

The Heart of Academia: Medieval Universities, Textbooks, and the Birth of Academic Libraries

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Abstract: The contemporary academic library occupies a crucial role in the teaching and learning mission of universities. This centrality is perhaps best exemplified by the popular saying that the library is the heart of the university. But has this always been the case since the inception of universities in the High Middle Ages? To help answer this question, the following discussion traces the creation of universities within the medieval world, the textual traditions that informed their scholarship and pedagogy, and the later birth of academic libraries within the college and university system. The author attempts to demonstrate that the rise of academic libraries was not inevitable but, rather, the product of the interplay of myriad macro- and microlevel forces, each contributing to the library's eventual development. To accomplish this, the phenomena surrounding the emergence of medieval academic libraries are embedded within an adaptation of Robert Darnton's model, the Communications Circuit. It is the hope of the author that having a better sense of the history of the profession will allow current library and information science professionals to develop more robust professional identities and deeper philosophies of practice.

Keywords: library history; academic libraries; medieval universities; communications circuit; learning and scholarship

Introduction

Many have claimed over the years that libraries are fundamental institutions within academic, often citing the well-known proverb that *the library is the heart of the university* (e.g., Proctor, Block, and Hughes 2021; Himmelfarb 1997; Leupp 1924). Many if not most librarians probably share this sentiment, and some would argue that libraries have always held a central importance within higher education. In fact, some authors have gone a bit further and claimed that librarians *are* the university (Himmelfarb 1997). Still others have made even stronger claims, arguing that the history of libraries is “the history of scholarship and civilization” itself (Irwin 1966, 21). But has this preeminence indeed always been the case since the initial emergence of universities beginning in the high medieval period? Or, did the centrality of libraries in higher education evolve along with the university, only becoming foundational in a later period? The following discussion will attempt to shed some – however modest it might be – light on this question.

Before delving into the meat of the discussion, it is worth mentioning the theoretical framework selected as the lens through which questions, data, and interpretations were viewed. In 1982, Robert Darnton, a prominent cultural and book historian, published what came to be recognized as a seminal article, “What Is the History of Books,” in which he introduces and outlines the Communications Circuit. The Communications Circuit is a self-sustaining theoretical model that attempts to account for separate yet mutually interdependent stages comprising the lifecycle of books. For example, it examines the interplay of authors, publishers, printers, shippers, booksellers, readers

(including the role of libraries), and how each of these is embedded within and, in turn, influences larger macrocultural processes of social structures, politics, economics, law, and intellectual developments. Due to the interdependent nature of the Communications Circuit, changing one component necessarily implies effecting each of the others (Darnton 1982). Thus, for the purposes of this discussion, the interplay between the related categories of *Readership*, *Production*, *Regulation*, and *Access* was understood within the larger medieval cultural context of intellectual development, as embodied by the nascent university system, and socioeconomic necessity. For transparency, it should be noted here that Darnton's model primarily focuses on the lifecycle of printed information (i.e., that which arose after the Gutenberg Revolution of the mid-fifteenth century and not the manuscript tradition prevalent throughout the medieval period), but with slight modifications, the model proved to remain useful.

The following paragraphs are arranged thematically. The first section, Birth of Medieval Universities, provides an overview of the establishment, character, and evolution of universities as important medieval institutions. The second, University Textual Traditions, broadly examines curricula, scholarship, and pedagogy within the medieval context, while focusing on how authoritative texts influenced each of these areas. Economic factors influencing matriculation and scholarship vis-à-vis required textbooks are also considered here. In the third section, College and University Libraries in Medieval Higher Education, the birth of college and university libraries is explored in relation to the economic necessity outlined in the previous section. The next and penultimate section, Medieval Academic Libraries and the Communications Circuit, repositions the phenomena outlined in the preceding sections within an adapted version of the Communications Circuit. The goal of this section is to help us conceptualize how these interrelated phenomena impacted one another, and how the growth of academic libraries was contingent on myriad factors. In the final section, the discussion is wrapped up by encouraging information professionals to study library history. Hopefully, this discussion will add one very small piece to the story of libraries.

Birth of Medieval Universities

Several authors have already done excellent work in tracing the history and development of universities within the medieval world: e.g., Haskins (1962), Janin (2008), Pedersen (2009), and Rüegg (2003). The majority of the discussion in this and the following section will be pulled from these authorities (additional authors may still be cited in isolated cases), and it is recommended to consult with them for a more in-depth analysis. The High Middle Ages, roughly spanning the years 1000 to 1300 CE, was a time of intense development, growth, and relative prosperity throughout Western Europe. An agricultural revolution, fueled by warming climates and technological innovations, led to a subsequent commercial revolution that, in turn, engendered a shift in medieval society (Bennett and Bardsley 2021). Additionally, Western Europe was experiencing an intellectual revolution, thanks in no small part to its contact with neighboring Muslim kingdoms and, by way of its crusading zeal, the Byzantine Empire. Through these contacts, Western Europe was able to gain access in the twelfth century not only to advanced scholarship being produced by some of the greatest minds of the age, but also to classical Greco-Roman thinkers whose texts were being preserved by Muslim and Byzantine scholars. Thus, the influx of new ideas and methods (e.g., advancements in medicine, mathematics, and the use of Arabic numerals to replace their cumbersome Roman counterparts), in addition to the rediscovery of important classical authors paved the way for an intellectual flowering that historians have called the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century. It was within this milieu that universities were born.

