since information for only 2131 books was available, this number was used as the basic number in determining averages. (See Table I.)

Of the 2131 books examined, 965, or 45.3 per cent, circulated from Sept. 1, 1940, to Sept. 1, 1942. Inversely, 1166, or 54.7 per cent, showed no evidence of use whatsoever. The total circulation count naturally was derived from the number of books circulated, *i.e.*, 965. The total number of circulations for these books was 3883. Incidentally, the greatest number of circulations for a single book, 46, was for *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

Of the total number of circulations,

TABLE I  
CIRCULATION OF 1940-41 ACQUISITIONS

Class	Number of titles	Number of titles circulated	Per cent circulated	Number of circulations	Per cent of circulations
General works	17	6	35.3	13	.3
Philosophy	61	40	65.6	179	4.6
Religion	214	80	37.4	227	5.8
Social sciences	302	116	38.4	292	7.5
Philology	63	15	23.8	34	.9
Science	220	135	60.3	446	11.5
Useful arts	136	52	38.2	185	4.8
Fine arts	77	46	59.7	164	4.2
Literature	479	182	38.4	549	14.1
History	397	155	38.9	446	11.5
Fiction	165	138	83.6	1348	34.7
Totals	2131	965		3883	

415, or 10.7 per cent, were renewals. These figures have little significance by themselves, however, and for this reason a breakdown by classes is not included here. It may be of interest that the highest percentage of renewals was in philology (20.5 per cent) and the lowest in general works (none).

### *Gift Books*

Table II shows that it is obvious that gift books in no way measured up

indication to the librarian of the unusual importance of fiction in the total circulation of books. The following facts are of significance:

Only 7.8 per cent of the books included in the study were classified as fiction. Yet 83.6 per cent of this fiction circulated, and 34.7 per cent of the total circulation was fiction. The Muhlenberg library has no fiction in the 813 and 823 classifications; however, all other fiction, including that in English translation, is classified with

TABLE II  
CIRCULATION OF 1940-41 GIFT BOOKS

Class	Number of titles	Number of titles circulated	Per cent circulated	Number of circulations	Per cent of circulations
General works	8	1	12.5	2	.2
Philosophy	24	10	41.7	60	6.0
Religion	126	28	22.2	51	5.1
Social sciences	182	45	24.7	92	9.5
Philology	47	2	4.3	3	.3
Science	93	39	41.9	119	12.0
Useful arts	87	17	19.5	27	2.7
Fine arts	31	16	51.6	48	4.8
Literature	186	36	19.4	87	9.0
History	120	39	32.5	75	7.5
Fiction	91	68	74.7	432	43.4
Totals	995	301		996	

in use to all books considered together. Nine hundred and ninety-five gift books constituted 46.7 per cent of all the books studied, yet they accounted for only 31.2 per cent of the books circulated and only 25.6 per cent of the total circulation. The percentage of renewals was almost identical with the percentage of renewals of all books studied—10.4 per cent for gift books and 10.7 per cent for the entire group.

### *Fiction*

The findings of the study were the first

literature in the 833, 843, 853, 863, and other fiction classifications. A truer picture of fiction circulation, then, and one that would increase the percentage of fiction circulation considerably, could be obtained by transferring the fiction sections of the literature classification to the fiction classification.

### *Conclusions*

The fact that over 54 per cent of the books placed in the main book collection from one to two years before the study was made had failed to circulate at all

appears to the librarian to indicate something amiss in the selection of books quite as much as in the reading habits of borrowers. Without available figures for comparison, however, it might be wrong to undertake too drastic a curtailment of acquisitions or too great a change in the types of books added. It would be profitable to repeat the study in perhaps five years, with the same books used. In this way, books that had continued to circulate over this longer period would serve to indicate what types of acquisitions were relatively permanent in their value, and future acquisitioning could be influenced by these types. It might also be profitable to undertake a similar study covering a different group of acquisitions.

In view of the total number of books in the library and the total circulation of books, those books and circulations included in the study reveal other interesting facts. From Sept. 1, 1940, to Sept. 1, 1942, the 60,000 books in the library circulated 18,056 times. During the same period, 2131 of these books circulated 3883 times. Therefore 57,869 books circulated only 14,173 times, or .2 of a circulation per book. This compares most unfavorably with the 1.8 circulations per book within the group studied (that is, the fairly recent acquisitions) and gives some indication of the diminishing circulation of older books. It is dismaying to note the dead wood on the shelves.

The only comparisons possible within the study itself were between gift books

and purchased books. As Table II reveals, gift books as a group were much less used than all the books considered together. To emphasize this difference, purchased books constituted 53.3 per cent of all the books studied, 68.8 per cent of all the books circulated, and 74.4 per cent of the total circulations. Furthermore, while there were 1.8 circulations per book for all books studied, there was one circulation per book for gift books. Here, it seems, is ample proof that the books themselves are a determining factor in circulation.

It would appear, then, that a reduction in the number of gift books accessioned is in order, this reduction to be related to the figures in Table II for the use of gift books in each class. The type and quality of gift books vary considerably from year to year, of course. From Sept. 1, 1940, to Sept. 1, 1941, the Muhlenberg library received 1497 books as gifts and added 995, or 66.4 per cent, of these to its collection.

In its broader aspects, the study seems to re-emphasize the need for the acceptance and maintenance of a definite policy for the acquisitioning of books in a college library which is based on other factors than gifts, individual requests, size of departments, and similar devices now in use. Whether general principles can be worked out for all libraries of a similar type or whether each must work out its own policy is a matter for further consideration.