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Problems of Acquisition Policy in a University Library

PROBLEMS of acquisition policy are in many ways the most important confronting administrators of university libraries. This, unfortunately, does not mean that these problems have never been dodged; many of the difficulties now besetting great research libraries at Harvard and elsewhere result from failures to face such problems squarely.

Borrowing by inter-library loan is a poor substitute for a good book collection; the potential value of a library to its users is determined almost entirely by its holdings, and these are the result of past and present acquisition policies, which also vitally affect the expenditures required for building, cataloguing, and services. These policies, if they are largely responsible for the quality of the library, must also be of first importance to the university as a whole, for a good library is essential to attracting the best professors and graduate students; research cannot flourish unless at least the printed materials it requires can be supplied when they are wanted.

After books have gone out of print, they often cannot be found or must be purchased at a premium. Ideally, therefore, the library would acquire at the time of its publication every volume that would ever be needed; but any consideration of costs will soon demonstrate that this is impossible. No one is wise enough to tell what may some day be requested, and the annual purchase of thousands of potentially useful volumes would be very high-priced insurance at a time when an average of \$4.00 per book must be paid for acquisition, cataloguing, and servicing.¹ Selection is therefore necessary. And in selection errors are inescapable. Nonetheless, a library making a minimum of mistakes, whether of omission or commission, will obviously over the years be performing one of its basic functions with relatively high efficiency.

Some of the difficulties of determining acquisition policy in a research

¹ Keyes D. Metcalf, 'Spatial Growth in University Libraries: The Future,' *HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN*, II (1948), 164-178.

library are caused by the enormous quantity of the material that might be acquired. Only a small fraction of what has been printed is to be found even in the Library of Congress, the British Museum, or the Bibliothèque Nationale. Manuscripts are of special importance, and they approach infinity in numbers. Many of them, like many of the printed books, are not available for acquisition and many more can be rejected with few qualms; but no library has enough money to buy anything like all the desirable material that is available for purchase.

At least, the books and manuscripts in question are so numerous that it is easy for a university librarian to find excuses for his blunders. Moreover, he is responsible for the selection of so many books that individual errors do not seem too serious; in a small library each volume bulks much larger. On the other hand, it can be noted that librarians of smaller institutions have comparatively satisfactory printed aids to selection; there are lists prepared for small public and college libraries, and many of the fields covered by special libraries have their own bibliographical tools. General research libraries must turn for help to a multitude of book-reviewing periodicals rather than to compilations designed specifically for their needs.

The university library has one great advantage over most other research libraries — it can call upon members of the faculty for advice in nearly all the fields of interest to it. But each professor is busy with teaching and research; even if he is deeply interested in the library, it may not be easy to persuade him to cover publications in his field systematically and continuously. If he is enthusiastic enough to keep at the task, he may expect the library to buy more for him than it should if it is to maintain a fair balance between subjects. He may be chiefly interested in a relatively small subdivision of his general subject, and librarians, even when they realize that a well rounded collection is not being acquired, find it hard to prevent the overemphasis demanded by specialists.

While it would seem that a good faculty ought to be able to supply better advice than any library staff, it must be noted that a few great research libraries employing subject specialists to do their selection appear to have been more successful than any of the university libraries in carrying through sound acquisition programs. The New York Public Library is an outstanding example of this. In 1936, a study of recent acquisitions of foreign publications in the social sciences showed that 'the New York Public Library makes a better showing in both books

and journals, whether taken separately or in combination, than any other library [surveyed] . . . whether American or European. This library also spends less money than the other five American libraries. . . . The New York Public Library appears more attentive than the other five American libraries to the future needs of American scholars in the social sciences.²

This is not the place to appraise Harvard's book collections, which will be the subject of a second article, or to anticipate the third article in the present series by proposing an acquisition policy designed to improve the present situation. If the general problems of acquisition are to be presented here with reasonable brevity, only the major issues can be discussed.

Before considering some of the classes of material from which a selection must be made, it should be noted that, while this article will primarily concern itself with purchases, libraries also obtain much material by exchange and gift. With regard to the latter source, perhaps it need only be pointed out that there is no excuse for accepting worthless publications or manuscripts just because they are free; the purchase price of the average item is much less than half the total cost of processing, servicing, and storing it.

All libraries exchange a few duplicates and a few new monographs, but current serial publications are the major field for exchanges. In some university libraries several thousand serials are received by exchange; the practice flourishes when a university press publishes many serials and makes them available free of charge for distribution by the library. At Harvard, where the library must pay directly for most of what it sends out, exchange is a relatively unimportant factor in acquisition.