This influx of knowledge was put to good use as education began shifting away from its traditional purview within monasteries and cathedral schools to prominent itinerant teachers who

traveled from city to city, attracting students along the way. This was an age where individual teachers held preeminence, not collective units of schools or institutions, and a single famous teacher could make a particular city, monastery, or cathedral school equally famous if he chose to settle there (Pedersen 2009). As one can imagine, cities were particularly keen on keeping prominent teachers within their own walls because of the revenue they could generate from students traveling from all over Europe to study. It was this keenness that would lead to the development of a collective institution that would later be referred to as the *university*.

Originally, prominent and not so prominent teachers operated independently from one another, even when teaching the same subjects in the same vicinities. However, as teachers continued to attract more and more students, there developed a need throughout the twelfth century to protect both teachers and students from exploitation at the hands of townspeople who might take advantage of the new situation. It was not uncommon for rents or the price of foodstuffs or other basic necessities to be inflated at unfair rates in the hopes of generating greater profits from those seeking an education. Teachers and students fought back with the only power they had: to quit the city and set up residence somewhere else. This type of strike undoubtedly dealt an economic blow to those in power, and as a result, these once independent groups of teachers and students were incorporated along the lines of the traditional commune and guild system already thriving in towns and cities. Incorporation of this sort was not new to medieval Europe. The creation of a *persona ficta* was a legal concept that had its roots in Roman law, which allowed individuals to form an incorporated entity that had legal status and privilege, including the right to own property, apart from the individuals comprising said corporation. This was in essence the nature of guilds and communes. Once united, individuals then had the power of collective bargaining. One of several Latin terms used to designate this type of corporation was *universitas* (Pirenne 1956). Originally meaning total or whole, it came to represent legally recognized corporations, and over time, would become the exclusive designation of universities.

Though the intricacies of the development and administration of universities fall far outside the scope of the present discussion, it is worth cursorily mentioning a few important facts that will provide additional context. Firstly, although it can be argued that universities were progressive institutions, effectively providing an entirely new system of education that could benefit all strata of society, they did not, unfortunately, make progress towards creating greater levels of gender equality within the medieval world. This is illustrated by the fact that only males were permitted to matriculate and earn the various advanced degrees offered. Women were barred from doing so. One reason for this was that the majority of university students and teachers assumed the legal status of the *ordo clericalis* (order of clerics). While this was signified by scholars in their clothing requirements and the wearing of the tonsure (i.e., the clean shaven portion on the top of the head representing a monastic's renunciation of the world), it must be emphasized that for the vast majority this was a legal designation only. "Under church law, a woman could not become a cleric and, in practice, it was impossible for her to become a university student" (Janin 2008, 32).

Secondly, university structures developed, broadly speaking, along two different trajectories: one situated in the Mediterranean and another in Northern Europe. The former, as represented by the oldest university in Europe, the University of Bologna, concentrated administrative power in the hands of its students. In effect, students ran the university, setting policy and providing oversight, while teachers only held autonomous power over examinations. The latter, as represented by the second oldest university in Europe, the University of Paris, will be more familiar to contemporary readers. At Paris, the teachers, through their respective faculties (more on those later), dominated. Paris would come to be the model used throughout France, England, Germany, and other parts of the northern European continent, eventually making its way to the New World. As such, the majority

of the following discussion will focus on the rise of academic libraries within this Northern European model.

Lastly, as collective institutions, universities were very often granted rights and privileges – including those of self-governance, freedom from local judicial authorities, and the right to own property – by royal, imperial, or papal decree. Some privileges extended to being able to interfere directly with the local economy: e.g., fixing the maximum rates that could be charged to university members for their lodging and other basic necessities. As we shall see below, this privilege usually extended to the book trade, as well. When these privileges were granted by a universal monarch, primarily embodied by popes or emperors, graduates holding at least the degree of *magister artium* were given the *licentia docendi* (license to teach) and granted the *ius ubique docendi* (the right to teach everywhere) (Rüegg, 2003). In other words, teachers, as fully enfranchised masters and therefore part of the university guild, were no longer corseted by the parish, diocese, or even country where they earned their education and teaching credentials; they were, at least in principle, able to exercise their intellectual craft throughout Christendom, thereby adding an international flavor to the profession (Nardi 2003). This, in turn, meant that a single city with a prominent university could attract very large numbers of scholars from all over Western Europe.

