

Education for Librarianship— What Model?

MANY HUMAN PROBLEMS can be solved only bit by bit. Military campaigns often are sequences of minor actions; scientific innovations frequently evolve from series of distinct pieces of research; and social or political reform commonly comes because of achievements arrived at piecemeal and in various fields. Moreover, an isolated success or discovery sometimes promotes a major result in a degree which is quite out of proportion to its own intrinsic importance. Such a relation of events supposedly could occur in education for librarianship. The present article accordingly aims to consider what a single recent development, *i.e.*, the discussion of training for work in scientific and technical libraries, might contribute to the general subject.

The fitting of students for so-called "special" libraries ranks high among the problems which perplex the faculties of library schools. This is particularly so in 1947. Such libraries probably are more numerous and diversified than ever before; their spread is solid evidence of a demand for their services; and their activity has come to prominence through impinging upon and even merging with that of research agencies, information bureaus, publishing houses, and organizations devoted to education through the classroom and otherwise. It has been true since those libraries gained their first recognition, however, and the issue, therefore, has to be regarded as perennial as well as unresolved.

Furthermore, the question does not stand

alone. It is part of another having an even longer history. This problem, as commonly visualized, apparently is how to qualify students for ready performance in particular situations while at the same time equipping them with the knowledge and skills considered to be important under all conditions of practice and for the careers of growth and maturity which professional people expect.

True, the sharpness of the dilemma has varied from time to time. In the beginning years, many alleged that there need be no concern about anything but the positions to which students would go—learn the job on the job—do not worry as to general or basic knowledge—forget about formal training. This point of view seems to have influenced strongly the curriculum of the early American library schools, despite its repudiation in controversy by the founder of the first school. It may have subsided after the disputes of the 1870's and 1880's, but it did doubtless underlay the original devising of courses and programs for library work in children's rooms and in schools, which came around 1900. It has persisted in the demands of employers for ready-made librarians; that is, library school graduates facile in all the processes which happen to be in effect at the loan desks and order divisions of their own institutions. It has appeared in the clamor, again on the part of employers, for a supply of experts from which to choose for occasional openings in specialized departments. It may even be

discerned in modified form in the arguments which, twenty years ago, led some of the library schools to inaugurate elective courses in the study of public libraries, college libraries, cataloging, and other particulars.

The suggestion to be advanced here is that the question at issue has proved difficult because it has been isolated and treated small-scale. Perhaps the answer lies in choosing a broad front on which to attack it and associated problems. Perhaps, too, what librarians like to call their profession would benefit by such an effort or may even depend for continuance upon it. In any event the idea seems to merit exploration to the extent of a few hundred words.

Possible Approaches

There are two possible approaches in considering the difficulty. One is negative but important in spite of that. It starts with the realization (1) that the demands rehearsed above represent pressure for attention to specifics—that is, the conditions and practices peculiar to given kinds of libraries or positions, in undue proportions and at a premature stage of the preparation; and (2) that no educational discipline with the narrow and shallow foundation this implies can be called professional. A vocational program either may seek to fit students soon and nicely for particular occupational niches or it may endeavor to give them a foundational equipment which will serve them in diverse situations and all their lives. Ordinarily it must choose, for it is extremely unlikely at the same time to succeed in doing both or in recruiting students for both. While the two things may not be wholly incompatible, the concepts they represent are too much at variance to grow freely in competition with each other.

Specifics, of a kind, do have a place in professional education. That place does not exist until a firm groundwork has been

laid, however, and the library schools accordingly are under obligation to avoid thoughtless and untimely emphasis upon them. Any other course betokens, at the best, haste and immaturity in training and scant comprehension of the demands an intellectual calling makes upon its members.