Enumeration of the kinds of material that make up a university library may well begin with the one that involves the fewest problems of acquisition policy — the books needed for collateral and assigned reading by undergraduates. These are essential, of course, and some students ask little else of the library, but the faculty selects and lists them, and their cost, at Harvard, is considerably under ten percent of total book expenditures. Fairly generous duplication of these titles contributes a good deal to student morale and to better library service, and makes

² Douglas Waples and Harold D. Lasswell, *National Libraries and Foreign Scholarship* (Chicago, 1936), pp. 71, 75. The five other American libraries were the Library of Congress, Harvard, Chicago, California, and Michigan.

possible a smaller staff than is required when there are so few copies that they must be reserved on closed shelves. The number of undergraduates and the methods of instruction affect costs, but fairly accurate estimates are usually possible in advance, and the librarian's chief difficulty is learning sufficiently early which titles will be wanted by a certain date.

Rare books and manuscripts are at the opposite extreme from the expendable duplicates supplied to undergraduates, but in the present context they, too, require relatively little discussion. In very general terms, it may be said that research libraries have not bought rare books and manuscripts extensively from funds that can be used for other purposes. In pursuing their chief object of acquiring research material, they have, rightly or wrongly, tended to stress quantity and diversity rather than rarity. Yet the value of the 'rarer' printed books and, still more, of manuscripts in the prosecution of research is clearly of primary importance in many fields.⁸ Fortunately many libraries, and particularly those in endowed universities, have funds that have been given specifically for such material; the encouragement of such gifts is obviously a significant function of the library administration. It may be noted, also, that where relatively extensive collections of 'rarer' material in particular fields have been built up from general library funds this has occurred largely through the interest and furtherance of members of the faculty.

Funds have often been given to endowed libraries for many special purposes other than the purchase of rare books and manuscripts, and such funds, while they limit the freedom of the librarian — sometimes uncomfortably — to buy what he wants, may simplify the problem of acquisition policy to some extent. A few Harvard funds may be cited as examples of how widely restrictions vary in character.

The Arthur Tracy Cabot bequest of \$50,000, the income of which is to be used for the purchase of books on fine arts and allied subjects for the College Library and the Library of the Fogg Art Museum, buys a portion of the fine arts books that are needed annually and, under present circumstances, requires no modification of normal acquisition policies.

The Castle Fund, the income of which is to be used for procuring

⁸For a recent and cogent treatment of the subject see William A. Jackson, 'The Importance of Rare Books and Manuscripts in a University Library,' *HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN*, III (1949), 315-326.

books relative to the Hawaiian Islands, is much more limited in scope. Fortunately the donor also stated that, 'Failing the existence and ability to secure such books relative to the said Hawaiian Islands, then such income and interest shall be used for such additions to the English Department . . . as . . . may seem fit and proper.' There is still a further clause; 'In case it shall not be practicable or possible at any time to procure such books as aforesaid, then such income may be used for such other purposes as the said The President and Fellows aforesaid shall deem best.'⁴ There should be no difficulty in finding books on English to be purchased with the income from this gift whenever it proves to be more than ample for publications on the islands in question, but the donor was wise enough to provide a second alternative in case conditions should change.

The Degrand Fund of \$87,000 was given with the understanding that the income would be spent in the purchase of 'French works & Periodicals on the exact sciences & on Chemistry, astronomy & other sciences applied to the Arts & to Navigation.'⁵ This field is fairly broad, but it is not wholly desirable to require the Library to spend more money on French books than on those in other languages dealing with the same subjects, particularly when it is very doubtful that the language in which scientific books are printed ought to be a decisive factor in selection.

Unless a fund is so large that it will buy everything available in the fields it covers, provisions of the sort that have been quoted do not decide which books of any class shall be bought and which rejected. In this sense, then, they can hardly be regarded as simplifying the problem of acquisition.

In addition to funds for special purposes, the amount of completely free money in a university library is also reduced by certain priorities that must be taken into account before unrestricted funds are spent for anything else. Bibliographical tools and other general reference works are of first importance, and cannot properly be charged against any one department. Many general periodicals must also be acquired. Most research libraries have important special collections that must be kept up on a large scale, for an outstanding subject collection is a contribution to the nation's resources for scholarship, and ought not to be

⁴ *Endowment Funds of Harvard University June 30, 1947* (Cambridge, 1948), p. 321.

⁵ *Endowment Funds*, p. 325.

neglected unless the library has decided, after careful consideration, to abandon the field.

