

## EDITORIAL

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# The Potential of Libraries

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A library is often viewed as a building or room which serves as a storehouse for multiple copies of textbooks and a few magazines, a place designed for reading and study where specific items may be borrowed or specific questions answered. In reality a library is, or should be, much more than this. It is an active component of its parent institution playing, through the provision of information, a central role in the realization of the institution's goals and objectives. The purpose of this article is to try to give the reader some sense of this larger library by describing the varied activities and responsibilities of library staff and the services they provide.

Broadly speaking, the principal professional tasks with which the library staff are involved are: 1) collection development; 2) technical processing; 3) the provision of information services; and 4) administration.

Collection development is that activity whereby appropriate new materials are systematically added to the library in accordance with well-defined policies and procedures resulting in the establishment of an authoritative, up-to-date collection of print and non-print materials. It involves the identification, selection, and acquisition (by purchase, gift, and exchange) of all pertinent new publications, and requires of the library staff specialized subject knowledge as well as knowledge of the library's collections and needs, the book trade, and bibliographic sources. The resulting collection, comprised of monographs; reference works; abstracts, indexes and bibliographies; periodicals; and non-print items, should contain within budget limitations all materials needed to support instructional, professional and research needs.

Technical processing is that activity concerned with organizing the library's collections for use, viz., descriptive cataloging, subject cataloging, and classification. It is also responsible for creating and maintaining the library's catalog, whether its form be card, book, computer, or microfiche, and other necessary files and records which are the main points of access to the library's collections and where users determine by author, title, series or subject, whether a given book is held by the library. This work, in addition to requiring specialized subject knowledge and an understanding of how people seek information, calls for extensive training and experience in applying international standard codes of cataloging rules, classification, and subject analysis. The aim here is to identify holdings not only to facilitate local use, but for national, regional, and international use as well.

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Information services is that activity concerned with providing physical and intellectual access to the library's resources. As Dix states:

"The basic test of the quality of any library is the ability to get into the hands of the reader the book [or information] he wants when he wants it." <sup>1</sup>

Gelfand cites two principles which underlie the provision of information services:

1. Library materials should be highly accessible and easily available for use, and
2. Assistance in the location of materials and in the use of the library for information and research should be available <sup>2</sup>.

While these two principles are undergirded by the collection development and technical processing functions, they are realized by Circulation and by Reference Service.

Circulation is concerned with facilitating physical access. This implies responsibility for the physical custody of library materials, their loan and return, their arrangement on the shelves, and their maintenance (conservation, weeding, etc.). It also includes such activities as reserve services, photocopying, and interlibrary loan.

Reference has as its object the interpretation of the collection for users, providing assistance at a variety of levels ranging from answering specific questions to undertaking involved literature searches, both manual and on-line (e.g., Medline), and, particularly in specialized libraries, providing current awareness services. Education of library users also comes under the rubric of information services. This may take the form of brief orientational tours of the library, in-depth bibliographic instruction, or advanced training in research methods. Proficiency in Reference Service requires again not only resourcefulness and specialized subject knowledge but a thorough, critical knowledge of the literature of the subject and the apparatus for its bibliographic control.

Administration of the library concerns itself with setting policies and procedures for the smooth functioning of the activities described above as well as with the usual managerial concerns of planning, personnel, budgeting, reporting, public relations, liaison with patrons, colleagues and the public, and with the evaluation of services.

Of course, it is the information services (Circulation and Reference) with which users have the most direct contact and interest. For the purpose of examining information needs in terms of materials and services users can be conveniently divided into four broad groups: 1) students, 2) professional, 3) researchers and 4) those using the library for leisure and recreational reading. Generally speaking, these categories are overlapping and not mutually exclusive; all use the same materials and services, and difference among them being primarily one of emphasis.

Students' demands on the library are generally limited to assigned, reserve, and collateral reading (materials primarily from the book collection); to borrowing; brief reference inquiries (especially in dictionaries, handbooks and manuals); photocopying; and orientational tours. Of course, for them the library also provides an important place for study. Their object is to fulfill academic requirements in order to pass examinations, to obtain promotion, or simply that of self improvement.

Professional patrons make a different kind of use of the library. Though they too are often interested in a study their primary interest is in keeping abreast of new developments in their field. This is done primarily by browsing through the current journal collections, and to a lesser extent by use of the indexing and abstracting services. Their demands on library materials also include the reference and book collections (especially treatises and new books). Much use is made by them of the photocopying service and of interlibrary loan services for photocopies of periodical articles not held by the library. They are especially interested in the current awareness services which the library provides whether they be simply a new book shelf, a monthly list of new books, or computer-produced lists of pertinent new references generated in accordance with specialized subject profiles. This group often utilizes formats other than print, especially audio-visual materials and, increasingly, computer software packages. Comparatively recent developments such as on-line access to full-text journals and the availability of library resources on CD ROM's are now beginning to change the literature habits of this group and will ultimately have profound significance for libraries, their collections, and their services as resources are dispersed economically on permanent, multi-user, random-access media.

Researchers have specific informational requirements, both retrospective and ongoing; their interest is primarily bibliographic at first, and they come with a variety of questions covering virtually all subject areas. Some require only a simple look up in a reference book, others a complex and detailed manual search or an on-line search of some data base like Medline. Their requirements are for the full range of materials, from primary to secondary and tertiary. The primary literature (especially journals and the so-called grey literature of government publications, dissertations, and research reports) provides the first appearance of new work, the secondary (abstracting and indexing services like Index Medicus), the needed access to retrospective knowledge in a field, and the tertiary, the synthetic and derivative works such as treatises, handbooks and encyclopedias. Though researchers should be familiar with the bibliographic apparatus in their subject field they often require instruction or assistance in their search, especially by a librarian with a critical sense of the literature. Having compiled an evaluated list of citations, the researcher is next interested in gaining access to them. This is where the library's circulation, photocopying, and interlibrary loan services come into play. Like the growth in on-line full-text journals and CD-ROM's, the appearance in recent years of a trend to end-user on-line bibliographic searching (without the mediation of library personnel) has considerable significance for libraries and their services.

Finally, mention should be made of the use of the library by all these groups for what might be called leisure or recreational purposes. Whether it be a student reading a newspaper or consulting an atlas, or a pathologist reading the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* or *National Geographic*, this, too, is a proper use of a library.

If the library, then, is to realize its full potential it must be seen not as a passive cumulation of books lying dormant but as a dynamic repository of man's knowledge, systematically built, maintained, and interpreted, a central agent for communication, education and improvement and a device for preserving and transmitting to future generations through documentary means the heritage of mankind.

## REFERENCES

1. Dix WS. Of the arrangement of books, *College and Research Libraries*, 1964 (Mar);25:87.
2. Gelfand MA. *University Libraries for developing Countries*. Paris, Unesco: 1968:95.