

# Myths and Realities: The Academic Viewpoint I

Paul Olum

*Written from the perspective of the president of a graduate research-oriented university, the author explores the nature of the academic library, its size and structure, the matter of retrenchment as it affects acquisitions and services and the issue of who makes decisions about the library. Faced with a library space problem, the University of Oregon studied alternatives such as off-campus compact storage and decided that this was an optimum decision only for libraries with collections in the four- to five-million-volume range. Faced with a serious budgetary problem, the University of Oregon, with wide support from the faculty, maintained the library acquisitions budget and provided adequate compensation for inflation.*



In the discussion that follows, I will take seriously the title of this program and talk about some myths and realities for academic librarians. I must begin with a couple of remarks to set the context. First, I am not a librarian nor have I made the kind of extensive use of library resources that is the hallmark of the scholar in the humanities and in many other fields. I am a mathematician, once upon a time a physicist, and for me the library has meant very largely the mathematics or science library. It is relatively easy to get to know intimately such a departmental or field library. My other remark is that I will be talking solely about the library of a graduate research-oriented university and much of what I say may not be meaningful or appropriate for the library of a four-year college or a community college.

I will talk about four things: the nature of the library, the size and structure of the library, the matter of retrenchment as it affects acquisitions and services, and (briefly) the question of who makes decisions about the library.

## THE NATURE OF THE LIBRARY

To begin with, let me ask how we

should look upon the library in the university. What is it? I think the general view is that the library sits there in the middle of the campus as the repository of the collected wisdom of the ages. Carlyle would have gone further, of course. He indicated that one needn't have said center of the campus; there was no reason to have anything else but the library to make a university. None of us really believe that, I assume, although it is a nice description of the depth of feeling one has about libraries. But the description of the library as "the repository of the collected wisdom of the ages" ought to be noble enough to satisfy everyone. Is that so, or is it just a myth?

Well, it is basically real, but it goes too far and yet it doesn't go far enough. No library can contain all of the wisdom and knowledge produced in the world, so that we begin with the severe problem of recognizing that libraries must choose what they are to contain, and a university research library will make different choices from those made by another sort of library. I will come back to this again later, but for the moment we must recognize that every library, even the best and the largest, is going to be necessarily inadequate.

However, a library is also something a

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good deal more than what I have said. The statement above, describing the library as the repository of wisdom, implies that the wisdom is there and we need simply to come often to drink (presumably deeply) at that Pierian spring. But what goes on, in a research library at least, is much more dynamic than that. In this I am referring primarily to that portion of a research library that might be its most distinctive characteristic, namely, the large collections of journals in all sorts of scholarly fields and in all sorts of languages.

From the point of view of the current journals, I think the best attitude to take toward the library is that it is a sort of postal exchange. Those of us doing research or scholarly work would like to write to others to tell them about our achievements, or partial achievements, or ideas for achievements. We can't afford to write letters to everyone else working in the field, indeed we may not even know who they all are, so we write our letters as journal articles for our colleagues to read, and they in turn will write back in the same way. That is really how scholarly work gets done, although, of course, there is also direct contact at meetings and by telephone, etc. But I regard this as an important point of view, namely, that the library is a medium for the current exchange of ideas, not just for the finished collected wisdom to be set down imperishably for posterity. It is a way of talking to one another—important talking, but tentative talking nonetheless. Eventually, when the excitement is largely gone and the subject all wrapped up, then for the most part it will appear in books that are treatises. In particular, it means also that what is in the library is wisdom developing, not wisdom finished; indeed, much of it may be false starts, unrealized hopes, or worthless or trivial material. But all of this "correspondence" is worth keeping, because only the judgment of posterity will ultimately determine what is valuable and what is not. This all may seem semantic, but it is in fact how scholars work, and it does make a difference if librarians recognize and understand this point of view and seek to support it in the service they offer.

## THE SIZE AND STRUCTURE OF THE LIBRARY

Having said a few words about what a library is, let me turn to the question of the appropriate size and structure of a university library. We have already noted that no library can contain all of the wisdom and knowledge, not to mention trivia, produced in the world; on the other hand, every scholar wants, not only in principle but also in practice, to have some kind of reasonable access to this totality of information. Clearly, also, the material most greatly in demand should be the most immediately available. How is all of this to be achieved?

There are three main levels of access to books, journals, papers, etc., for university scholars, whether students or faculty:

1. *The university library, as we commonly understand it.* This is presumably a rather large collection of materials, mostly available for circulation, placed in easily accessible stacks that are open, at least to faculty and graduate students, and often to many others.