University Textual Traditions

Medieval university curricula were broadly divided among four subject areas, each with its own semiautonomous faculty: liberal arts, medicine, law (both civil and canon), and theology. Of these, the *artes liberales* (liberal arts) constituted the foundational course of study, and all incoming students would have to progress through its series of degrees before being allowed to ascend to one of the higher faculties. In addition to the authors writing about medieval universities that were referenced above, Wagner (1986) provides a comprehensive examination of the *artes liberales* within medieval learning. In brief, the *artes liberales* consisted of seven primary subjects divided into two overarching categories: *trivium* and *quadrivium*. The *trivium* consisted of *grammatica* (grammar), *dialectica* (logic), and *rhetorica* (rhetoric). Broadly speaking, the *trivium* prepared students by teaching them how to take in, analyze, and produce information. The *quadrivium*, which was mostly based on different applications of mathematics, consisted of the subject specialties *geometria* (geometry), *arithmetica* (arithmetic or abstract mathematics), *astronomia* (astronomy), and *harmonia* (musical harmony). Students entering the university would concentrate on these areas, and after spending approximately four years earning the *baccalaureus artium*, students choosing to continue would devote an additional two years studying the *artes liberales*, culminating in the degree of *magister artium*. At this point in the student's academic career, he would be granted the *licentia docendi* and permitted into the *universitas magistrorum* (i.e., the official guild of teachers). Now, the newly degreed *magister* possessed the right to teach as a member of the liberal arts faculty, and – if he so chose – continue his education as a student in one of the higher faculties of medicine, law, or theology. These final three faculties, of which law and theology were by far the more popular, created advanced subject specialists and required an additional four to eight years of rigorous study (Janin 2008; Pedersen 2009).

In each of these disciplines, the curriculum was built around specific texts that had acquired an authoritative status by the High and Late Middle Ages. For example, looking at only one of the three subjects housed within the *trivium*, *dialectica*, we can estimate that students pursuing the *magister artium* at either the University of Paris or the University of Oxford in the middle of the thirteenth century would have to read and attend formal classes covering nine specified texts, the majority of which were written by Aristotle and Boethius, respectively (Janin 2008; Pedersen 2009). Every other subject also had its corresponding reading list. It is worth emphasizing that it was the text itself that

was the primary focus of university course work and not necessarily the subject as a whole. In other words, students did not study *dialectica* as a subject in and of itself, but, rather, studied the interpretation of *dialectica* by authoritative authors. “The basic aim of teaching [and scholarship] in the medieval university was to transmit to students, uncritically, selected parts of the medieval world’s received (inherited) body of learning springing from Greek, Roman, Arabic, and early Christian authorities” (Janin 2008, 30). Similarly, as Haskins (1962) illustrates, instructors were bound to teach subjects according to these specified texts, and a professor could – at least at the University of Bologna – be fined for not making it through the appropriate text by the conclusion of the semester or if he veered too far off topic during a lecture. It is a subtle shift in perspective, but one worth remembering as we continue our discussion on the importance of textual traditions within the medieval university system.

Focus on textual learning, in turn, influenced the pedagogical methods used by instructors in the classroom, of which there were primarily two: *lectio* and *disputatio*. The very name of the first one, *lectio*, highlights this influence. *Lectio*, from which the English word *lecture* is derived, simply means *the reading*, and university lectures consisted of professors reading texts aloud, line-by-line, to their students. While doing this, professors might also offer clarifications and explanations as needed. The second method, *disputatio*, consisted of formal debates between interlocutors, with the “*respondens* arguing positively for a particular solution to a problem, while an *opponens* gainsaid him with correspondingly negative arguments. When this had gone on for a while, or the arguments were just about exhausted, the teacher would intervene and settle or ‘determine’ the question with a solution or *responsum*” (Pedersen 2009, 259-260). Even here, arguments, counterarguments, and determinations were not made haphazardly, and the validity of each was determined by the use of authoritative texts to support each point and counterpoint. Thus, in order to perform their duties well (in both the *lectio* and *disputatio*), instructors had to be equipped with those authoritative texts outlined in curricula, and preparation via consultation with these texts was crucial (Lovatt 2006; Verger 2003b). This further highlights the centrality of books within medieval education.

Since texts were the veritable lifeblood of the medieval university, it was crucial that both students and instructors had access to those required by the different faculties. As will be discussed in the next section, university libraries did not begin emerging until centuries after the emergence of universities as institutions, so how did early medieval scholars gain access to the literary tools of their trade? In short, they purchased them. But this in itself became a barrier to access. Universities came into existence some 300 years prior to the development of the Printing Revolution in the middle of the fifteenth century, and, as a result, the cost of medieval textbooks tended to be exorbitantly expensive (Gieysztor 2003). In fact, the cost of being a student in general was expensive, and there are many extant examples of students writing home requesting money from their parents:

B. to his venerable master A., greeting. This [letter] is to inform you that I am studying at Oxford with the greatest diligence, but the matter of money stands greatly in the way of my promotion, as it is now two months since I spent the last of what you sent me. The city is expensive and makes many demands; I have to rent lodgings, buy necessaries, and provide for many other things which I cannot now specify. Wherefore I respectfully beg your paternity that by the promptings of divine pity you may assist me, so that I may be able to complete what I have well begun. For you must know that without Ceres and Bacchus Apollo grows old. (Haskins 1962, 77-78)

