

Book Selection in Academic Libraries: A New Approach

Traditional modes of book selection by instructional faculty working on a part-time basis with limited coordination often result in the growth of imbalanced collections. In an attempt to solve this problem, libraries have begun to utilize bibliographers, who are often assigned responsibility for subjects they cannot adequately cover. By employing systematic methods similar to those developed by bibliographers for surveying and building collections, members of the instructional faculty, by virtue of the added factor of their specialized knowledge, can often be effectively utilized in building collections.

INSTRUCTIONAL FACULTY and librarians have often coexisted uneasily over the years in regard to the building of library resources in institutions of higher learning. In spite of this nervous alliance, many first-rate college and university libraries have been developed in the United States. As academic libraries grow larger and increasingly complex and as the bibliographic materials of each discipline proliferate, however, it appears increasingly that a new approach to the perennial question of faculty-library cooperation in the matter of book selection is needed.

Although there has been recent progress in this area, there are still many instances of faculty selectors working part-time and in a haphazard manner as the primary agents in the development of library collections,¹ a practice involving a number of disadvantages, which can often result in unbalanced growth.

¹ J. Perriam Danton, "The Subject Specialist in National and University Libraries with Special Reference to Book Selection," *Libri*, XVII (1967), 46.

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One of these disadvantages is that faculty members, being specialists, sometimes feel that they alone are competent to choose titles in their fields and are reluctant to relinquish this responsibility to librarians whom they regard as less qualified. With such an outlook, they often tend to select the following types of books: (1) those used in preparing their courses; (2) those to be assigned to their students; (3) those with which they were familiar as graduate students; and (4) those which they are using for current research. An instructor's own classroom and research needs in a precisely defined area blurs his vision of the broader picture; it is difficult for such a specialist to see clearly the ramifications of his choices and to perceive the needs of the institution as a whole within the framework of budgetary limitations. In addition, specialization is becoming narrower as the information explosion forces the individual to concentrate on smaller and smaller segments of the available body of knowledge.

Another difficulty is that, even with good intentions, a particularly energetic faculty member who submits many book order requests can fail to see that his

activity causes the library to grow unevenly, unless all of his fellow book-selectors are equally conscientious. Too often budgetary allocations are based on the volume of requests rather than on the real needs of students and faculty.

There is also the danger of faculty members selecting books in an irresponsible manner. In some cases, book selection has been used as a method of empire building or of wielding power over colleagues; in others, a person without any particular feeling for books or interest in the library has a library assignment imposed upon him. Wishing to find an easy way to discharge his responsibilities, he indiscriminately checks second-hand dealers' catalogs in order to spend departmental funds, while at the same time being jealous of these funds, fearing the loss of any money would elicit criticism from his colleagues.

In addition to the unbalanced development of the collection which can be the result of these disadvantages, there are two further reasons why book selection by part-time faculty may not be the most effective method of building library resources. In the first place, with the rapid growth of libraries, collections have become more complex and the problems of identifying and acquiring library materials more difficult. The development of a library collection therefore requires both greater bibliographic sophistication and more time than could reasonably be expected from a person whose primary responsibility is teaching and research.²

Second, there has been a change in the function of the academic library over the past years. Its traditionally passive, supporting role is being abandoned for a more active part in the educational

programs of the campus; it is now less a reserve book room and more a center for independent learning. There is a growing awareness that the needs of individual students cannot always be met adequately in the classroom by the lecture-textbook method of instruction. More and more, students insist that learning be relevant to their individual interests. As a result, experimental colleges, honors and tutorial programs, and comprehensive examinations are increasingly replacing formal classwork.³ The library thus becomes responsible for providing materials for individual study and research which may not parallel the interests of the classroom instructors. Implicit in this responsibility is the need for a broad cultural base in building the collection, a base which can only with luck be provided by a group of faculty specialists functioning separately and with limited coordination.

The crux of the problem seems to be this: as the traditional modes of faculty book selection become decreasingly viable, what alternatives are there? And is there an approach that would be applicable to most institutions of higher learning?

It seems to be generally agreed that the best job of collection building can be done by subject specialists with library training. Since it is seldom possible, however, to have an adequate number of such specialists on a library staff, particularly in the smaller colleges and universities, some libraries utilize bibliographers, each of whom is responsible for the development of a number of areas of the collection. And even though the systematic development of a balanced book collection by bibliographers, who are concerned with the needs of the entire academic community, will have

² One by-product of rapid expansion can be that immediate and specific faculty needs are automatically taken care of (particularly when there is an attempt at comprehensive coverage of current books), thus causing the instructors' involvement with book selection to become even less useful in the traditional ways. They often become disinterested in the process when this happens.