Summary treatment has been given to gifts and exchanges, undergraduates' assigned reading, rare books and manuscripts, restricted funds, reference books, general periodicals, and special collections; but each would have had to be considered at some length if this article were attempting a full examination of selection problems. Special classes of material such as maps, prints, and phonograph records also raise difficult questions, but it is believed that they are less important and affect general acquisition policy less significantly than the topics that will be mentioned below.

Newspapers. There seems to be no general agreement on the importance of newspapers; some historians and other scholars who are interested primarily in the present consider them essential if not of first importance for research, but others are much more skeptical. Subscription rates, which have gone up tremendously in recent years, represent only a fraction of the cost of collecting newspapers. Numbers must be checked in daily and a good deal of correspondence is required to claim missing issues. A minimum price for binding is now \$6.00 per volume, and a great American paper fills 24 volumes per year; the space occupied by the 24 volumes costs even more than the binding. This, regrettably, is not the end of the problem, for modern newsprint, even if rarely used, tends to disintegrate within a generation; if the newspapers are to be preserved for posterity they must be microfilmed. An annual microfilm subscription to the *New York Times* (with a cheaper rate per page than other papers because of the large number of microfilm copies sold) costs \$200. Librarians and scholars must face the question of who is responsible for preservation of newspapers and which papers should be kept if selection is necessary.

Specialized periodicals. An examination of the *Union List of Serials* will give the reader some idea of how numerous periodicals are; the second edition lists more than 115,000, many of which are still current. About a hundred new periodicals are listed each month by the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*. They cost less than newspapers to acquire, bind, and store, but it may be noted that many of the large research libraries now spend more for periodical subscriptions than for the purchase of monographs. Many periodicals are of temporary interest only; it would seem cheaper in some cases and perhaps almost as satisfactory not to purchase them but to learn of articles that are needed

through the various indexes and abstracts and, when an item is requested, to borrow it or obtain a microfilm copy from another library. It has recently been proposed that libraries acquire periodicals as they appear but keep them only during the period of greatest use; the original, instead of being bound and shelved permanently, would be replaced by a microfilm copy within a year or two of publication.

Comments on the ephemeral nature of some periodicals should not cause one to overlook the fact that in some fields, particularly the sciences, periodicals are the basic literature. Two other points should be made: first, that an incomplete file may be very irritating, as it so often happens that the particular number wanted is the one not available, and, second, that the decision to subscribe for a new periodical is a more serious matter than the decision to purchase books that cost as much as a subscription for the first year, because the periodical must be checked in, paid for, bound, and stored not just once but every year until it ceases publication or the subscription is canceled.

Language problems. Should books dealing with subjects in which the library is interested be purchased just as freely if written in Norwegian, Dutch, or Portuguese as if they were in English, French, or German? In philology or literature, some libraries may draw the line at languages in which the university does not give instruction, but it seems reasonable to argue that the best books in physics, for example, should be acquired regardless of language. However, an important book on such a subject in a 'minor' language will probably be translated into one of the 'major' languages sooner or later; in the original, it will be of use to very few patrons of the library, and an institution that is trying to obtain as much research material as possible for its money may quite properly hesitate to buy in the 'minor' languages. It seems clear that at least one copy of each book of research importance published abroad ought to be found somewhere in this country, and 54 libraries are now cooperating through the Farmington Plan⁶ in an attempt to make sure that a copy of each such volume will be acquired by an American library. It has been suggested that books in the 'minor' languages be concentrated in a relatively few libraries, whence they can be borrowed when needed elsewhere. Librarians have tended to assume that all scholars should know all languages and that the criterion for

⁶ Keyes D. Metcalf, 'The Farmington Plan,' *HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN*, II (1948), 296-308.

selection of a book is its excellence rather than the likelihood that it can and will be used.

Allocation of funds. It is probably impossible to devise any system for division of book funds by subject that will satisfy all concerned. Should such a division be made by departments in the college and university? Should it include the cost of periodical subscriptions and public documents, old books as well as new, special collections, etc.? If a large percentage of total funds is allocated by subject, how can the library acquire an expensive title in any one field or a valuable ready-made collection? If professors in one department are less selective or more interested than those in another, should their allowance be increased at the expense of other departments? How can one find a fair basis for apportionment of funds when some departments, such as history and literature, depend on books to so much greater an extent than the sciences?

New fields. Most institutions attempt, from time to time, to start instruction in a new field. If this is one in which the library hitherto has collected very little, it may be necessary to make up for past neglect as well as to supply current publications. A program of instruction and research in Slavic civilization, for example, may call for expensive background material. It is surely the duty of the librarian to call the attention of the university's financial and administrative officers to the fact that a new field requires additions to the library's book funds and possibly also to its public service staff.