Insistence upon a rudimental instructional core is not meant merely as a revival of a claim made time-worn by library school faculties; namely, that the schools could not treat specialties because the necessary general matter had rendered their curricula already over-heavy. Actually it implies that there never has been basis for such reasoning. And it denotes that, unless that basis can be supplied, the professional pretensions of librarians fall to the ground. If the claims their work makes upon all librarians are substantial, the preparation to meet the requirements must be so. An academic year surely must be a brief enough time for it, without whittling the period or splitting the contents and trying to deal with particular and restricted relevances. Also, if the demands in special institutions are as rigorous as they are represented to be, they point to generous study of suitable kinds supplementing the central discipline.

Sound Foundation Important

It may be in order here to refer briefly to the note predominant in the thought and literature of education in other professional sectors. Those librarians conversant with it will recognize that it reflects the high regard attributed today in education generally to sound and firm foundations. Such foundations are accepted as requisite, whether in anticipation of intelligent and useful living, of the scholarship whose normal fulfilment takes it into various fields or of the effective and fruitful practice of a profession. If this holds true so widely, certainly librarians cannot ignore it, except

at the cost of defeating their own purposes. And, once admitting it, they must face the demands which it imposes in the preparation for their careers.

This view opens the positive approach to our problem. Over-early attention to specifics may indicate that the materials for professional groundwork have not been sufficiently sought. It may even raise suspicions that they do not exist. At such a juncture, what action is called for? If the content of the conventional beginning library school curricula has not proved sufficiently indispensable to exclude thought of applications to particular kinds of libraries—and this in the minds of public librarians, school librarians, college librarians, special librarians, and the rest—what constituents would enable it to do so? Here is a central question, for, unless such essential elements can be found, no strong case can be made for the professional education of librarians. Persons accustomed to professional education in comparable fields will not value another discipline unless it meets the standards prevailing in those fields any more than many of them have done in the past. Candidates for library work who know their way around in the professional world generally will continue to regard library school study as a necessary gesture to “respectability,” with whatever disparagement that attitude implies. And librarians themselves, once they examine what goes into the preparation for other callings, hardly can continue to be satisfied with their own.

Compare with Other Fields

It might be wholesome—and disillusioning—for librarians to line up the curricula of library schools with those of the professional schools which have the best claim to intellectual subject matter, such as those of law and medicine, and to seek for parallels and contrasts. They might fare satisfac-

torily as they put their fingers upon the history of books and of libraries, assuming the treatment of these topics with appreciation of inherent social bearings and significance in human development. They might remain comfortable in pointing to the presentation of book resources or of the problems in dealing with readers and making use of books or of the science of administration as applied to institutions such as libraries—if they took for granted the scholarly and comprehensive handling of these matters attempted in some of the library schools. But where, in all honesty, would they discover in the most respected professional disciplines anything comparable to the techniques of organizing book collections and making them available, or to the elementary reference materials which should be mastered in any undergraduate college program, or to the miscellany of methods and housekeeping which commonly has been labeled library administration? If they used any reasonable standards of comparison, would they not be embarrassed? And how can the situation be explained, except that librarians have let their zeal for usefulness wall them off from the professional world and often have seen the tasks of the day with too little perspective and so have put second things first.

Unless this view is wrong, the search for professional curriculum content will involve something more radical than most expressions of recent years upon the subject have conveyed. It will not suffice merely to shift emphasis from minutiae and manipulation to major aspects of librarianship, essential as that is. It will not be enough to “stress principles”—at least in the simple undefined sense in which that phrase commonly has been taken. It will not be adequate to amplify knowledge, unless a substantial body of knowledge can be established as peculiar in its relevance to library

work and capable of finding a development indigenous to the field of librarianship. Ingredients are requisite which are intellectual in their nature and demands and to which, furthermore, librarians can lay a claim unlikely to be advanced in favor of any other profession. They largely may be new to the curricula of library schools. Just what they may be constitutes a problem which, fortunately, is beginning to be seen and brought under attack. The efforts in this direction deserve the attention and support of all who are interested in education for librarianship. The aim here and at this moment is to underline their urgency.