³ It appears that progress in this direction will continue, and it is not impossible to conceive of a functioning library-college where instruction is centered on bibliographic counseling by librarians and former classroom instructors. See Louis Shores, "The True University," *The Library College* (Philadelphia: Drexel Press, 1966), p. 39.

better results than haphazard buying done by part-time specialist selectors, the problems facing a generalist bibliographer are enormous.

For one thing, he is usually responsible for a greater number of subject areas than can be covered adequately by one person, and anything beyond superficial evaluation of material is often extremely difficult for him. This problem is exacerbated by the large number of publications which must be surveyed and selected in terms of the goals of the institution.

Furthermore, a generalist bibliographer will lack specialized training in certain areas of his assignment. For example, a person responsible for the humanities might be adequately trained to handle English, American, and Western European literature, but be unqualified in Russian.

Another problem is poor bibliographic control. For some types of material the current output may not be adequately covered; for others, there may be no comprehensive availability or in-print lists. As far as older publications are concerned, selective bibliographies do not exist in all fields; and certainly any bibliography must be carefully reviewed so that the items chosen are appropriate to the needs of a particular institution.⁴ Where the bibliographer lacks specialized training, meaningful selectivity is difficult and often arbitrary. Faced with these problems—assignments which are too broad, poor bibliographic control, and lack of specialized training in all areas for which he is responsible—the librarian should consider turning to the instructional faculty for help. This statement may seem contradictory in light of

the disadvantages outlined above which were the result of traditional approaches to faculty book selection. The emphasis must now be on *new* methods whereby teaching faculty and librarians can function together more effectively. It is a question of utilizing the knowledge and training of the instructional faculty without repeating the errors of the past.

Before attempting to describe a specific program, it is first necessary to determine what knowledge and skills the teaching faculty have on the one hand, and librarians have on the other, to contribute to the growth of a well-balanced and useful book collection.

The faculty member, by virtue of his specialized knowledge, should be able to define the nature of the literature used in his research and teaching, that is, what types of book and non-book materials he needs. He should be able to make decisions as to the relative importance of various historical periods and/or specific categories within his subject areas; he may also know the bibliographic peculiarities of the field, such as hard-to-identify publications and the output of learned societies. And finally, in areas lacking good, selective bibliography, he can judge the value of individual titles. The bibliographer should understand the overall needs of the library, possess general knowledge of the literature of each of the fields for which he is responsible, be able to determine which bibliographies would be suitable for developing the collection, be familiar with the special problems of the book trade, see announcements concerning the availability of collections and special materials, and have a comprehensive awareness of current publications. Furthermore, by attending meetings, reading professional journals, and keeping abreast of the book trade, he should be aware of developments in the field of librarianship which can be both relevant to a particular subject area and important to the library as

⁴This is recognized by Voigt and Treyz: "The danger in publishing a selection list of this nature is that it may be used as a final authority rather than as a guide. This list does not claim to be a list of the best books or a basic list for any college library, for selection of books for a college library must be made in terms of the needs of that particular institution." *Books for College Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1967), p. v.

a whole.⁵ This knowledge should enable the librarian to translate the information provided by the faculty specialist into a workable program of library development, which would take into consideration the needs of the entire academic community.

Moving on to the specifics of such a program, the first step would be to determine the areas most in need of development. There are two factors which can cause this need: (1) expansion and (2) weaknesses in the existing collection.

Expansion may be numerical (*i.e.*, more students), qualitative (*i.e.*, more advanced degrees), or the result of new types of academic programs, such as interdisciplinary or area studies.

Parts of the collection which are not adequately supporting academic programs and are in need of development should, ideally, be identified by a series of surveys covering the library's entire holdings. Since, however, such an ambitious undertaking is seldom possible, the bibliographer must often rely on his own intuitive and informal appraisal of the collection. This might be based on a number of factors.

1. *Faculty and student reaction.* Reactions to the library's holdings in a given area, if properly evaluated, can be useful as a first indication of weakness or strength; however, it must be remembered that they are highly subjective. Library users can have unrealistic expectations of a collection in relation to its size, or they can be satisfied with one that is inadequate, because they are not aware of the existence of material which the library lacks.
2. *Quantitative analysis.* This type of evaluation can be made by a simple count of specific areas of the shelf-

⁵ For example, he would be aware of reprint programs, projects such as LC's Presidential Papers, printed book catalogs, or *Books for College Libraries*.

list and can be used, through comparisons with institutions having similar educational programs, to suggest imbalances in the collection.

