The university library and scholarship

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The University Library and Scholarship

The opening words of the Metaphysics of Aristotle, words that have sent their great assertion echoing down the centuries, are these: πάντες ἀνθρώποι τοις εἶδέσθαι δρέπανα δοκεῖ, all men have by nature the desire to know.

Dante, who gives to Aristotle the magnificent title il maestro di color che saurio, the master of those who know, repeats in Italian, in the opening sentence of his Convivio, the very words of Aristotle: tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere. And Dante, if anyone had said to him that there were men who did not seem to be moved by a compelling desire for knowledge, would have replied scornfully that such beings were not worthy of the name of men.

In his Five Questions on the Mind the Renaissance Platonist Marsilio Ficino has this memorable sentence: intellectus natura affectatur ad totam entis amplitudinem comprehendendum, the mind is impelled by nature to comprehend the whole amplitude of being. For in this concept Platonists and Aristotelians are at one.

What, then, is the relationship of the university library toward this basic human enterprise? Essentially this: the university library, more than any other institution whatsoever, is the custodian of the world’s actual knowledge and the reservoir of its potential knowledge. More than any other institution it preserves and makes available the results of previous human seeking; more than any other institution it makes possible the fruitful continuation of that search. That is a strong statement, but I am confident that it is sound. For the university library certainly performs this double function more fully than any institution that is not a library, and more fully, in this country at least, than any other type of library, public or private. Many libraries of other types share significantly in the ministry of learning, but the scholarly purpose, in such libraries, is either not dominant or, if dominant, is limited in its range. The Library of Congress is a unique and worthy companion of the university library in this respect; but the scholarly primacy of the university library as a type is clear.

1 Presented as a paper at the conference, “The Place of the Library in a University,” held at the Lamont Library, Harvard University, 30-31 March 1949.
To whom, specifically, does the university library, in its scholarly function, offer its resources and its services? First, to mature scholars; second, to scholars in training — that is, to graduate and professional students; and third, to potential scholars — that is, to undergraduates. Others have spoken here today, or are to speak, of the relation of the library to undergraduates and to the professional schools: I shall be speaking, therefore, of the relation of the university library to mature scholars and to the graduate school.

The mature scholars concerned are first, members of the faculty of the university in question; and second, other scholars.

Scholarship is of course essential for university faculty membership. It is not the only essential; but it is the most distinctive of the several essentials. Having called a man to its faculty largely, at least, because he is a scholar, it is only right that the university should enable him to practise his scholarship — to learn, always to learn, and to contribute in his own chosen way to the advancement of learning.

Yet the scholar does not work unto himself; for he knows that he is but one of an indissoluble throng of companions, a throng not limited in space or time. And he has faith that if he does his work with utter thoroughness and utter persistency, and records his results with the greatest fidelity and the greatest clarity of which he is capable, some portion of his work, some element of his own life, will enter into the enrichment of the scholarly heritage, the human heritage.

It is then a proper and a central function of a university to enable its own faculty members to live and work as scholars. And this function is performed and must be performed primarily through the university library.

Yet the scholarly service of the university library is rightly offered not only to the members of its own faculty, but also to all other scholars who may seek its strength. For the community of scholars is one community, and the visiting scholars who come in considerable numbers to such a library as this should be made heartily welcome, as members of its scholarly family. They are so welcomed here, as I can testify from many years of happy experience. And of this fact one may be sure, that visiting scholars will be even more appreciative of their library experiences in such a place than the local faculty members, who tend inevitably to take somewhat for granted the treasure-house in which they have their scholarly being. To come even for a few days, as I have often come, from a college whose library, though excellent in its holdings and
rendering excellent collegiate service, could not, in the nature of things, contain more than a considerable fraction of what I needed for purposes of research — to come here, laden with lists of books and articles not elsewhere available to me; to come here, to plunge into the stacks, and to find, point by point, what I had so desired to find — such experiences have brought me, over and over again, not only the satisfaction of my particular quests, but a renewed and an uplifting sense of the vastness and the vitalizing power of the world of scholarship.