2. *The compact storage library.* This is a densely packed collection of books and journals that are relatively little used and to which very few service personnel are assigned. The underlying idea is that materials can be called for and received within a day or so, but no browsing through the material is really possible. The argument for this is the enormous cost of the new buildings and associated support services that ever-expanding library acquisitions would require. The customary further justification is that if one chooses books for the storage library by some historical criterion of use (e.g., fewer than three charges in the last five years), no one will be very badly inconvenienced.

3. *Shared arrangements among the libraries.* The implication here is that since no one can have everything, different libraries should specialize in different areas and then service each other through inter-library loan. A variation on this is that there could be one or more major centers for holdings (e.g., a national periodicals center), and other libraries would simply

call on them for a bulk of the material.

There is a fourth kind of access that someone will surely bring up if I don't, namely, access to desired information through modern automation, i.e., computers with enormous storage. I am inclined to believe that is where some of the biggest myths are to be found, and I'll get back to it in a minute, but first let me say a word about the three types of availability of books that I mentioned above: the standard library, the storage library, and inter-library loan.

We had a large conference on this subject a few years ago at the University of Oregon because we were faced with a proposal for the creation of an off-campus compact storage library of the type I have described above. We had come to recognize, like most everybody else, that we would, after not many more years, outgrow our present building, and the cost of a new building would be very great, as would the other new buildings that would follow it in the coming years. We were told by many people that the only economically viable reality was to transfer the little-used books to this compact storage, which would be both enormously more efficient and enormously cheaper, to make room for the new books that would arrive. This we were told, at least by some of the experts, was surely the wave of the future (in any case, of the immediate future), and the only loss would be a modest delay of access time, a slight inconvenience at worst. One could also, in this reality, look beyond to the third type of access, by means of which we could give up many of our journal subscriptions and borrow the journals instead, either from sister institutions or from the yet-to-be-built large periodical centers. (No adequate answer, incidentally, was given to the question of how journal publishing was to be supported when most of us stopped purchasing. Possibly this was to be solved somehow by the coming automation.)

To this proposal, many of our faculty (especially, I think, those in the humanities) protested bitterly, most particularly at the loss of the ability to browse through large sections of the library when looking for relevant matter in a scholarly pursuit. The battle appeared to be one between the

right to "browse" and have desired material immediately available and the economies of off-campus compact storage. When the dust had settled, the conclusion we came to (and it is one I support) was that the reality depended to a large extent on the size of the library. The off-campus compact storage proposal made sense, and was probably a necessity, for the large library with holdings of four to five million volumes, but would be damaging for a research library with holdings in the range of a million volumes. In other words, whether the claimed value of the proposal was real or a myth depended on some critical size for a research library. (Of course, there are other concerns to be taken into account, most particularly the variety and magnitude of the teaching and research programs at the institution. These will affect the specific determination of critical size, but I have left quite a bit of room between a million or so volumes at one end and four to five million at the other.) Below that critical size, the number of volumes was such that one could assume that a sufficiently large portion of them had an immediate relevance, enough at least to justify keeping all of them fairly close at hand and available. The same goes for the need to continue maintaining journal holdings in such a library, because for the most part these titles are not going to be the most wildly esoteric ones, but are, rather, likely to have been matched to the institution's academic programs. Nothing is absolute, and decisions are rarely final, but we have for now come down quite firmly on the side of trying to keep our present holdings fully accessible on campus.

I promised above to say a few words on the subject of the library of the future, which, it is claimed by some, will be a place not of books and journals but rather of access to information—information that will appear on a television screen or computer printout. The most advanced form of this vision seems to be that there will be an enormous computer, or network of computers, which will have stored in memory banks a gargantuan world almanac of all desired knowledge and information. A query will then quickly produce the wished-for answer. Now, of course,



this is truly a myth. Nothing like this is going to happen; there is no possible technology for gathering, storing, and classifying all of this information.

At best, what is possible is that books and research papers will, when published, be accompanied by certain key words; then, in limited areas, one will be able, with such key words, to have a computer search done that will provide a list of some of the possibly relevant publications. This is already available in a limited way today, as you know, in medicine, law, and many scientific fields. We can even assume further that each of these publications will contain a summary paragraph or a page describing the contents of the full work. Given this, one can then choose which publications one wants to see. At that point there will be nothing to do but to get the actual works and read them.