Or this poetic imagining of a standard student’s letter written c. 1400:

Well beloved father, I have not a penny, nor can I get any save through you, for all things at the University are so dear; nor can I study in my Code or my Digest [these

are legal texts], for their leaves [pages] have the falling sickness. Moreover, I owe ten crowns to the provost, and can find no man to lend them to me. I ask of you greetings and money. The student has need of many things if he will profit here; his father and his kin must supply him freely [so] that he will not be compelled to pawn his books, but [will] have ready money in his purse, with gowns and furs and decent clothing; or he will be damned for a beggar; wherefore, that men may not take me for a beast, I ask of you greetings and money. Wines are expensive, [as are] hostels and other good things; I owe in every street, and am hard put to free myself from such snares. Dear father, deign to help me! (Janin 2008, 16-17)

Both of these excerpts may elicit a familiar chuckle from modern readers for just how contemporary the problems outlined are in the lives of today's university students. Pursuing higher education was and remains to be a costly endeavor, and just like in the medieval world, the longer one matriculates and the higher one advances in the completion of one's degree, the more costly it becomes (Schwinges 2003). Both excerpts reference the expenses associated with room and board, which, as we have already discussed in the previous section, was one of the major factors leading to the establishment and recognition of universities as incorporated entities with collective bargaining powers, but the second goes on to specifically reference textbooks. Their relatively high value is indirectly indicated by the fact that students could get some extra cash by pawning or selling them. There is also evidence to suggest that, when colleges (more on them below) began developing libraries in the thirteenth century, books within those collections were sometimes used to pay off debts owed by the institutions themselves (Harris 1995).

Why were medieval books so expensive? Shailor (1994) sheds some light on the costs associated with texts during this period. For starters, the component materials were expensive, especially parchment. Parchment, which formed the writing surface of books (i.e., the leaves), was made from the processed skins of a variety of animals. As one can imagine, the cost of raising animals for this purpose, along with the added expenses of processing each skin, kept book prices high. Just to provide some perspective, a single large volume could easily use 200 animal skins. Paper, which originated in China and was slowly introduced into Western Europe by way of al-Andalus, would eventually be one of the factors of the Printing Revolution that would drive down prices in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries, but throughout most of the medieval period, parchment was the main medium. Secondly, since this was the era before Gutenberg, texts were copied by hand, and hiring scribes to write out entire manuscripts proved to be the most expensive component of production and could take 10 to 15 months to complete a single volume (Schwinges 2003). Once copied, additional costs were accrued for corrections, illuminating, and binding (Pedersen 2009).

To give readers an idea of the total cost involved, we will examine the aggregated expenses associated with a professionally produced 200-page manuscript in England during the thirteenth century. As outlined by Pedersen (2009) in his excellent introduction to the rise of universities in the medieval world, the three most expensive facets of manuscript production were, respectively, 1. Copying (9 shillings, 4 pence), 2. Parchment (8 shillings, 8 pence), and 3. Correcting (2 shillings, 10 pence). The least expensive components were binding (1 shilling, 5 pence) and illumination (1 shilling, 1 pence). This brings the grand total for a single 200-page volume to 23 shillings, 4 pence, or approximately £1.12. Some other volumes could cost upwards of £60 (Schwinges 2008). Using our example of *dialectica* from above, the cost for a student to have all nine of his required textbooks professionally produced could end up costing him over 200 shillings (approximately £10). To provide context, the average teaching fellow in Merton College at Oxford received an annual stipend of 50 shillings or £2.5 (Pedersen 2009). Thus, only one component of the *trivium* could cost over four years'

worth of allowances. When this fact is taken with the knowledge that multiple courses were taken each semester, the potential costs become dizzying.

For students who had wealthy parents or patrons, purchasing hand-made, custom textbooks from professional manufacturers would not have been an issue. For those well off but not as wealthy, the option of purchasing secondhand volumes would have been available (Pedersen 2009; Schwinges 2003). However, since neither rank nor status was a prerequisite for admission, it can be expected that the vast majority of students had to find more economical solutions; in fact, “it was the responsibility of university masters to make sure that the poverty of students did not prevent their academic progress” (Janin 2008, 17). This led to many universities being granted the right to oversee and regulate the book trade in their cities, and many universities empowered special officers to frequent markets in order to make sure guidelines were being met and that only approved manuscripts – with the appropriate corrections – were being sold. For example, “in 1354 the chancellor of Cambridge got jurisdiction in all matters involving booksellers, scribes, bookbinders and illuminators” (Pedersen 2009, 234). Still, costs were expensive, so the university developed another method to help. One might be thinking that this is where the discussion will turn to the development of university libraries as natural solutions to these economic problems, but not quite yet. Instead, we must turn our discussion to the *pecia* system.