The university library consists of three essential elements: the book collection, the building, and the staff. If the library is to serve scholarship faithfully and well, each of these three elements must be excellent in itself, and adapted as perfectly as possible to the activities of scholarship.

The collection of books (and of relevant non-book material) must be constantly developed with a view to the satisfaction of the needs of the library's constituent scholars, present and future. The submission by individual scholars of lists of their own particular needs is an important part of such development; but the determination and the carrying out of an over-all policy and program of acquisition is necessarily the task of the librarian and certain of his chief assistants. It is upon their expert knowledge, also, that scholars must depend for the provision of the many and voluminous types of works that are of general rather than departmental or personal importance: general periodicals, publications of learned societies, the great bibliographies, and a vast variety of works of reference.

The planning of the building with a view to scholarly convenience and efficiency is a matter primarily for the librarian and his chief assistants. This is true both with regard to new construction and with regard to the rearrangements that are inevitable, and often very difficult, in a growing library.

Nor has the librarian any more critical task than the selection and the direction of an adequate and competent staff. Without such a staff the building would be dead, and the books would be moribund: slowly handled, poorly bound, poorly classified, poorly catalogued, poorly shelved, poorly charged, poorly recalled, poorly controlled in every way, and often misplaced, or completely unfindable — a scholar's nightmare. The variety and extent of the processes that are necessary to keep a library alive pass the understanding even of many scholars, as does the fact that these processes call for the constant exercise of much more
than technical skill — for judgment, for enterprise, for imagination, and for stores of special knowledge. Furthermore, if the administration of the library as a scholarly trust is to approach perfection, all members of the staff should have some understanding of the nature and the value of scholarly activity, and as many of them as possible, on the higher levels, should be scholars in their own right — as indeed many librarians have been in the past and many are today.

Scholarship, moreover, is a matter not only of substance but also of attitudes and methods. I am profoundly convinced that there is no fundamental difference between the attitudes and methods that are required for individual scholarly achievement and the attitudes and methods that are required for success in any type of educational administration, library administration included. Problems differ, to be sure, but they differ more in tempo and in the nature of their particular strains and stresses than they do in essence. For there must be in all cases a background of controlling purpose; an insistence on the gathering of all the evidence that can be gathered in the time allowed; an organization and analysis of that evidence; and a conclusion reached as a basis for statement or for action. There is no scholarly problem that is not in some sense human; there is no human problem, beyond the elemental ones, that is not in some sense scholarly; there is no library problem that is not in some sense both scholarly and human.

To the staff of the university library scholars in their turn owe conscious, hearty, and enduring gratitude. This, like most gratitude, is more generally felt than expressed. But it is generally felt, and librarians may rightly assume that it is felt. No scholarly book or article can be written without the aid of the constant basic library services, and few can be written without some specific assistance from members of the library staff. Many scholarly books and articles contain acknowledgments of help received from certain persons. 'I owe thanks,' the writer may say, 'to Professor A, and to my friend and colleague, Dr B.' Any such list, if it is to be complete, should contain the phrase: 'and to many librarians.'

The graduate school of arts and sciences has two functions. It has, of course, the function of training its students to be good scholars. But that is by no means the whole story. For the graduate school is in reality a professional school, most of whose students are in training for careers as college or university professors. It is, by and large, because such training leads to such careers that students come to graduate schools; and it
is to graduate schools that collegiate officers turn first of all when they need to appoint young men. It is then just as properly a function of the graduate school to train its men to be good instructors and professors as it is a function of the law school to train its men to be good lawyers.

Graduate schools in general, I believe, more conscious of their scholarly function than of their professional function: they will, in my judgment, serve their constituency, and, indeed, serve scholarship itself much better, when they accept more fully and more wholeheartedly their professional function — when they undertake a more thorough-going, a more scholarly, study of that function and of its implications.

What is the relationship of the university library to these two functions of the graduate school? How can the university library help to make graduate students good scholars? How can it help to make them good eventual professors?

