

The Circulation Department: Organization and Personnel

Reorganization of college and university library circulation departments, long overdue, is now essential to improve the character of professional work and prepare for postwar responsibilities. . . . The librarian of Brooklyn College discusses this problem.

WHEN HOSTILITIES CEASE and the mustering-out process begins, thousands of men and women will return to the colleges and universities of America to resume their interrupted study. Thousands more who never before had the opportunity will embark upon college careers. On Nov. 13, 1942, the President appointed an Armed Forces Committee on Post-War Educational Opportunities for Service Personnel. Senate Bill S.1509, which provides for payment by the federal government of "customary tuition, laboratory, and library fees," was the outcome of the work done by this committee. The committee estimated that one million ex-service personnel might be eligible for one year of study in the colleges and universities, while an additional 200,000 might qualify for a second year, and 165,000 and 150,000 respectively, for the third and fourth year of college work.¹ Unquestionably, this bill or one of its successors will be enacted. Numerous bills have since been introduced in the Senate to provide postwar education for eligible ex-service men and women.

¹"Higher Education and the War." *Education for Victory*, v. 2, no. 11, Dec. 1, 1943, p. 10-11. Report of the Armed Forces Committee on Post-War Educational Opportunities for Service Personnel.

The postwar student body may differ in marked degree from the traditional student body. Freshmen will consist of two groups providing a situation never before existing on the American campus. There will be younger men recently out of high school who barely missed induction and who have progressed to the colleges in normal fashion. In addition, there will be present freshmen of more mature years. These men may have completed their secondary school education several years before and in the interim will have seen more of life than the younger freshmen—a grim side of life that the others missed. They will all be in college together. This student body, unique in its complex character, will influence educational method.

College and university library circulation departments will be affected by these changes on the campus. Old problems with which librarians have always struggled will be present in exaggerated form, while new problems without precedent will present a challenge requiring the highest type of professional work. The circulation department should therefore receive earnest consideration now, for it must be the active agent that introduces books to this complex group and coordinates the library with advanced educational method. Success or failure in adjusting the library to postwar needs will be largely contingent upon the circulation department.

Some circulation departments are not ready for their new responsibilities. Before

the present conflict libraries attempted to meet the book needs of increasing numbers of students by acquiring more books, but "the use of them by the undergraduates on whose account primarily they were acquired, is in most institutions . . . distinctly disconcerting."² This is an indictment of the circulation department, which is charged with the responsibility of seeing that students do use the library. Too frequently the circulation department has been identified with handing out books. Its responsibility must not end here.

Professional vs. Clerical Duties

Reorganization, long overdue, must eliminate the weak features of the circulation department. One of the greatest obstacles to meeting the responsibilities of the future appears to be the confusion or overlapping of professional and clerical duties. Two decades ago Dr. Williamson warned that "for the sake of the library profession and to elevate the standards of library service, some distinction between professional and . . . clerical grades of library work is essential."³ He adds:

There are many kinds of work in any library which can be performed just as well (perhaps better) by a young woman with a high school education and a little appropriate instruction and experience as by a college graduate with the best library school training that can be devised.⁴

Dr. Williamson forecast a very practical and unfortunate result if this situation were allowed to continue, for he pointed out that unless professional assistants perform professional work they cannot expect to receive appropriate remuneration. And he observed that "library administrators appear to be making little or no effort to keep these two types of work distinct."⁵

² Branscomb, Bennett Harvie. *Teaching with Books: a Study of College Libraries*. Chicago, A.L.A., 1940, p. 5.

³ Williamson, C. C. *Training for Library Service*. New York, 1923, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*

A few years later George Alan Works stated that "there may not be sufficient distinction made in libraries between the clerical and professional types of service,"⁶ and pointed out that even from the standpoint of economy "there should be as complete segregation as is practicable of the two types of work." One does not have to look far to see that this warning and advice has not been heeded. In their study⁷ published as recently as 1941, William M. Randall and F. L. D. Goodrich sound rather pessimistic when they speak of the "details of such things as charging systems, fines, and the problems of lost books" and warn that ". . . to the service librarian, these requests [at the loan desk] tend to classify themselves into groups and, finally, to appall him with their sameness. Here lies the danger of institutionalism, which must be avoided."