The *pecia* system offered scholars a cheaper alternative to the commissioning of new textbooks or the purchasing of secondhand copies: that is, copying the manuscript oneself. In this system, which seems to have developed by the middle of the thirteenth century, members of the book trade known as *stationarii peciarum* (this might be best translated as stationers of the bundles) would obtain authoritative copies of textbooks that had been approved by university officials. These approved copies were known as *exemplaria*. Each *exemplar* was then divided into small bundles called *peciae* (the plural of *pecia*). These bundles, numbered for cataloging purposes, were then be rented out to students and teachers for a relatively modest fee, and each would be responsible for copying out its contents (Gieysztor 2003; Janin 2008). The concept here is not entirely different from the three-volume novel lending model used in subscription libraries in the nineteenth century (Bassett 2017). Of course, universities – and there were at least 11 using this system, Paris and Oxford included – regulated this aspect of the book trade. In 1304, for example, the University of Paris created a special committee to oversee the *stationarii peciarum* and set prices for the *peciae* of specific books (Pedersen 2009).

As one may imagine, the process of copying out one’s own textbook was both painstaking and grueling, and the longer the process took, the more expensive it became. And even though scholars were copying from approved *exemplaria*, there was always room for errors in transcription and the possibility of having to correct already copied texts. Needless to say, more than one student must have experienced setbacks and frustrations. There is a humorous yet interesting example of one student’s frustration found in the marginalia of a late thirteenth-century volume of commentaries by Thomas Aquinas. Due to a slight hiccup in the *peciae*, the student had to go back and correct some text that he had already copied out. He left this angry message in Latin: “*Nota confundatur stacionarius [stationarius] qui me fecit deturpari librum alicuius probi viri*” (Shailor 1994, 98). Preferring my own slightly snarkier translation to the one provided by Shailor in the text, it reads: Mark you, may the stationer who made me disfigure the book of a certain excellent man be himself confused.

As we have seen, textbooks were essential to the academic careers of students and teachers. In effect, they were the necessary tools of their trade. By the conclusion of a student’s matriculation in the *artes liberales*, especially if he ascended to the status of *magister artium* and hoped to pursue his studies in one of the other faculties, he would have amassed a considerable number of texts. Although necessary, just as room and board were for survival, these books were not cheap, and from the earliest days of the institution’s existence, we see the university implementing strategies to keep costs down. Being a university student – just as it is today – was an expensive endeavor, and the costliness of

attending often acted as a barrier for many would-be scholars, especially those who did not hail from wealthy families. Thus, there developed a system in the thirteenth century whereby these basic necessities of university life (shelter, food, and books) could be provided to those possessing the aptitude but not the means of pursuing their academic paths. This would become known as the *college* system, and it is within this context that academic libraries first arose and subsequently flourished.

College and University Libraries in Medieval Higher Education

Academic libraries were not born in universities, but rather in colleges. This is often a difficult distinction for modern readers (especially American readers) to make because higher education in the United States often uses the terms *college* and *university* interchangeably. British readers, on the other hand, are more familiar with the medieval distinction between these terms because their two oldest university systems, collectively referred to as Oxbridge, maintain clear lines of separation. Harkening back to our earlier discussion, the medieval university was nothing more than an incorporated group (*universitas*) of instructors (*magistrorum*) and students (*discipulorum*) that was formed to protect the interests of individual scholars. While universities were often granted important legal and social rights and privileges, including the right to self-governance and to own property, they were built less on the idea of a physical institution and more on the cooperative interplay of each group involved (Schwinges 2003). Thus, for quite some time, medieval universities did not own property, and even classroom space was rented from a variety of other establishments (Gieysztor 2003; Haskins 1962; Janin 2008). Therefore, unlike monastic and cathedral schools, both of which held property and as a result could house collections of books, early universities did not inspire the birth of academic libraries.

Colleges, however, were something different, so it is no surprise they became the perfect breeding ground for the establishment of academic libraries. So what exactly was a medieval college? In their earliest stage, colleges (from the Latin *collegia*, which denotes groups of people living together under specified guidelines) were endowed residence halls that had been donated by wealthy benefactors for the use of poor students (Gieysztor 2003; Haskins 1962). In other words, they were free dormitories for those who qualified. The earliest example seems to have arisen at the University of Paris by the end of the twelfth century. However, it was in the middle and second half of the thirteenth century that colleges similar to those found at Oxbridge would eventually emerge. Like their predecessors, they were endowed institutions, but these later colleges were also granted money, land, property, buildings, and – important for this discussion – books (Pedersen 2009).

Pedersen (2009) explains that such endowments allowed colleges to admit specified numbers of scholars as *fellows*, either students or teachers depending on the type of college and stipulations outlined by their benefactors. Each college typically had its own statutes governing the expectations, behaviors, and obligations of its members. In return for adherence with these statutes, colleges very often provided lodging and meals (usually eaten communally), and sometimes, as was the case with Merton College at Oxford, provided an annual stipend for living expenses. As the prospect of using university graduates to fill administrative posts became more attractive to secular and ecclesiastical rulers, and as some alumni began amassing their own wealth, more and more colleges were founded and funded by members of the European elite. As this happened, colleges took on a central role in university life, and in the case of some, provided much of the teaching that had once been the exclusive domain of the university. At this point, the university remained the overarching figurehead connecting all of its colleges into a single, coherent system. While the university remained the only entity that could formally give examinations and grant degrees, academic life began to be increasingly played out at the college level (Verger 2003a).