Obviously, the same resources and services that are essential for the continued activity of mature scholars are essential also for the development of scholars in training: only among books, only among a wealth of books rightly administered, can a young man gain with any fullness the sense of what scholarship involves, the sense of membership in the timeless throng of scholars, the sense of incipient scholarly achievement. Given such resources and services, I am inclined to think that the habituation of the student to their values and their demands is primarily a matter for members of the instructional department concerned rather than for members of the library staff. Some of this work of habituation can be done in bibliographical courses, but not all of it. No lecturing, however good, and no use of catalogue cards, however thorough, can take the place of direct acquaintance with the look and the feel of books as they stand waiting in their places — the look and the feel not only of single books, but of rows on rows of books, of (literally) whole stacks of books. If a student is working in Italian literature, for instance, he should explore again and again the multi-shelved and book-crammed aisles that are devoted to that field, familiarizing himself with every section and subsection of them, with their arrangement, with the names of the authors concerned and the names of the scholars who have written about them, and with the great collections of works by different authors. He should gain an indelible sense of the proportions and the natural organization of his field. He should in most cases be able to go directly to the shelves for whatever he may want, moving as he would move among the books of his own study. He should have a similar, if
less intimate, acquaintance with the aisles devoted to Italian history, to Italian periodicals, and to the publications of Italian learned societies. And he should have some introduction to such Italian manuscripts and rare books as the library may hold separately among its treasures. His department, if it be so minded, can see to it that he engages in these activities, by specific direction and assignment, and, better still, by actual companionship within the stacks.

The resources that are essential for scholarly work within a given field, however, are not means to be found completely within the stacks that are specific to that field or are most obviously related to it. The student, therefore, should become familiar with the indispensable works of general scholarly reference, and with the general library services that are available to him. If his subject is Italian literature and if he is studying at Harvard, he should know his way, for instance, around the walls of the now vast and remarkable reference room in Widener, and among the current periodicals devoted to the study of literature, and to the Union Catalogue, and to the Union Serial List, and to the shelves in the Acquisition Department which bear the official lists of current Italian publications. He should be given experience in the use of the Inter-Library Loan Service (and of the related photostat and microfilm services). And he should gain some idea as to how to go to work in fields other than his own: for times will come when he will need to cross the boundaries of his primary interest. These matters, which are of equal concern to students in many departments, could best be handled, I believe, by the library staff itself, in cooperation with the graduate school. Group talks and guided tours, designed specifically for graduate students and planned most definitely on the scholarly level, might prove to be of great value both in the increasing of scholarly efficiency and in the broadening of scholarly horizons.

These same students are to go out from the university to be collegiate instructors and professors. How can the university library promote the excellence of their collegiate service?

No collegiate instructor or professor can do his work as well as he ought to do it unless he knows how to use his collegiate library as an instructional resource, and unless he knows how to guide his students in their own use of that library. Furthermore, by virtue of such knowledge, he can do far more than he could otherwise do in the kindling and the cherishing of such potential scholarship as exists among his students.

For these purposes the collegiate teacher should have a thorough
understanding of his library, not only as an institution affording resources and services, but as an institution that can maintain such services and such resources only through the skilled and judicious performance of difficult processes, only through the successful handling of an endless series of difficult problems, some changing, some perpetual. It is in my judgment a proper function of the university library and of the graduate school to help him to gain such an understanding. I believe, accordingly, that it would be well if the university library and the graduate school should acquaint the graduate student with the methods and tools of book selection and with the other major library processes, and should confront him with the basic library problems, including, among others, spatial problems, staff problems, budget problems, and general problems of policy. Such acquaintance could best be given, I believe, by means of an annual lecture, or possibly two or three lectures, presumably illustrated. Such lectures, in my judgment, would be of sufficient importance to be given by the university librarian himself.

Dante's Ulysses urges his companions onward to their great adventure with the words:

\[ \text{fatti non foste a viver come bruti,} \\
\text{ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza} \]

'ye were not made to live as the brute beasts, but to attain manhood and knowledge.' Per segui virtute e canoscenza: a good motto for any university; a good inscription for the lintel of any university library.²

ERNEST H. WILKINS

²I owe thanks for several suggestions to my son, Robert H. Wilkins, and to Dr W. W. Bishop's paper on 'The Library's Contribution to Scholarship,' in The Development of University Centers in the South, ed. A. F. Kuhlman (Nashville, 1941), pp. 17-33.
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