Actually the condition which afflicts circulation departments, while chronic and serious, can be cured. First, however, the symptoms of this organizational weakness must be examined.

As already implied, lack of clear division between clerical and professional work has a direct and adverse effect on the professionally-trained loan assistant and on the accomplishment of the circulation department. Too often such comments are heard as: the work is humdrum, mechanical, uninteresting; it offers no incentive. Professional assistants are frequently assigned to the loan desk and required to perform purely clerical tasks. If desk assistants are pressed for time, there is likely to be opportunity for nothing more than perfunctory and automatic motion from which no benefits are derived by either the loan assistant or the patron. The frequency with which even in normal times circulation depart-

⁶ Works, G. A. "College and University Library Problems." Chicago, A.L.A., 1927, p. 80.

⁷ Randall, William Madison, and Goodrich, Francis Lee Dewey. *Principles of College Library Administration*. Chicago, A.L.A., 1941, p. 128-29.

ment assistants request transfers to other departments to avoid monotonous, uninteresting work can be attested to by any librarian or library personnel officer. A year or more of library school is not required in order to check a call slip in a file of book charges, route it to the proper stack level, and record the charge. The routine nature of such purely mechanical operations is only matched by that involved in discharging the returned book when the loan assistant may not even have the pleasure of seeing the patron. Of course, issuing books is a necessary activity, but this should not occupy the full time or any portion of the time of the professional assistant. Dr. Branscomb observes truly that "while all librarians would agree that it is their duty to provide and circulate books needed in the courses of study, a good many of them are inclined to feel, if not maintain, that their responsibility along these lines ends with these activities."⁸

It must be emphasized that the head of the circulation department is not always responsible for these conditions. One must look further for the causes.

Why does this waste of talent which has such a demoralizing effect upon the staff still exist today? Perhaps the answer can be found in the attitude of the library administration, the attention of which is sometimes focused too closely on acquiring material and on cataloging the material acquired. Whether or not it is cause or effect, the fact must be pointed out that the head of a circulation department—one of the most important positions in the library—often ranks, professionally, below the heads of the acquisitions, catalog, and reference departments.⁹

It has also been observed that the lowest

minimum wages are found in circulation departments, as are the lowest maximum salaries,¹⁰ and that the American Library Association, itself, recommends for the chief circulation librarian in the larger library, both a minimum and a maximum salary lower than the chief catalog librarian and the chief reference librarian.¹¹ A casual examination of conference agenda and of professional literature reveals a singular lack of discussion concerning the broader aspects of circulation department organization.

The circulation department's sphere of influence can no longer be bounded by the counter. The establishment of reserve collections, browsing rooms, undergraduate libraries, and other conventional devices to reach the students have been steps in the right direction but these efforts have not gone far enough. The circulation department is too conservative to meet the demands of the future. Its scope has been narrow, its interest too limited. The attitude of circulation department assistants is only one of the more evident manifestations that all is not as it should be.

Remove Circulation Files

A recommended step in raising the work level of the circulation department of the large library is the removal of the circulation files from their conventional location at or near the loan desk.¹² This will result in a number of advantages. Except for purely physical limitations, which can often be overcome by some adjustment or reconstruction, and except for the power of tradition, there is no logical reason why the file must be at the desk. Removal of the file is recommended for several reasons: It will

¹⁰ Salary statistics compiled by William H. Clift and published by the A.L.A.

¹¹ *A.L.A. Classification and Pay Plans . . . v. 3, Universities*. Chicago, A.L.A., p. 32-36, 47-54, 65-72, 81-89.

¹² The circulation files at Sterling Library, Yale University, are in a separate room away from the circulation desk.

