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Among Harvard's Libraries

The Revolution in the College Library

More than a new breeze is stirring in Widener. A revolution is taking place. In the College Library a new culture is being created, major organizational shake-ups are occurring, and everything about the library is being examined anew. The leader of the revolution is Richard De Gennaro, since 1 June the Roy E. Larsen Librarian of Harvard College.

When A. Michael Spence, then Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, announced De Gennaro's appointment on 4 April, the senior Harvard librarians who were gathered for the announcement burst into spontaneous applause. Today, the applause would not be so general: revolutions are hard on everyone. It is not pleasant to be asked—or required—to cast aside cherished practices and modes of thought; neither is it easy to live with the sense of insecurity revolutions foster. The number of people putting in long, long hours is large. Unease, tension, anxiety are widespread, even among those many who are also elated with the transformation that is underway. Such is the reality of the Harvard College Library today. Or, so it seems to this writer, who watches the College Library from the sideline of the University Library Director's Office.

The leader of the revolution would not find it possible to say, "This hurts me more than it hurts you." Quite the contrary. He loves the job and believes completely in the necessity of the changes he is leading. But, meet with him at a quarter to six on a Thursday afternoon, and some of the spring has gone out of him. This is a man who day after day, almost certainly until late at night, is giving himself fully to the task he has undertaken.

Part of what makes the hard work so gratifying to him is that he has returned to Harvard, and who would not find it pleasing to return to head an organization in which some thirty years earlier he had begun as

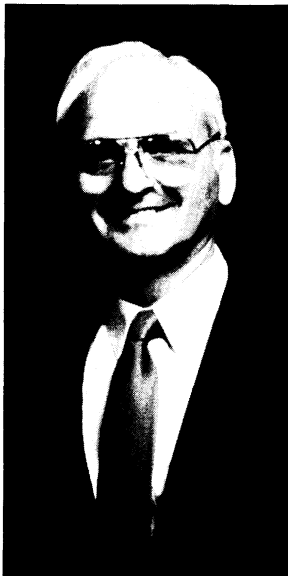
one of the most powerless? Not that he stayed in that position very long. From 1958 to 1970, De Gennaro worked as Reference Librarian, Assistant Director, Associate University Librarian for Systems Development, and Senior Associate University Librarian. Everyone who uses HOLLIS benefits directly from his work of that period, since De Gennaro was primarily responsible for what is now called the OW (Old Widener) database. It consists of the records that were produced when major portions of the Widener shelflists were converted to machine-readable form, a project that was among the earliest in libraries to employ the computer.

Along with returning to the scene of past major accomplishments, De Gennaro has the satisfaction of doing so after a lifetime of preparation for a truly difficult managerial job. From Harvard, he had gone in 1970 to the University of Pennsylvania as Director of Libraries and Adjunct Professor of English, and then in 1987 he had become Director of the New York Public Library. In those positions he learned from doing, and he has also learned from study, as a participant in the Harvard Business School's Advanced Management Program.

De Gennaro thus comes to his latest position feeling that he has the managerial skill to accomplish his goals. And most important of all, he believes that he knows what should be done. Senior officials elsewhere in the library and, it seems, in the College and the University's Central Administration also believe that he knows what should be done. De Gennaro thus brings to the job a level of support and a combination of personal and intellectual qualities that make him the ideal person to lead the revolution.

But a revolution to what end?

Because a revolution in a library is like a revolution in a country—you can change the leadership, but that does not alter the country or institution—the end point is not fully



Richard De Gennaro

obvious from the first hundred days. De Gennaro has, however, made it clear that change is upon the Harvard College Library. Rhetoric there is, but not rhetoric alone. On Tuesday, 4 September, the day after Labor Day, De Gennaro announced that an Area Studies Department had been formed, headed by Charles Berlin, Lee M. Friedman Bibliographer in Judaica. In addition to Judaica, the Department consists of the Middle Eastern and Slavic divisions.

On the same day of 4 September, a new series of governance meetings was instituted and one recent, albeit venerable institution, the Associates meeting, was abolished. Along with a restructured Department Heads Group, De Gennaro instituted bi-weekly Tuesday Management Meetings, with attendance by invitation and "limited to those who are directly involved in the matters being considered." A month later De Gennaro announced that the Harvard College Library would undertake a strategic planning process, and on 30 October, he announced his intention to restructure the two major departments in Widener, Collection Development and Cataloging and Processing. In their place will be three departments: American and English Studies, European Studies, and Cataloging Services. In the future the same individuals will have responsibility for acquiring materials as well as processing them.

On 15 November, the College Library Preservation Department was formally inaugurated, a step presaged on 2 August. On that date, De Gennaro announced that Carolyn Clark Morrow's appointment as Malloy-Rabinowitz Preservation Librarian in the University Library would be joint with the College Library. The new department, with a staff of thirty-four people, was created by bringing together people from various parts of Widener. As easy as that may sound, it violated one of the unwritten elements of the traditional Widener ethos: You may add on, but you do not take away.

