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The History of Academic Libraries in the United States: a Review of the Literature

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Introduction

Academic libraries have a close relationship with learning and research and have influenced these things as well. Their history is one of evolution and change that parallels the history of their parent institutions. Leaders and innovators championed features of libraries that are now taken for granted. Responsiveness to student and faculty needs, quality of service, and resilience have been hallmarks of academic libraries in the US. A chronological review of the literature demonstrates these characteristics. This paper is divided into the major periods of the history of US academic libraries: the Colonial period, the Nineteenth Century, and the Twentieth Century.

Included in this review of the literature are journal articles, books, and dissertations published between 1980 and 2003 that discuss historical aspects of the library in four-year colleges and universities in the United States. Histories of individual libraries are usually omitted. Histories of libraries in two-year colleges, architectural history, conference proceedings, and editorials have not been included; nor have publications on specialized libraries in academic institutions such as medical, law, or music, or research collections that are not a part of an academic institution (Library of Congress, Center for Research Libraries). Citations were identified by exhaustive searching of the *Library Literature*, *ERIC*, *America History and Life*, *Digital Dissertations*, and *WorldCat* databases. Bibliographies of those citations were reviewed to identify additional sources. Key authors were identified and author searches were then performed in the databases listed.

Mirror of Higher Education

That the history of academic libraries mirrors the development of higher education implies a process of growth, assimilation, and diversification (Shiflett 1994). The role of the library has evolved as the priorities of the institutions have evolved. At the same time, academic librarianship has developed into a distinct profession with its own set of ideals, objectives, and commitments within the academic community (Wiegand 1983). Shiflett's work on the origins of academic librarianship is a classic and an excellent summary of the literature and research on this topic that was published before 1980. He states that it is necessary to understand the history of American higher education to truly comprehend American academic librarianship. The library "prospered or suffered in proportion to its value to the college" (Shiflett 1981). and the status of

the librarian was directly related to the library's place in the college. He concludes that academic librarianship has failed to become fully defined because it lacks a body of theory and research (Shiflett 1981).

Libraries "can be viewed as information systems that both reflect and influence, and even help to create, paradigms and authority, for they set limits in various ways on the ideas and information available to users" (Dain 1990). Due to a process called *transparency*, in which an entity is taken for granted and not well understood, the contexts and institutional structures of libraries are for the most part explored only in the library literature by librarian-historians. It is a disturbing indicator of the relative invisibility of libraries in higher education that there are few articles or books about them in the literature of that discipline. Their role in acquiring and producing knowledge within intellectual, institutional, and social contexts needs to be developed with a research base and disseminated in the literature of disciplines that are related to and affected by them.

Colonial Libraries

Until the American Revolution, most books were imported from England. Local presses produced materials such as pamphlets, school texts, newspapers and business or legal forms. From 1639 to 1776, they produced about 60 books per year. After 1776, there was an increase in publications produced in America. An 1804 catalog listed 1,338 American publications in print (Hanson 1989).

When John Harvard donated approximately 300 of his books to Harvard University, he created the first academic library in the colonies. The colonial college libraries were characterized by small, eclectic collections of donated books. There was no funding from parent institutions to systematically purchase materials to supplement the colleges' programs. Libraries were vulnerable to fire because the buildings were made of wood. They were open for only a few hours per week and were operated by a professor who was assigned to be caretaker of the library as part of his teaching responsibilities. In some colleges, he had to pay for books that disappeared from the inventory himself.

Since a classical curriculum was fixed, there was little need to read anything but textbooks (Shiflett 1994). Most books in libraries were theological works, as well as some classics and standard treatises in philosophy, logic, and history. There was no standard way to categorize books so they were arranged either by size, donor, subject, or author until the adoption of the Dewey Decimal classification scheme in 1876. The library usually consisted of one or two rooms of books located in the main building or in the chapel. Harvard constructed the first freestanding library building in 1841 (Hanson 1989). Before the late 19th century, "academic libraries, with the exceptions of Harvard and Yale and a few others, were as undistinguished and arid as the colleges themselves" (Dain 1990).

Nineteenth Century

Changes in scholarship and learning during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries greatly affected libraries. The emphasis on publishing results of research during this period led to a proliferation of journals and scholarly monographs and the need for primary source materials (Shiflett 1981). Serial publications gained in importance in the early 1800s.