Verger (2003a) comments on the development of colleges during this early period. The oldest example is Sorbonne College, established at the University of Paris in 1257. The new model quickly

spread from there. By 1300, Paris had no less than 19 endowed colleges; by 1400, the number had grown to 37. Similarly, by 1300, Oxford had six endowed colleges and throughout the fifteenth century, it gained an additional five. Thus, colleges grew from their original mission of providing shelter to the poorest students to becoming “privileged institutions serving to guarantee their members, at the price of a degree of discipline, the best conditions for work and study” (61).

As we have already discussed, one of if not the most expensive aspects of university life was the acquisition of textbooks, so one way colleges could guarantee that those best conditions were being met was in the establishment of libraries. In fact, “many founders [of colleges] saw it as part of the very act of foundation to provide their colleges with a collection of books” (Lovatt 2006, 154). Lovatt (2006) explains that in many cases, these books were donated from the benefactor’s personal library, and some were so reticent to part with favored volumes that they would only pass to colleges after the founder’s death. Since universities were not created from the auspices of a single patron, it makes sense that library collections were not part of their initial foundations. We should not think that college libraries held the vast collections that later university libraries would come to house after the Printing Revolution, but early on, colleges tended to house larger and more significant collections than their university counterparts. For example, by the year 1404, New College (Cambridge) and Merton College (Oxford) held 300 and 500 books, respectively; by comparison, the university library of Cambridge only held about 122 volumes some 36 years late in 1440 (Lovatt 2006). Despite what contemporary students would consider to be modest holdings, the monetary value of colleges’ collections was extraordinary, hence the frequent use of the chained library model (Petroski 1999).

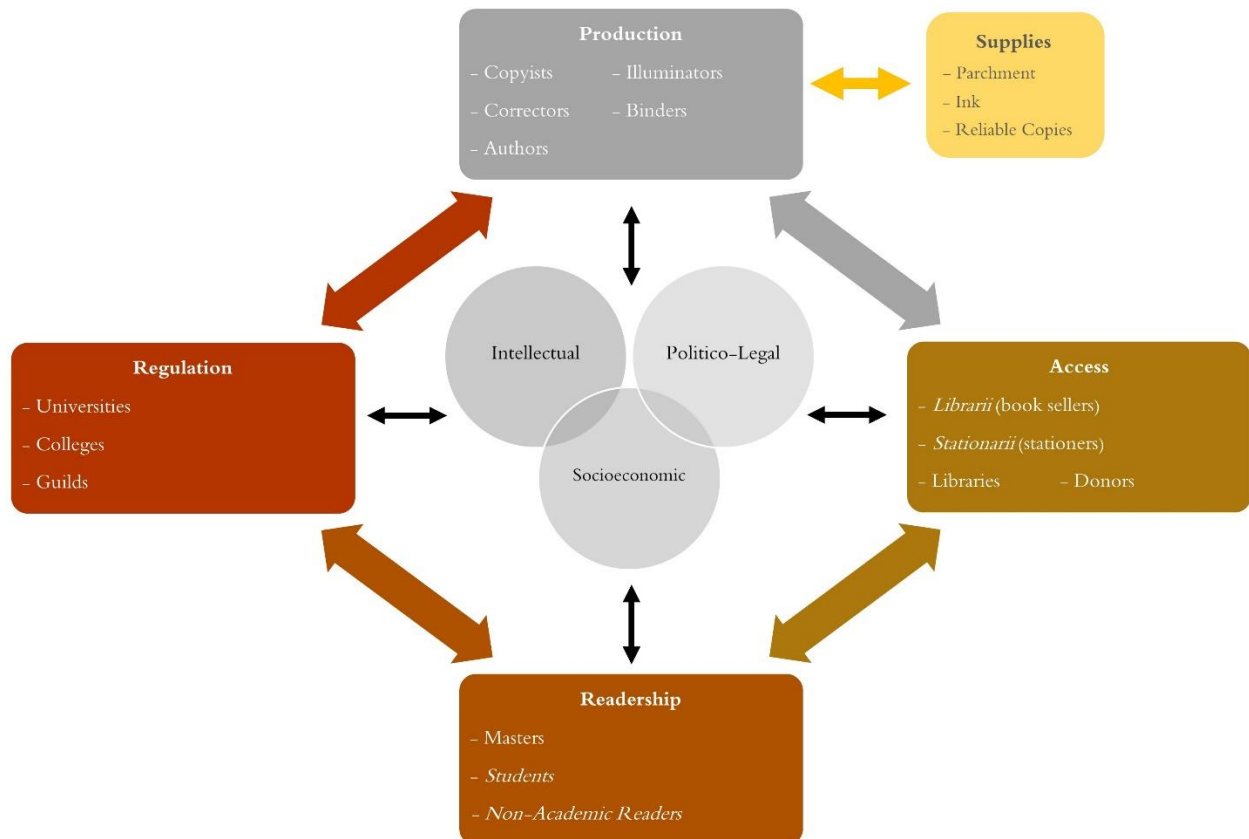
Through the course of the Late Middle Ages, university faculties stopped renting and started purchasing required space and resources, and as the fourteenth century progressed, university-owned buildings grew and expanded (Gieysztor 2003). The establishment of libraries naturally followed. The development of Oxford’s university library is illustrative of this process (see Bodleian Libraries 2021; Gieysztor 2003; Harris 1995), so we will restrict the remainder of our discussion to the modest collection that would one day blossom into what is now the splendor of the Bodleian Library. By 1320, a modest collection of manuscripts belonging to Oxford was housed in University Church of Saint Mary the Virgin. Nearly 100 years later, in 1412, Oxford created its first paid librarian position within the university. Due to the location of the collection, this post was awarded to the chaplain of Saint Mary the Virgin. Then one of Oxford’s foremost patrons, Humphrey of Lancaster, 1st Duke of Gloucester, who happened to be the younger brother of King Henry V, donated 129 volumes in 1439 and an additional 134 in 1444 to the library’s holdings (Campbell 2013). Due to the way books were housed during the medieval period (on large lecterns with shelves above and below the reading desk known as *pulpita*), the burgeoning collection needed more space, so in 1444, Oxford officials sent a petition to the Duke of Gloucester asking for funds to build a new library building (Harris 1995; Petroski 1999). Completed in 1488, the newly christened Duke Humphrey Library was built on the second story of the newly built Divinity School – second-story construction of libraries being common during this period. At this point in our narrative, the medieval period begins giving way to the early modern world, and with that transition, university and college libraries will begin growing by unprecedented leaps and bounds.

