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Comments on Rockefeller University Student Proposals

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COMMENTS ON ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY STUDENT PROPOSALS

by

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and

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After reading The Rockefeller University Student Proposals and giving careful consideration to the recommendations they present, we feel that it would be in keeping with the stated goal, "the free exchange of views about the University and improvement of the University," for the Librarians to present a response. This response is in no way an apologia. Rather it is a statement and analysis of our point of view. It is necessary not only in order to have an exchange of views, but more especially because there was no such exchange until after the preliminary version of the report was written and a number of copies distributed.

The report on the library concludes with the following statement: "In conclusion, we ask that students be consulted or advised about future library plans." This is, from our point of view, a completely valid recommendation. However, it seems to us that the students do not seem to be aware that they are obliged to inform themselves about the library before, during and after making proposals. In point of fact, at no time did the student committee confer with anyone on the library staff to gather any facts, statistics or other kinds of information

for the preparation of its report. When, after the preliminary version was distributed, one of us (Miss Wohl) learned the names of two of the students on this committee and we conferred with them, this fact was freely admitted by the students. The motivation in making this point is in no way a matter of picque or wounded pride, but rather a matter of deep concern to us. We would much rather have a study and report unencumbered by a spate of misinformation and mis-statements, resulting in a report so full of flaws that its usefulness is seriously impaired. The workings of the library are, and will continue to be, an open book to all. We had thought that our relations with the student body, in particular, were such that they would feel that they would have our full cooperation in such an endeavor. If this report is in any way painful to us, it is in the realization that such was not the case, at any rate it was not the case with this particular student committee.

The report begins: "The principal function of the library should be to make reference material accessible to the faculty and students." The principal function of the library is to make materials accessible to everyone associated with The Rockefeller University, and to be of assistance to scholarship in general through a cooperative interlibrary loan program with other academic institutions. This is the guiding principle governing all phases of the library operation. Acquisitions, cataloging and circulation policies are keyed to the needs of the library user to a degree which, if not unique, is certainly quite rare.

Acquisitions. Books and periodicals are obtained not only on

request; over 60% of the Associate Librarian's time is devoted to selecting new materials and locating out-of-print items for the library. Contrary to the essential meaning of the statement made in the report that "the book collection of the library is small compared to other university libraries," in fields under study at the university, the library tries to have as complete and comprehensive a collection as possible. In these areas, the library collection is at least as good as, and in some cases better than, those in the largest university libraries. The fact remains that such libraries borrow materials on interlibrary loan from us.

Cataloging. Material is cataloged within days of its receipt, and when urgently needed, within minutes. Cataloging, in most libraries, is hampered by lack of support for necessary personnel and equipment. Consequently most libraries have large backlogs, requiring months to get materials into circulation, in marked contrast to our situation.

Circulation. Materials circulate in a manner, based on comments and recommendations from the library user, commensurate with the needs of the user. The library is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year. In many libraries circulation policy is determined by budgetary considerations and personnel restrictions and is often rigid and unaccommodating to the library user for these reasons.

That the library is something less than perfect is of course recognized. However, in comparison with other libraries, The Rockefeller University can take pride in what has been accomplished. This has been facilitated by an extremely liberal and generous

university administration. This is true not only in money matters (the library budget submitted by the Librarian has rarely been altered) but in matters of policy as well. The Librarian has a completely free hand in amending and establishing new methods in compliance with the needs and desires of the university personnel.

The report is quite correct in stating that many of the library's ~~problems arise from sheer lack of space. Library activities are~~ mushrooming at a phenomenal rate. In 1954, the library added 257 books for the entire year; the library adds, at present, about that number each week. Circulation has grown from 7,803 in 1954 to 37,502 in 1968. This has, of course, resulted in a very serious space problem. But it is completely invalid to therefore reach the conclusion, as the report does, that the purchase policy of the library is predetermined by the availability of space. This is simply not true. It may well seem surprising, but the availability of space to house materials under consideration for purchase plays absolutely no part in the final decision. For example, we have recently succeeded in obtaining the 263 large volumes of the British Museum General Catalogue (an essential reference work for any university library), and yet, as a matter of fact, we do not yet know where to find the necessary shelf space. It is also invalid to conclude that since the purchase-on-request policy exists, that no "planned purchase policy by a professional staff" exists as well. In point of fact, over 80% of the student recommendations for purchase and over 50% of the faculty

recommendations for purchase are either on order or already in the library and cataloged by the time these recommendations are received by the library. In all candor, if the library purchase policy were really determined by "piecemeal and spotty suggestions from aroused researchers and students" we would have no space problems: these suggestions constitute less than 5% of the total purchases made for the library collection. Actually the professional staff depends heavily on such suggestions only when an area of research new to the university is begun. An example of this is the Behavioral Sciences. At first we were completely dependent upon recommendations, but within six months, after the types of materials needed and the areas of research became apparent, the number of recommendations made decreased significantly. One of the professors told us that he could see that it was no longer necessary to make such suggestions. In short, the purchase of books and periodicals is carefully planned in accordance with the known needs of the faculty and students.

The physical plant of the library has been a matter of much concern to all of us, and considerable time and effort has been devoted to this problem. The report is emphatic in recommending "most urgent priority" but presents few details and no suggestions. It mentions the obvious: lack of study space, poor lighting, no air conditioning, lack of shelf space. Surely the committee knows that all those (and especially the librarians) who have anything to do with the library are well aware of these problems. It is in this

area that consultation with the Librarian would have brought immediate clarification of the situation. The committee would have been told that much thought has been given to ways of expanding the library building. Recently a plan to secure more space has been formulated so that some relief is now in sight. As for the lighting, they would have learned of the trials carried out this year with several types of lighting fixtures, which are placed in various parts of the library, resulting in a plan for relighting much of the library during the coming year. And finally, had they discussed the question of the "dispersal of the book collection" with the Librarian, they would have learned that the establishment of collections, such as the Behavioral Sciences Reading Room, are only temporary arrangements to alleviate the immediate space problem in Welch Hall and that these collections will be reshelfed in the main library as soon as space becomes available.

And now, as a final point, we turn to the committee's statement that "people have criticized the subject index and have suggested the library add a title index for books." Unfortunately, when the library was recataloged and classified in 1957, the previous library administration decided against including title entries. To do this now would involve an investment of some \$20,000. Actually, we are not considering doing it at the present time, and for quite another reason: the computer as a library tool is imminent. Experimental computer studies of library procedures are about to be undertaken by the

Associate Librarian. The first studies will be made with circulation procedures, but will culminate in cataloging areas resulting in a print-out version of the catalog by author, subject and title. In the meantime there are tools like Books in Print for the American books and British Books in Print for books published within the United Kingdom to assist the library user in locating materials by title. These tools are available at all times at the Circulation Desk. In short, until the feasibility of computerizing the library is determined, plans for a title catalog of the library's holdings are suspended.

In making this reply to the student committee we would like to make it clear that we consider our comments to be a step in a continuing dialogue.

15 May 1968