There were fewer than 100 periodicals other than newspapers published in 1825; by 1885, there were 9,000. Due to the difficulties inherent in such business ventures, they had a life expectancy of about three years (Hanson 1989).

First Endowments

Harvard and Yale were the first libraries to establish endowments during this period. This created a more stable financial base for those libraries. John L. Sibley began working in Harvard's library in 1841 and "was indefatigable in building the collections, enormously resourceful in attracting gifts and had never a doubt as to the vital importance of amassing the published and written record of all events and discoveries, great or small" (Hamlin 1981). He increased the library hours from one hour per week for freshmen and sophomores and two hours per week for juniors and seniors to seven hours daily Monday through Friday.

Literary Society Libraries

College libraries during this period were not adequate for the students due to their limited hours of operation and limited collections. From 1800 to 1880, literary society libraries flourished. Members paid dues that supported their libraries and selected the books that were bought for the collection. The books were in English and encompassed fiction, drama, history, political science, biography, and travel. They were scholarly and classical and included encyclopedias, dictionaries, and other reference works. The libraries were open to all students and faculty and sometimes to alumni and townspeople. These libraries could be considered the predecessors of present day undergraduate libraries (Dain 1990). The literary societies declined when the natural sciences became more prominent in the curriculum, graduate instruction increased, and the course elective system came into existence. As literary society libraries declined in importance, college libraries correspondingly increased.

When Johns Hopkins University was established, faculty used the German seminar method for instruction instead of the recitation method. This created new demands for library services and materials. The librarians responded by keeping the library open longer, building stronger collections with primary and secondary sources, providing bibliographic instruction and reference service, and erecting multipurpose buildings designed to accommodate people as well as services (Wiegand 1983). As a result, there was a tremendous growth in collections. College libraries assimilated the student literary society libraries and gifts increased. Departmental libraries, rather than one centralized college library, predominated. The metaphor of the library as the "heart of the university" is assumed to have been first stated by Charles Eliot, long-time President of Harvard, in 1873.

Growth in Collections

The number of volumes in the collection at Harvard increased by an average of 63% per year from 1856 to 1876; from 1776-1856, the number had only increased by 7.5% per year. This occurred concurrently with the course elective system, an expanded curriculum, the rise of graduate schools, and new instruction methods. "By the end of the nineteenth century the typical small college library could be characterized as containing 6,000 to 20,000 volumes comprised

mainly of donations. Emphasis was primarily on supporting the curriculum rather than research” (Hanson 1989).

Improved Use

At the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, there was a definite shift in emphasis from conservation and protection of books to making them accessible and encouraging students and faculty to use them. There was recognition of the need to provide effective and personalized service as well as instruction in the use of the library and reference materials. It became accepted that books should be classified according to subject and not according to fixed shelf locations. Each book was to be listed with an adequate bibliographic description and this information was to be made easily available to users by author and subject. Cooperation with other libraries was seen as advantageous for borrowing materials (Hamlin, 48-9). Hours were extended and facilities improved to provide a comfortable work environment for students from early morning to late evening on weekdays and for some hours on weekends. Financing the library became an accepted responsibility of the parent institution. Placing books on reserve for use by students in a particular course was a new practice. Book catalogs of materials held by individual institutions or by groups of libraries were published to facilitate the sharing of resources (Dain 1990).

Gender Bias

Almost all research university library directors were male, as were most deputy and assistant directors. This demographic only began to change in the 1970s (Dain 1990); however, a noteworthy regional phenomenon occurred in the Midwest. Bailey discusses the great increase and influence of female academic librarians in the Midwest during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Students from this period required better library resources to support the changes in curriculum and teaching methods. The Midwest accepted coeducational institutions before other parts of the country. “The availability of college-educated women in conjunction with the low status accorded academic librarianship enabled women to enter college and university library work in growing numbers” (Bailey 1986). Faculty wives sometimes served as librarians because they were seen as “cultured, conveniently available, and an inexpensive source of labor” (Bailey 1986). Some of the dedicated women who led these libraries founded state library associations or published articles and books. One-third left their jobs when they married; one-quarter remained in their jobs for 20 years or more. Although not formally trained in library practices, they learned by observing other libraries, attending conferences, and reading the professional literature (Bailey 1986).