Lastly, before concluding our discussion, it is worth noting that college and university libraries contained more than just the textbooks found in curricula. Since the foundation of academic libraries rested on the generous donations of private collectors, each with their own penchant for reading materials, it makes sense that the institutions they endowed would receive manuscripts covering an array of topics. Reiter (1998), studying the collections of students, teachers, libraries, and donors in medieval Germany, has identified two major strands. The first, which he calls the *official book culture*, was indeed made up of academic and scholarly works required by the various faculties. The second, however, was made up of an *unofficial book culture* and included volumes covering spirituality and

popular devotions. The author emphasizes that “not everyone at these universities participated in this unofficial spiritual book culture, of course. Like today, some masters [teachers] were doubtless too sober-minded to dabble in the frivolities of popular piety, and some students were too focused on career objectives to waste time with extra-curricular reading” (Reiter 1998, 396). Thus it could be argued that relying on donations, which could be unpredictable, contributed to the development of moderately diverse library collections that would become the bedrock of future collection development.

Medieval Academic Libraries and the Communications Circuit

Now we may turn our attention back to the original question posed in the introduction: Have libraries always been central to the success of universities? In other words, has the academic library always been the heart of the university? The short answer is no, they have not. While it may be argued that books have always been the lifeblood of the university, examining these phenomena through an adapted interpretation of the Communications Circuit reveals that the rise of academic libraries was not inevitable but, rather, the product of the interplay of myriad macro- and microlevel forces. After all, library traditions do not arise *ex nihilo*. Instead, it is helpful to view them as cultural institutions, both arising from and also encoding the larger cultural processes in which they are embedded (Carr 2003). Thus, they were driven by the medieval context in which universities were situated. Had that context been different, then perhaps so too would have been the outcome. Using Darnton (1982) and his Communications Circuit as a model and foundation, and taking into account his warning that the handling of pre-print manuscript traditions would require modifications to the Communications Circuit, the following model was constructed to visually represent the different elements included in this discussion:



Using this illustration, it is easy to see how each component part of the process leading to the birth of universities in the High Middle Ages and the subsequent development of academic libraries in the Late Middle Ages interacts with and influences the others. As was stated in the introduction, the value of using such a model is that it requires one to situate information culture, whether print or pre-print, within the complex web of interdependent factors that form a given geotemporal context. Changes in even one component necessarily implies effecting the others, in a chain of cause and effect that defines history. Let us conclude by summarizing the previous discussion within the scope of this model by using Darnton (1982) as a guide:

1. *Macro-cultural Forces (Center)*: The High Middle Ages had a string of rather marvelous luck in terms of warming climates, lengthened growing seasons, and technological innovations, and as a result, this period witnessed an agricultural revolution. This, when coupled with fewer instances of virulent plague outbreaks, encouraged rapid population growth and, due to having a surplus of food to sell, the accumulation of wealth. These factors then sparked a commercial revolution, centered in towns and cities, that allowed merchants and skilled laborers to fully support themselves by their respective trades. This, in effect, helped to free them from the burdens of agricultural labor. At the same time, Western European borders were mostly free from outside aggression, allowing for a certain level of stability to flourish (Bennett and Bardsley 2021). Within this relatively stable high medieval environment, political rulers were consolidating power in ways requiring the establishment of massive bureaucratic machinery operated by able, skilled, and intelligent people. Similarly, the codification of existing legal codes and the reintroduction of the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (Justinian's sixth-century comprehensive code of Roman law) into Western Europe in the eleventh century required the expertise of legal scholars (Pedersen 2009). Lastly, due to its contacts with Islamic and Byzantine scholarship, Western Europe experienced an intellectual renaissance in the twelfth century that reintroduced many classical texts that had been lost since the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE. All of these factors taken together facilitated the development of advanced, specialized education that had previously been nonexistent in Western Europe.
2. *Readership (Bottom)*: The result was the emergence of a new class of scholars, both teachers and students, whose members took full advantage of their changing context. After all, using just one example from above, had there not been enough food to start the entire process, there would not have been enough time – due to workload and short life expectancies – for so many to quit their farms and family businesses to pursue academic careers. Furthermore, the emergence of a form of scholarship firmly rooted in an established textual tradition required both instructors and students to have access to textbooks. Thus, a new category of *readers* was created, and their scholastic needs, as we shall see below, were intimately tied to economic factors. Had the method of scholarship and pedagogy developed during the High Middle Ages not been so thoroughly rooted in the study of authoritative texts, then perhaps the economic needs of scholars would have been quite different.
3. *Production (Top)*: Scholars needed books. There were certainly individual producers who were part of the larger book trade who worked to meet that need. In fact, with the influx of students throughout Western Europe, there grew a new demand for not only a greater amount of production, but also the identification of corrected, authoritative copies of each text. However, the period being covered here predates the Gutenberg Printing Revolution of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which means that every textbook had to be hand-copied. Additionally, paper was relatively new to Western Europe and had not become the dominant writing

medium, so the expensive alternative of parchment was still in use. All of these factors, including the labor of copying, correcting, illuminating, and binding, in addition to the requisition of appropriate supplies, rendered medieval manuscripts expensive and precious commodities. Had universities first arisen after the age of Gutenberg, when both the affordability and availability of books increased considerably, then the economic hardship experienced by students trying to secure their textbooks might have developed along a different trajectory.

4. *Regulation (Left)*: Textbooks were not the only expense that students and teachers had to grapple with during the high and late medieval period. The high costs of room and board within the walls of cities led to the exploitation of scholars. Intersecting the politico-legal forces referenced above, individual scholars were incorporated into the *universitas magistrorum discipulorumque* by royal, papal, and imperial decree. These decrees, based on the fear of collective bargaining, often granted rights and privileges to universities, including, inter alia, 1. The right to set maximum prices for rents and other necessary supplies, and 2. Control over local book trades, which became centered in university towns and cities. Again, had these factors coalesced in a different time when the socioeconomic and politico-legal landscape looked much more different, then scholars may not have been given – or even needed – such regulatory powers.
5. *Access (Right)*: The final category to discuss here, though this process is by no means linear, focuses on the point of intersection between *Production* and *Readership*: that is, the method by which scholars gained access to the literary materials being produced. This category is a bit arbitrary in that during the Middle Ages, manuscript producers were very often also booksellers (*librarii*). However, separating these categories allows us to demonstrate how universities, by occupying the opposite cardinal point in the diagram, were able to exert regulatory control over how their scholars gained access to books. Thus, we see the emergence of the *pecia* system, which allowed scholars to rent portions of authorized manuscripts (*exemplaria*) to copy out by hand. Of course, this process also incurred costs – not to mention the cumbersomeness of such a painstaking process that surely interfered with even a diligent student's studies – but it was by far the cheaper option. The university, of course, controlled this system, even appointing officers to oversee it. Yet, it still was not ideal. The gamechanger occurred in the thirteenth century when wealthy benefactors, trying to create the ideal academic conditions for scholars, began endowing colleges with property, including physical buildings and collections of precious volumes. This development undoubtedly alleviated many financial and time burdens, thereby allowing scholars to pursue their careers more effectively. As the medieval world gave way to its early-modern sibling, universities, themselves, would begin offering library collections to help meet the needs of all those matriculating and not just those fellows fortunate enough to be admitted into an endowed college.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is safe to say that academic libraries did eventually develop the level of importance that later generations have ascribed to them, but it is helpful to remember that their existence and importance developed as a response to the needs and pressures of the medieval world. Pursuing this line of historical inquiry is beneficial for modern librarians because it allows them to better situate their own professional identities within the wider context of library and information science (LIS). Raymond Irwin, the renowned British library historian, posits that this type of historical inquiry is

crucial to not only the future of the profession but also to the perceived enjoyment of professionals (Irwin 1966). Librarians “want to build up in their minds a picture of their work as a whole; and if they leave out its historical roots, a great part of the picture will be missing and the rest will be distorted and false” (Irwin 1966, 21) Those of us who have devoted our professional lives to libraries are better off when we are able to contextualize our professional places within the vast timeline of library history stretching back to the ancient past. Hopefully, this modest handling of one very small portion of that history will encourage others to appreciate the richness of library and information science and its contributions to the development of higher education, while also inspiring professionals to study library history more deeply.

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Hoc opus amico optimo et marito meo, Iosepho, qui hoc legere primus erat, dedicatum est. Gratias tibi maxime ago.

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