

# What Kind of Divisional Reading Rooms?

IN THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY of the next decade, the outstanding new public service feature will be divisional reading rooms. As a result of the example set by Colorado, Brown, and Nebraska, an increasing interest in this type of public service has on all sides become evident.

According to the proponents of the idea, a number of advantages accrue from the use of divisional reading rooms. Because each reading room (devoted to the social sciences, the humanities, etc.) is smaller than the prevalent type of general reading room, students suffer from fewer distractions. Through open-shelf collections patrons are enabled to browse among a large number of standard treatises. By placing the reading rooms adjacent to the stacks, students can pass from one to the other with a minimum of inconvenience. Lastly, because librarians with special subject training supervise the reading rooms, it becomes possible to concentrate within them a variety of services; for example, at Nebraska, reference books and current periodicals are shelved in the reading rooms; both the general reference room and the current periodicals room have been abolished.

To understand the emergence of the divisional reading room, certain aspects of library history must be taken into account. One feature of the plan—the use of librarians with special subject training—requires no comment because it has for some years been discussed in library journals.

The other basic feature—the open-shelf

collection of standard treatises—requires some explanation. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the textbook method of instruction began to fall into disrepute. Wider reading on the part of students became a common objective. At first the wider reading program was directed almost exclusively by the faculty, but later more emphasis was placed on student browsing. As a result, student access to the stacks became imperative.

At the same time, student enrolment was growing rapidly. Thus, at the very moment when students required the utmost freedom of the stacks, their greatly increased number forced librarians to place restrictions in their way. Today, in most university libraries, a large proportion of the undergraduates are prohibited from the stacks.

To remedy this situation, a number of solutions have been proposed. At Columbia, when a new library building was erected in 1934, a portion of the building was set aside for undergraduates in order to provide them with an open collection of books. Harvard's answer to the problem, a separate undergraduate library, will soon become a reality. At Colorado, and then at Nebraska, the divisional reading rooms were introduced.

Harvard's solution is too expensive for most institutions; and Columbia's seems to have been overlooked with the passage of the years. But the divisional reading room idea is probably on its way to wide adop-

tion. Therefore, it is high time that a public discussion be instituted in order to determine what services shall be given in the reading rooms, and in what manner older services are going to be affected.

To begin with, what is the result of shelving standard treatises in the divisional reading rooms? For undergraduates lacking access to the stacks, this is a victory because these patrons previously could get at such books only through the card catalog or some bibliography. For students with access to the stacks, this is a setback because now they must search in two places whereas before they had only to search in the stacks. Furthermore, because books are circulated from both the reading rooms and the main circulation desk, confusion results; patrons generally cannot be expected to remember from which desk a book was withdrawn.

Is it possible to give better service to those lacking stack permits without penalizing the others? Is this the best possible arrangement for those without access to the stacks? Is there some way to avoid the confusion resulting from the circulation of books from several desks?

#### *Nature of Student Body*

To answer these questions it is first necessary to examine the nature of the university student body. University students can be divided into three groups: (1) those attending classes open only to graduates, (2) those receiving instruction in courses given for both graduates and undergraduates, and (3) those enrolled in classes reserved for undergraduates.

At some point the number of students becomes too large for all to be served in the divisional reading rooms. And, since it is the students in the third group who are in the main barred from the stacks, it is they who merit first consideration. Without at-

tempting to fix a definite minimum, it can be said with assurance that separate facilities should be provided for this group whenever its total exceeds three thousand. That is, this group should then have an open collection of its own, one chosen specifically with its needs in mind.

The moment this is done, *it is no longer necessary to shelve standard treatises in the divisional reading rooms.* This is true because the remaining students (those in the first and second groups) can be given access to the stacks. Why disperse the standard treatises between stacks and reading rooms, when it is possible and preferable to leave them intact?

But even without standard treatises, divisional reading rooms can be put to good use. In most libraries, students who wish to pass from the stacks to a reading room must traverse a considerable distance. Since few students are provided with adequate study space in the stacks, most must study in some reading room. For their greater convenience, the divisional reading rooms should be placed adjacent to the stacks. In this manner, direct access between stacks and reading rooms is made possible.

#### *Shelving in Reading Rooms*

But what materials can logically be shelved in the reading rooms? Aside from standard treatises, already discussed, there are these possibilities: reference books, bound periodicals, current periodicals, and books on reserve.

Reference books are shelved in the divisional reading rooms at both Nebraska and Colorado. This is a logical development, but only when persons with special subject training supervise the reading rooms. In most reference rooms of the traditional type, the absence of persons with such training has resulted in comparatively poor service to advanced students. In this con-

nection it should be noticed that wherever a separate collection for beginning students is established, reference books will constitute a portion of the collection; it is here that the traditional type of reference worker will still be needed.

Should current periodicals be shelved in the reading rooms? There are several objections. If the current periodicals room is abolished, where are the general periodicals to be shelved? Moreover, some periodicals (such as *Speculum* which treats of the whole of medieval civilization) traverse a number of wide fields of knowledge. Finally, many faculty members feel that a single periodicals room is one in which students are more likely to become acquainted with a greater variety of periodicals.

Bound sets of periodicals, however, can logically be shelved in the reading rooms. This is the case because the bound sets are rarely used by browsers. In most instances, they are consulted by patrons who have found references to them in bibliographies and periodical indexes.

But what is to be done with bound sets of periodicals which are general rather than special in nature? These cannot logically be shelved in the divisional reading rooms. Nor should they be left in the stacks, be-

cause they are so frequently consulted. Usually, these sets are shelved in reference rooms; but if this type of room disappears, a new location will have to be found. Perhaps other librarians would care to follow the Wisconsin example, where stack space for such periodicals is provided within the current periodicals room.

Reserve books for advanced students (that is, those in the first and second groups mentioned above) can also be shelved in the reading rooms. In this way, the congestion in the present type of reserve room could be relieved, providing, of course, that reserve books for beginning students are separately shelved.

#### *Summary*

To summarize, divisional reading rooms are desirable because they provide study space comparatively free from distractions and because they can be used to provide easy access to and from the stacks. *These are advantages which can be derived from the reading rooms even if not a single book is shelved within them.* However, librarians will naturally wish to make use of the shelf space thus made available. In doing so, care must be taken not to disrupt any useful services.

### Correction in Miss McCrum's Memorandum

I wish to call attention to an error in the last sentence of the third paragraph of my recent mimeographed open letter distributed to members of the A.C.R.L. As it stands it reads:

For instance, the annual allotment to the Division of Public Libraries has been in the neighborhood of \$14,000; that of the A.C.R.L. is some \$1,800 out of an estimated \$8,500 paid annually in dues to A.L.A. by members of the A.C.R.L.

It should read as follows:

For instance, a Public Library Office exists and was supported in 1944-45 by a budget of some \$14,000, while the A.C.R.L. has no such office and must finance its work from the allotment of \$1,800 annually from dues estimated at around \$8,500, paid by members of the A.C.R.L. to the A.L.A.—an allotment said to be quite comparable to funds also available to the Division of Public Libraries.

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