Beginnings of Research Libraries

Wiegand believes that “the role the research library assumed in the scholarly communication system fostered by the modern American university in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in large part determined the way the research library profession defined its responsibilities to the research community” (Wiegand 1990). He explains that the ideology of reading at the time was that it should be done for a purpose and it should be done systematically. There were many lists of recommended reading. “Because institutions and their instructors did

not regard independent reading very highly, college librarians felt little pressure to build large collections. Instead, they merely guarded collections donated from estates of deceased faculty members or alumni” (Wiegand 1990). After the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* and the establishment of land grant colleges, education adopted a philosophy of scientific inquiry. As universities became interested in finding and communicating new knowledge, libraries began to build supporting collections.

Collection Building

Competitive collection-building was characteristic of academic libraries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yale’s library was the second largest and third oldest in the country. Yale was the first American college to award a Ph.D. in 1861. An 1871 faculty report emphatically states the importance of a comprehensive library and so the library participated in the transformation of the college into a university (O’Connor 1987). Since no library could have a “complete” collection of all published works, libraries began to specialize. Libraries in large cities could cooperate with each other in acquiring and sharing materials; however, Yale was an institution that was isolated from other research libraries and so tried to acquire as comprehensive a collection as possible. Rare books were acquired through alumni donations (O’Connor 1987). Libraries achieved distinction because of donations of unique or rare collections. They were evolving from storehouses to workshops for research (O’Connor 1987).

Leaders in Librarianship

Several highly influential and innovative figures in academic librarianship appeared during the nineteenth century. Justin Winsor was appointed head librarian at Harvard in 1877. He served in this capacity for twenty years and brought about evolutionary changes and a new role for the library. Winsor is said to have humanized the library. He was recognized as a scholar, innovator, national leader in professional concerns, and builder of the Harvard library (Hamlin, 50-56).

Archibald Cary Coolidge became director of the Harvard Library in 1910. He had been a chair of the history department and had traveled extensively, all the while formulating a vision of what the library should be. He identified his priorities as finding space for the collections and research, addressing a patchwork cataloging and classification system, and building a quality collection. He provided vision and leadership and also encouraged teamwork and shared responsibility (Byrnes 1982). He aggressively built an outstanding collection of foreign research materials and donated much to the library himself. Because of his efforts, the Widener Library was constructed, which “remains the physical and spiritual center of the university...a base and a center for research and instruction at Harvard.” Coolidge “helped make the library an essential part of the university organization...an intellectual symbol of the university. The skill with which Coolidge anticipated future needs of the collection and the library as a whole created a magnet that has helped Harvard to attract and retain scholars and thereby to make it a great university” (Byrnes 1982).

In 1883, Melvil Dewey became head librarian at Columbia University. His approach there was described as “revolutionary” (Hamlin, 49). Some of the changes he implemented were: extending library hours from 10 per week to 84; permitting students to access the shelves; invention of the card catalog system for locating materials; lecturing on the use of the library; organizing the first reference department to “counsel and direct readers;” making available writing paper and ice water for the students; setting aside an area of the library where readers could talk; instituting a suggestion box to obtain feedback; and hiring six female Wellesley graduates as library assistants (Hamlin 1981). . During his tenure, the acquisitions budget doubled, the personnel budget quadrupled, and book circulation increased by 500%. “His initiatives were being copied by other academic (and public) libraries across the country and around the world” (Wiegand, 1996; 108).

In 1887, Melvil Dewey opened the first library school at Columbia University with seventeen female and three male students. Before this event, academic librarians learned their profession by trial and error or by learning from other librarians. He moved the school to the New York State Library in Albany in 1889 because Columbia objected to admitting female students (Wiegand 1996). By 1900, a library school degree or certificate was necessary to be a chief librarian of a university. Students who graduated from Dewey’s school formed small enclaves in different parts of the country to share professional training. Some of these developed into library schools (McElderry 1976).

Twentieth Century

By World War I, most academic libraries had reference departments. Their purpose was instruction and guidance of the library user. The goal of reference work was to foster the independence of the user in locating research information. There was a trend toward specialization in reference service by subject (i.e., art librarian), type of material (i.e., rare books librarian; government documents librarian); and function (i.e., reference librarian or cataloging librarian) (Wiegand 1996). Library services to undergraduates were a focus. In 1947, Harvard opened the first library building dedicated to undergraduate services. Shortage of seating and collection space combined with the difficulty in accessing and using large research collections accelerated this trend. In the 1970s, more than 40 institutions had separate undergraduate libraries. That number has decreased to 25 in 1987 primarily due the cost of duplicating collections and services (Person 1988).