New monographs versus old. It might be maintained that no monograph ought to be acquired until one is sure of its importance. Those who disagree may compare this to the theory that, if letters are not answered promptly, many of them need never be answered at all. On the other hand, the demand for a book is usually greatest soon after its publication. If purchase is delayed, the price may go up or copies may be hard to find (although of course in some instances the work may be remaindered or otherwise become available at a greatly reduced price). Is it possible to avoid either extreme, in general purchasing essential works immediately on publication to form a good working collection that can be filled in later as demand arises for other titles? If some of these latter are not then available, they may be microfilmed; if they are of first importance they will probably be reprinted. A basic problem of acquisition policy is how much to emphasize new monographs as compared with older materials.

Out-of-print publications. Whatever the general policy, there will always be a considerable demand for material that was not acquired when it first appeared. Possible methods of locating copies of out-of-print books need not be described here, but it should be pointed out that, when a dealer does not have a book in stock and must search for a copy, he has to add the expense of the search to his price. Instead of trying to buy such a work, one may try to locate a copy in another library and borrow it or order a microfilm.

Second-hand catalogues are important sources of older material, and many libraries have been highly successful in building up and rounding out their collections by watching for opportunities to buy important books when listed at reasonable prices by second-hand dealers. Alfred C. Potter, who directed the work of the Order Department at the Harvard College Library for more than forty years, was unusually skilled in this, and the library is indebted to him for much valuable material that would otherwise have been missed. The average per item cost of selling through auction is so high today that purchasing at auction is usually not a very efficient method of acquisition, but there are of course exceptions, whether of occasional single items or of large unsorted lots sold *en bloc*.

An important source of old material is the buying of entire collections made by individuals interested in specific subjects. The cost per volume is often relatively low, and acquisition of a balanced, ready-made collection is, of course, particularly desirable when the library is taking on a new field. Duplicates can usually be sold if the volumes already owned by the library are well selected, but, if the library already has a strong collection in the subject, the number of duplicates is sure to be very high. Much of the strength of the Harvard College Library has come from ready-made collections acquired during the first thirty years of the century, many of them through the initiative of Professor Archibald Cary Coolidge, the first Director of the University Library and one of the great collectors of all time.

Current publications. The greatest single problem in acquisition for a research library — at least for one as 'mature' as Harvard — is the selection of the new books that ought to be bought and the rejection of those that will not be needed. Most of the available lists are not arranged by subject; often a complete national bibliography must be searched from beginning to end. If subject specialists are to check the lists, each list must be examined by several persons whether arranged by subject

or not, and considerable delays result if many specialists go through each one. Some of the specialists are almost sure to be temporarily unavailable, which will slow down the process still more. But the basic question is no doubt how the actual selection should be made. A few subdivisions of this question may be suggested. Can the final decision be made from a trade list alone, or must a review of each title be found and considered? How much can one rely on reviewers in either the general periodicals or the more specialized journals? Should a book be rejected because it is reviewed unfavorably? If a graduate student recommends the title, should it be referred to a faculty member? If recommended by a junior member of the faculty, should it be referred for final decision to a full professor or department head? Should all books recommended by the faculty be ordered as long as any funds assigned to the subject are available?

A final question should be asked regarding the part that ought to be taken by the library staff in book selection. Surely it is the duty of the staff to call material that is available to the attention of the faculty, and to encourage the faculty to make recommendations. How much further should the staff go? Evidence was cited early in this article that libraries relying on staff members for advice on selection have sometimes been more successful than those that call upon faculties for help. Should even a university library employ some subject specialists of its own?

An enumeration of questions involved in acquisition policy should not be concluded without a further word on the costs of processing, which, as was noted, amount to more than the purchase price of the average book. It is expensive to search the titles recommended, to order them, and to check and pay the bills. It costs nearly as much to search in the catalogue the recommended titles that the library already has as to search those it does not own; if many of the books suggested have already been acquired, the cost per volume added will be considerably increased. Cataloguing a volume may cost as much as purchasing it, and storage space in the stack may also equal the purchase price; the latter, on the average, is probably not more than 25 to 30 percent of the total expense to the library of acquiring and preserving a book.

If this article has asked questions rather than attempted to answer them, the inconclusive procedure may be defended as proper in an introduction to a difficult subject. It may also be pointed out that, while

the questions have been asked in general terms, satisfactory answers to them must take into account the special needs of the individual library. After a second article has attempted to survey Harvard's present book collections, it may be soon enough to suggest answers that Harvard, at least, ought to give.

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[†]The writer wishes to acknowledge here the valuable assistance rendered in the preparation of this article by Mr Edwin E. Williams, Chief of the Acquisition Department in the Harvard College Library.

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