3. *Preliminary bibliographic surveys.* These could be based on basic lists, if such exist in a field, or on random samples from more detailed lists. Either type of survey can be useful as an indicator of imbalance.

Once there is evidence of need, the bibliographer and other members of the library staff should meet with the instructional faculty concerned with that particular area of the collection⁶ for the following purposes: (1) to describe the nature of the relevant literature in terms of stress on current or retrospective publications, monographs, serials, sets, periodicals, and non-book materials; (2) to outline existing or projected instructional programs; (3) to determine, on the basis of (1) and (2) above, what is needed.

This should define the general direction of the project. The bibliographer should then draw up a more detailed description of it, as well as propose a method for its implementation. He should begin by reviewing what has been written about the literature of the field and continue by analyzing the existing bibliographies to see whether they are appropriate to the needs of the library.

At this point the bibliographer should determine whether he can proceed with the project or if it is necessary to draw upon the knowledge of a faculty specialist. Frequently, even with limited knowledge of a subject, an enumeration of important authors or sub-fields provides

⁶ They may come from several departments. For example, if a project were being done in philosophy, instructors of art and music might be concerned with books on aesthetics, mathematicians with symbolic logic, historians and classicists with Greek and Roman writings, etc. It should be kept in mind that the library should not be building a collection for a particular department; it should, instead, be developing the literature of a subject area, which could have relevance to many departments.

him with a sufficient basis for going ahead with the task. If, however, he has no knowledge of the subject, if he lacks competence in a necessary language, if the existing bibliographies are not adequate, or if the literature used by people in the field is dispersed throughout many areas of the collection, and he finds himself unable to proceed, it will be necessary for him to draw upon the knowledge of a specialist.

It is important to select from among the members of the instructional faculty a person who is interested in the library and enthusiastic about such a project. Individuals who are working on or who have recently completed their doctorates are most desirable, since they are likely to be more conversant with the current literature in their fields, to be aware of recent trends, and to have a broader outlook on their field than are those with many years of teaching and research which incline them to specialization.

If a suitable person can be found, it is essential that the individual have time to devote specifically to the project. This can be provided in three ways: (1) he may be given released time by his department; (2) he may have a shared appointment with the library in which the library pays part of his salary; or (3) he may carry out the project as a member of the library staff during the summer months. The faculty member should be assigned to work under the general direction of someone on the library staff, normally a bibliographer, who would already have some knowledge of the problems of the specific field. It should not be assumed that the instructor is already familiar with all facets of the library and with the basic bibliographic tools, so he should be introduced (or re-introduced) to them. He should also meet all members of the library staff, both professional and clerical, with whom he will be working.

Once the general approach has been agreed upon, the instructor and the li-

brarian can begin to compile the various sources from which selection of suitable items is to be made. These sources would include published bibliographies, library catalogs in book form, bibliographies used in courses, footnotes and citations in various monographs and periodical articles, journal reviews, and publishers' catalogs. After suitable materials have been selected by the instructor from these sources, clerical assistants can check them against the library's holdings and prepare order cards. The cards should then be reviewed by the instructor and the librarian to ensure that they follow the guidelines developed for the project and are appropriate to the library.

When the final selection of order cards has been made, the cards should be submitted together with a report of the project written by the librarian. This report should explain the scope, method, and results of the investigation in an organized manner. It may also serve to justify the allocation of additional library funds. More specifically, it should contain the following:

1. a description of an ideal collection as agreed upon by the library and the department;
2. information about the existing holdings gathered from the study;
3. a statement regarding any gaps which will not be covered by the project;
4. a detailed analysis of the types of material to be included in the project;
5. an annotated list of sources used to identify material to be purchased;
6. estimated cost of implementing the survey;
7. recommendations for a buying program in terms of time and procedure.

Although this approach does not differ markedly from one normally taken by a generalist bibliographer, it offers a contrast to the traditional pattern of book selection as practiced on a part-time basis by individual members of the teach-

ing faculty. Instead of sending requests for specific books to the library, with limited concern for the whole collection or even a broad part of it, the teaching faculty can become actively involved in an organized program of collection building, utilizing standard techniques for evaluation which have been developed by librarians. The instructor, and

through him his department, acquires familiarity with the library's holdings and can more clearly understand the need for their systematic development. Thus the "uneasy coexistence" mentioned earlier in this paper can be transformed into a partnership utilizing the skills and strengths of both the teaching and library professions. ■■