Should Define a Curriculum

To find and define an unequivocally professional curriculum for librarians generally would automatically clarify several troublesome points about the preparation of special librarians. Being in itself substantial, the discipline would be worth getting ready for through preprofessional study which library schools would be warranted in prescribing and which might be varied to suit the aims of individuals, including prospective special librarians. For the same reason it would deserve to be buttressed with concentrated study in the subject fields represented by the holdings of special libraries, apart from anything of this nature which might be included at the preprofessional level. Finally, after the foundations had been well and duly laid the specifics might come into their own, first through attention in course to the significances and potentialities in applying basic matter to special libraries and second through their illustration in internships or otherwise on the job. All this of course means putting the general curriculum in a central position, with other elements ancillary but not encroaching upon it. It would be so important as to render obviously incongruous

any thought of diluting it or crowding it. The net result would be to make patent where all the parts in the training belong.

It is evident that the pattern here suggested concerns all education for librarianship. That is true partly because most forms of library work are "special," at least in the sense that they merit particular preparation. Moreover, "general" library work—if it exists—represents combinations of the special forms, often with heavy emphasis on some one of those forms. Hence, quite apart from the claims commonly voiced by special librarians, a case might be made for planning education for librarianship primarily with reference to their needs. However, if a sound and solid essential curriculum is to be the heart of the training, it must be as important for persons in "general" work as for those choosing some segment of the field.

Practical Bearing of Paper

What is the practical bearing of the considerations brought out in this brief paper? From the standpoint of recruiting for special libraries they may seem to hold new difficulties—at least to the extent that the road to competency on the practitioner's part is made no shorter, and indeed may be longer. That can be more apparent than real, however. Preprofessional studies of the kind suggested above are procurable ordinarily within an undergraduate program for the bachelor of arts degree. Again, a substantial professional curriculum should accelerate the growth of graduates going out into the field, even though at the start they lack superficial readiness for particular tasks. Then, too, a good deal of learning on the job is inevitable, whatever the form of training. Finally, subject study may be pursued after employment has begun and may be stimulated and enriched by conditions of service and may be continued in-

definitely. And even if no short cuts are provided, a superior product may be anticipated within the span of time allotted to the preparation.

As for meeting the needs and interests of candidates, the way is opened for achieving professional adequacy, which supposedly comes first in the minds of such recruits as the work of special libraries demands and special librarians desire. They will need to make an early choice of their lines of activity and to exercise forethought in their planning. This may seem like a hardship to some, but the lack of it is responsible for notable shortcomings among librarians of all classifications. As with the responsibility of the library schools for devising a new curriculum, the issue is whether those concerned are serious in their aims. A profession can not be built from an ill-equipped, floating, purposeless, unstable personnel, any more than it can be founded on improvised and unsubstantial schemes of training.

Task for Library Schools

The library schools clearly have a task cut out for them. There is nothing new in their responsibility, except possibly its form and scope, and they have been conscious enough of it these many years. As already

indicated, however, their renovations may have to go wider and deeper than ordinarily they have realized. They will be obliged to call upon the best brains in their ranks and the most able thinkers they can enlist from neighboring areas of effort. Most of all they will need to rid themselves of pre-conceptions which stem from distant times and which are endowed with a sanctity they do not deserve. Having done all this, the schools will need to link themselves with whatever agencies are capable of contributing to their programs. Apart from the other reasons for such close association, it would be futile to think of accomplishing in isolation the development needed now.

For all concerned there are in prospect new exertions. This really is what those interested have asked for. The level of preparation can no more be raised without effort than a hill can be climbed without it. Moreover, growth, improvement, and progress are among the touchstones of a profession. They call for initiative and labor, and a group of workers which is earnest and intelligent about building a profession hardly will shrink from such endeavor. Whether it does or not, the response may have large influence in shaping the future of librarianship.