⁸ Branscomb, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁹ The University of Illinois' Library has overcome this objection by placing all service departments (circulation, reference, and twenty-three departmental libraries) under an associate librarian, responsible to the director.

lessen the mental obstruction the counter provides; work at the files will be relegated to a less conspicuous place where the work will be less audible; if the files are not at the desk, the tendency will be removed to have professional assistants working at them. Work should be done more effectively when the files are located in a room which has better lighting and more space. The files can be anywhere, provided they are near a conveyor or book lift and can be reached by pneumatic tube or other device. In new buildings after the war, the file room should be planned with good lighting, adequate ventilation, and suitable sound-proofing. All charging records should be concentrated there. The files can be constructed in a more convenient form than when they must conform to the features of the loan desk or to the limited space adjacent to it. If the files are extensive or are likely to become so, they can be arranged in the form of a horseshoe or be in semicircular fashion, low in front, high at the back edge—a "grandstand effect."¹³ Separate compartments, each with level or horizontal bottom, would prevent the slips or cards from falling forward in spite of the inclined angle on which the files are built, for convenience in use. Seats or benches should be on wheels, so that they will move freely back and forth along the files.

A Chief Filing Clerk

All filing should be in charge of a chief file clerk who, in turn, should be responsible to a professional assistant in charge of service. Clerks are usually better at filing than are professional librarians.

Direct contact between public counter and filing center must be provided. This can be accomplished, when equipment is available, by direct (private line) telephone connection or one of the common interoffice

communication devices. Most of the obvious questions could be answered with simple notations made on the call slips by the file clerks, such as the earliest date a copy is likely to be returned or the location of another copy elsewhere on the campus. If the library usually has more than one copy of a book, there are arguments in favor of sending the call slip directly to the stacks. After this, if no copy is available, the slip can be sent to the filing center for checking. Separation of the semipermanent location charges from the constantly changing current circulation file cannot be discussed here. Microfilming the location file once or twice a year would be one way of saving space. Filing by the Keysort method, automatic filing by I.B.M. machines, and other methods for simplifying charging and filing processes have been given serious thought by several librarians and are in actual use in a few libraries. Several articles on this subject have appeared in professional literature.

At the circulation desk, an adequately trained clerk can examine call slips for accuracy and completeness and route them to the file room or stacks. In charge of all desk service there should be a professional assistant. A page could carry the books from the conveyor or lift to the charging desk, although this operation could be mechanized by installing a roller-equipped inclined "run" such as that in use in College Study, Columbia University, by which students return books used in the reading room. The professional assistant should be really free for those valuable contacts with students and faculty about which so much has been heard and he should handle all matters at the desk which would otherwise interfere with the mechanical operations of the clerks. Such a desk setup is subject to wide modification. A professional assistant could accept call slips or he could issue books. The point to keep in mind is the

¹³ McHale, Cecil J. "An Experiment in University Library Circulation Files." *Library Journal* 56:427-28, May 15, 1931.

importance of assigning professional work to professional assistants.

Having realigned work to this extent, it should be possible to engage more actively in those beyond-the-desk activities which will become increasingly important. Reorganization of desk work should free professional assistants, at least in the large library, for work with the students. Assistants should be carefully chosen for this work because "contacts with patrons require much experience and a high degree of education as well as tact."¹⁴ In smaller libraries, accepting call slips from patrons and charging books offer desirable contacts. Business firms have for many years realized the value of the receptionist with charm, personality, and intelligence who comes forward to meet the customer, bid him welcome, save his time and energy in dispatching his business, and make him feel that he and his problems are important and that his patronage is eagerly sought.