Evolving Criteria for Library Performance

From 1906 to 1941, the Carnegie Corporation of New York gave grant funding to 248 college libraries to develop book collections for undergraduate students and to 108 institutions for library buildings. The foundation decided to award funding only to those institutions that were willing to support their libraries adequately. Data gathering done by the foundation staff determined that teachers’ college libraries were especially deficient and so they had priority for funding. Several significant publications resulted from the work of the Corporation. As a result of the influence of the Foundation’s Advisory Group on College Libraries, a list of recommended books for undergraduate libraries was developed and became a measure of the quality of library collections. This authoritative guide to purchasing books became known as the

“Shaw List” and was a “landmark of the greatest importance” (Radford 1984). The Advisory Group then tackled the issue of defining standards for college libraries.

Library Innovators

Louis Shores was a significant figure in academic librarianship in the twentieth century. His comment to a colleague, “You’re too worried about the what and the where of libraries when you should be thinking about why libraries matter” is an indication of his philosophical perspective (Shiflett 1996). He was a leader in the area of reference librarianship, in his advocacy and development of the concept of “bibliographic instruction,” and as a library educator. He became the director of the Fisk University Library in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1928 and attempted unsuccessfully to establish a library school for African American librarians there. He was a supporter of racial integration. He became head of the library school at Peabody College for Teachers in 1933 and received a Ph.D. from Peabody College for Teachers in 1934. His dissertation on the history of the colonial college libraries became a “cornerstone in the historiography of American library history” when it was published as a book (Shiflett 1996). He was influential in the launching of the *Journal of Library History* in 1966. He was the founder of the innovative Library College movement of the 1960s. This was an attempt to “mate librarianship and education to produce a hybrid that would be greater than either” (Shiflett 1996). He believed that library-centered education was necessary for a good undergraduate education. In this model, teachers would work with students in the library during time that would have been spent in the classroom.

Evolution of Staffing

Orne reviewed the evolution of staffing in the academic library. He relayed a historic desire by librarians to be accepted equally by faculty, but concluded that “acceptance of librarians by the academic community has not improved very much” (Orne 1980). The first instance of union participation by library staff was in 1940 at the Library of Congress. Whether scholarship should be a required qualification for a library director is an unresolved issue (Hamlin 1981). Academic librarians have struggled with their professional role in colleges and universities. There has been ongoing debate about whether librarians should have faculty status and whether they can claim the same academic freedom rights as teaching faculty (DeVinney 1986). College library work in the 1970s was described as simple, traditional, and changing little. In university libraries, complex organizational dynamics resulted in “a progressive reduction of the ability to obtain hard decisions on matters having to do with improved performance” (Orne 1980).

Organizational Models

Kaplan’s review of the history of participative management in academic libraries revealed a 40-year delay from the time that the concept originated in the business world to its adoption by libraries. “Pioneer” librarians during the latent period published articles that tried to convince colleagues of the benefits of participative management. But the idea did not gain the attention of the profession until the social upheavals caused by the egalitarianism of the New Deal and the rebellious sixties occurred. Even then, the hierarchical structure of libraries was so

strongly entrenched that widespread change in management style occurred slowly (Kaplan 1988).

The twenty-five year history of a successful model of management at Dickinson College Library described collegiality and flexibility with a rotating chair. It is based on a group decision-making model with shared responsibility. In 1975, a holistic model of librarianship was implemented that eliminated artificial barriers between technical and public services. Librarians were expected to be highly competent in a number of areas. Although considered radical at the time that it was adopted, the new model is now described as a system that works very well in a small to moderate size academic library (McKinzie 2000).

Growth in Research

After World War II, federal funding stimulated increased research. Libraries had to deal with a great increase in the volume of published materials. As a result, the government provided support for research libraries to build their collections. The Cooperative Acquisitions Project for Wartime Publications resulted in the purchase of almost two million European books (Dain 1990). The Farmington Plan was a program of cooperative acquisition of foreign publications that was established by the Association of Research Libraries in 1948 and terminated in 1972. Its original goal was that at least one copy of every newly published book that had research value would be acquired by at least one American library. This was the result of the recognition of a need for information during World War II and the corresponding dearth of foreign publications in the U.S. Agents in each country acquired monographs and distributed them to the appropriate library. There was an underlying assumption that library collections were a resource of value to the country, not just the parent institution (Wagner 2002).