In the meantime the rumor circulated that the budget for acquisitions had been cut. And it has been, officially one-time, in order that the Librarian of Harvard College could have some unallocated funds directly at his disposal. That, too, was a shock, for the tradition has been that book funds are the top priority in the budget.

The changes, of course, furthered a number of goals: improved decision making,

heightened efficiency in processing materials, and a rational preservation operation. But they fostered others as well. All heard the message that the old ways would no longer continue. De Gennaro got across the idea that there would be in the College Library a new institutional culture. What he wants is unmistakably clear, and he is getting it. In the halls, on the paths of the Yard, one catches phrases about *work*. Work is something that those employed in the libraries are expected to do more of.

While De Gennaro is encouraging a culture of work, he is also trying to foster a pragmatic approach and to discourage perfectionism. Cataloging backlogs are no longer acceptable, and neither is the lament that they exist because of lack of staff. Process the books, or don't buy them. That's the message of the new culture, and it has certainly been conveyed by means other than general exhortation. An effort to end backlogs was one apparent reason behind creating an Area Studies Department.

As important as is a new culture and more efficient, rational practices, De Gennaro aims at still more. Here are some of the remarks he made at the start of the retreat that began the Strategic Planning Process:

"The Dean has set some new ground rules for the Library. The Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) can no longer continue to increase the Harvard College Library budget by ten to twenty percent a year, as it has for the past ten years. There is evidence that these increases may have contributed to the Library's financial and deferred-work deficits by relieving us of the necessity of facing up to our problems and setting priorities. We can exact no more exceptional budget increases without clear goals derived from a rational planning process. There will be no approval of new library space in the Yard unless it is an essential component of a larger master plan for dealing with the Library's long-term space and programmatic needs. Finally, the planning process is essential if we are to set goals for the FAS [fund-raising] campaign.

"The College Library has been living off the Metcalf Plan for the last fifty years, but this plan no longer serves us effectively. We need a new master plan, a new strategy that will be appropriate to our time as Metcalf's was to his.

"Keyes Metcalf came to Harvard as Director and Librarian of Harvard College in

1937. Widener was overused and filled to capacity; Metcalf faced a crisis. His concept was to relieve the user, staff, and stack spaces in Widener by building three new libraries: one for special collections (Houghton), one for undergraduates (Lamont), and one for lesser-used materials (New England Deposit Library). All three were completed by 1950.

"The transfer of collections from Widener to Fine Arts, Music, Pusey, etc. continued the Metcalf strategy. Building new space in the Yard and transferring materials to other libraries made it possible to cope with the growth of the collections while continuing to make them available on open, browsable shelves. These steps extended the life of the open-stack library for fifty years.

"In the 1990s our space is again filled, and we need to develop a new grand strategy appropriate to our time and its changed conditions."

That statement can almost give the impression that money is fuelling De Gennaro's revolution, but this observer sees in it much more. De Gennaro has a vision of a new library, one that he would like to bring about even if the Faculty of Arts and Sciences were to increase the library budget by ten to twenty percent.

We seem to be at a crossroads. Follow one path, and the only course is to build a new library in or near Harvard Yard—and not just a new library but one that consists of stacks in which will be shelved millions of books. It's an attractive path, indeed, one that many of us wish it were possible to pursue wholeheartedly.

Follow another path, and Harvard either revamps Widener or builds a new library. In it is a great reference collection, instead of the mediocre one that is limited by the space in the reading room. It has in it CD-ROMs and computer terminals and a staff that can assist users both to find books and to learn their way with the new technologies. And in this newly created library, more emphasis is

placed on helping users. The library still has millions of books on the shelves in Harvard Yard, but millions are also stored elsewhere. Although some materials are collected as part of a cooperative arrangement with other of the nation's libraries—to insure that some kinds of little used research sources continue to be available—De Gennaro's library emphasizes the most heavily used materials and has multiple copies of many titles. No matter if coverage is not as great; copies can be transmitted electronically, and delivered in whatever form is desired to a faculty member's office. And the user can find out what is available, because HOLLIS serves as a gateway to bibliographical databases elsewhere. (Of course, it also contains records for all of Harvard's books.) Along with providing access by author, title, date, keyword, call number, perhaps even to tables of contents, HOLLIS also serves as a gateway to the map catalog, to the prints in the Fogg, the dramatic portraits in the Theatre Collection, the Visual Collections of the Fine Arts Library, the photographs at the Business School, etc., etc.

Something like this is the vision of the future library that De Gennaro wishes to create. Although new technology makes it possible and perhaps inevitable, De Gennaro does not want to wait to see if it evolves; it probably cannot. And he seems to feel it's not even possible to proceed slowly, given the mental transformation that is required. Moreover, if you know where you want to go, that's where you want to put your financial resources. If you cannot go down both paths, embrace the one that seems the inevitable future—and then put every bit of energy and intelligence into making that future as attractive as possible. Or, to switch metaphors, don't shiveringly wade into the water; dive in, and then enjoy the surfacing

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