Meet the Public

The circulation librarian in the smaller library, the professional assistant in the larger organization, needs to come out from behind the loan desk and meet the student, anticipate his difficulties, and help him. If he receives friendly help or suggestions the first few times he comes to the library, he will soon feel as if he belongs there and will have the assurance and knowledge to help himself in the future. In addition, he will have a feeling of friendship in the library and a desire to come in of his own accord, not just when he has to complete an assignment. One assistant might be an undergraduate counselor to whom freshmen and sophomores would be referred for advice on their reading problems. Such an assistant would be more than a readers' adviser, for he would provide the liaison

¹⁴ Brown, Charles Harvey, and Bousfield, Humphrey Gambier. *Circulation Work in College and University Libraries*. Chicago, A.L.A., 1933, p. 41.

between the library and instructors, coordinating assignments with available material. His authority would cut across all divisions of the department and, through the circulation librarian, would recommend the purchase of new or additional material and see that photostat or microfilm reproductions (with due regard for copyright restrictions) were provided if needed. He might organize undergraduate tours and train the guides and conduct or participate in film forums now coming in for some discussion.¹⁵ The upper classman, the graduate student, and faculty member also need library guidance.

The activity of the circulation department need not conflict with the work of the reference department. While no blueprint for details of organization is provided here, it seems logical for the circulation department to advise on all reading problems connected with class assignments and recreational reading and to keep in close contact with library needs of graduate students and faculty members. The reference department would perform its usual function of aiding persons who apply for information but would not project itself into teaching departments or student activities. Readers' advisory service could be under the jurisdiction of either the reorganized circulation department or the reference department. Information gained by the former, through its direct contacts about the campus and with the students in the library, should be made available to all library officers. Such information should be presented to the chief librarian for discussion at regular meetings of library administrative officers.

The circulation librarian, having reorganized his department, has other essential duties. He must keep in close contact with campus activities. He should know

¹⁵ "Educating Civilians for War and Peace through Library Film Forums," *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 7:280, 1943.

the officers of the institution and as many individual faculty members as possible. He should confer with them and be familiar with their teaching plans and methods and know their special interests. He should see that they know what the library has to offer. Suggestions should be encouraged. By means of developing, with the faculty, orderly assignment programs, the sudden, unexpected onslaught of large classes can be avoided. Normal peak demand periods likewise can be anticipated. This is not an idealistic and impossible accomplishment under the proposed plan of reorganization, although the circulation chief must be free from routines to carry out such a program.

No brief is presented for any specific form of development for the circulation department. Details of organization must be contingent upon local conditions and needs. Some plan such as that advanced by the McDiarmids might be adapted from their principle of "line and institutional activities," based on the functional organization of the public library.¹⁶ Certain modifications of the divisional reading room plan advocated by Dr. Ellsworth might be applied in some libraries.¹⁷ Once the reorganization of circulation work is accomplished, the way will be clear for the realization of many plans which, because

of inherent organizational weakness, could never succeed in the past.

The foregoing suggestions also apply to the small library. Circulation work may be done by one professional librarian and one or two assistants, but the principle is the same. No physical rearrangement of the files may be necessary or possible, but the librarian should free herself of as many clerical tasks as she reasonably can and should devote her attention to over-all supervision and contacts with students and faculty, leaving the clerical details to well-trained clerks.

Such appellations as "loan" or "circulation" applied to the reorganized circulation department would become misnomers, for issuing books, while an important activity, would be but one phase of the expanded program. A more appropriate designation would be "public service" or "public relations" department.

Until a long-due reorganization takes place, loan assistants are going to complain and the library will continue placidly to waste some of its best professional talent. When the circulation department is developed to its full possibilities, recruiting for loan work will no longer be the problem it is now; the present waste of professional ability will cease; the "public service" department, its work finally organized into clearly defined professional and clerical activities, will be ready to meet its future responsibilities.

¹⁶ McDiarmid, John, and McDiarmid, E. W. "An Approach to the Problems of Library Organization." *Library Quarterly* 9:133-44, April 1939.

¹⁷ Ellsworth, Ralph Eugene. "Colorado University's Divisional Reading Room Plan." *College and Research Libraries* 2:103-09, March 1941.