Consortia

Library consortia have a long history of cooperation in sharing collections or technical processing. They experienced their greatest growth in the 1960s and 1970s. Their greatest advantage is economy of scale. Certain items did not need to be purchased by every library. Consortia have led to different relationships with vendors and publishers and have redefined library collections and services (Bostick 2001).

Resilience and Creativity

Miller's review of issues related to electronic resources cited the serials pricing crisis of the early 1980's as the catalyst for a new model that favored access to materials rather than ownership of them. She believed that librarians must continually reassess what they do and why they do it, creatively move forward, and set standards, not merely react. She said that the literature showed that librarianship is "impressively resilient" and is willing to question, to reorganize, to build on its past, and adapt to change (Miller 2000).

The library of the Diné College, a Navajo tribal college, is an example of this resilience and creativity. The library addressed an information need and the desire to make accessible a source of knowledge that is not in a standard written form. Hurley (2002) describes the issues in

collecting and preserving knowledge of the Navajo Nation. Communication of history and tradition through oral stories is common to North American Native people. Providing access to those stories is a challenge because there may not be a written form of the language and because different people tell different versions of the same stories. Capturing the stories in a static document loses the dynamic, context-driven, and fluid aspects that are essential (Hurley 2002). The library is determining how to make this rich source of information available while respecting the concerns and communication preferences of the tribe.

Libraries in Historically Black Colleges and Universities

The story of the libraries of nine historically black colleges in Texas concluded that black academic libraries never became the “heart” of the institution. They were not a priority for the college administration “and almost never catalyzed the intellectual life of their communities. As adjunct activities, library operations failed to figure prominently in institutional reports.” The librarians did not have allies among the faculty who could influence improvements because of high turnover among the professors (Olbrich 1986). The first free-standing library was built in 1907; the others followed after World War II. The Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools began requiring relatively stringent quantitative library standards. Owens stated that there have been no comprehensive in-depth analyses of the libraries of historically black colleges and universities or of the quality of the collections (Owens 2001).

Computerization

The Ohio College Library Center (OCLC) was founded in 1967 by the colleges and universities in the state of Ohio. Its purpose was to develop a computerized system that would allow the libraries of these academic institutions to share resources and reduce costs (OCLC web site). In 1972, OCLC offered online cataloging data to subscribing libraries. OCLC began as a shared cataloging resource based on a central catalog for the Ohio college libraries. It was also highly useful as a union catalog for all member libraries (Maciuszko 1984). The OCLC database now includes the holdings for almost every library in the country and also some international libraries. Interlibrary loan requests are sent electronically to libraries that are listed as owning the material, saving time and providing great efficiency. The database is called “WorldCat” and can be searched by anyone in subscribing institutions. It is an unparalleled resource for finding citations to published and much unpublished material including books, journal titles, newsletters, audiovisuals, theses, government reports, and conference proceedings.

Future of Libraries

A review of articles that predicted the future of libraries from 1990-2000 included sections on the issues of envisioning and planning the future of libraries; visions of digital libraries and new theories for information management; access/ownership and the transformation of scholarly communication; the arrival of the information society in 2000; and the Internet and new meanings for library collections. There were many articles that speculated on the future of libraries during the period from 1975 to 2000. This was evidence of a changing and uncertain profession. The author finds that by 2000, there were few articles that predicted the demise of traditional libraries (Sapp 2003). A possible area for further analysis was postulated by Dain,

who speculates that libraries tend to reflect rather than create intellectual trends. She states that it would be interesting to study the intellectual origins and impact of library collections and operations through time and across disciplines and institutions (Dain 1990).

Summary

The literature on the history of academic libraries was explored for three important periods in the evolution of higher education in the United States. Libraries in the Colonial period were minimal and peripheral to the college function and mission. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, academic libraries developed a formal structure and became more integral to the mission of the university, serving students and faculty in supporting more diversified curricula and research. These trends blossomed following World War II when increases in funding allowed libraries to acquire larger collections and become important resources in research and teaching. Changes in technology beginning in the 1970s caused major changes in availability and use of electronic resources. Since the 1980s, increased economic pressures on university administrators has caused some to question the role and function of the traditional library. Throughout U.S. history, libraries have changed in response to external influences. As they find ways to connect with the mission of their parent institutions, the academic library will continue to be considered the “heart” of the university.

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