Ultimately, then, we will need to have available the same kinds of materials we have now, and will have to read them in the same old ways to find out what we want to know. For the foreseeable future I believe this means libraries will remain as they are, just as we understand them today, full of monographs, journals, etc. Perhaps the time will come when all of this—the full works themselves—will be stored in computers, and we can simply call up on a TV terminal or printer the work we want to read, but I do not believe this will happen in a significant way before some decades have passed.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not opposed to an appropriate use of automation and I do not question that computer searches are extremely helpful in turning up works of possible interest. Perhaps this can even someday begin to replace the "browsing" that is so important to scholars, but I find it hard to believe that my friends in the humanities will ever be happy with this.

In any case, I do not believe that automation will soon provide the great revolution in our libraries that is often predicted as part of the coming "information society." For a long time to come, we will be reading books and journal articles to extract for ourselves their concepts and their wisdom, and we will not be relying on in-

formation extracted from them and digested for us by machines.

#### RETRENCHMENT: ACQUISITIONS AND SERVICES

Many universities in this country have encountered severe budget reductions in recent years, with a consequent need for retrenchment throughout the institution. That has certainly been true for us at the University of Oregon. We have suffered from a severely inadequate budget for the university for a decade or more, and the past four years have been horrendous. Much of this has taken place during a time of very heavy inflation of the cost of books, especially of journals. Nonetheless, during this period of retrenchment, the stirring battle cry has been raised by many of the faculty, including librarians, that the library budget, above all, must be held inviolate. Is this position a really possible one for the university, or is this claim of special privilege just another myth?

It may surprise you that, with respect to acquisitions (but emphatically *not* with respect to personnel and services), I believe the claim to be a real one.

I believe that we at Oregon have suffered a financial crisis at least as severe as that of any of our peer institutions in the country, and our budgets have been cut most drastically. Nonetheless, over this period, and up to the present, we have held the library acquisitions budget, and essentially that budget alone, protected from all reductions; and I mean that we have provided for the library not only its continuing budget, but also, without reduction, the additional funds that were required to compensate for inflation.

The reason, I suppose, is partly symbolic. It is a declaration to our students, our faculty, the public, and the state government, of the crucial importance we attach to the library holdings in the functioning of the university. But there is a more practical reason, for books and journals that we do not purchase currently may become much more difficult, even impossible, to acquire at reasonable cost after a few years have passed. Basically, we try to protect the things that are central to our mission and that may not be recoverable if lost. Thus, we do similarly protect

the heart of our permanent faculty, even though we may make some reductions in faculty positions where our central strength will not be lost and where restoration is possible later. This explains, too, why we have not been willing to hold the personnel and services in the library sacrosanct but have cut them along with many other, also necessary, services in the university. Of course, that is painful for the institution, and the result is that significant current needs are not adequately met, but the damage need not be long-term, and can be repaired in better times.

I do not in fact know whether we will be able to protect our acquisitions budget completely if our financial problems should get worse, but it is a real principle to which we are fully committed and not a matter of lip service to a high-sounding declaration.

#### WHO MAKES THE DECISIONS?

It is clear that the long-range decisions on the size, structure, budget, etc., of the library, which I have been talking about just above, are ones that must be broadly based in a university, ultimately coming from the administration, with the support and participation of the full faculty. I doubt that anyone would argue with this.

But there are other, more internal, decisions that have to be made regarding the day-to-day functioning of the library. Perhaps the most important questions here are who decides on acquisitions, and according to what principles are these decisions to be made? For example, to what extent should university departments each control their own share of the acquisitions budget, and who decides what the share should be? There are many other questions, such as the level of services to be made available to users, and even more mundane ones such as who gets keys to branch libraries and what hours the libraries are to be kept open. Is it reality to expect that all these matters are to be decided by the librarians, since they are presumably the ones with the necessary expertise?

Well, you are surely all familiar with the statement that "war is too important to be

left to the generals," a reminder I offer you with some trepidation since I am, of course, here talking to the generals! Nonetheless, it is important to say that these matters should not be left solely to the librarians; an important share of the decision making on the use of resources, on acquisitions, on personnel, on services, should involve the users, most particularly the faculty. Of course, the expertise of the librarians is crucial, but the control should not be theirs alone, since the function of the library is a service one and the needs of the users, which they themselves best understand, are paramount. This means, I think, that in a university there must be a strong independent library committee, whose role is advisory to the university librarian, but which also reports effectively to the central administration of the institution. Such a committee surely must have no actual control or veto power over the university librarian, but should be in a position to argue strongly for its views. If this is done in a spirit of mutual respect, the ultimate decision making will be a process that is shared by the librarian and the representatives of the university community.

I don't mean that these issues are simple ones, easily decided by consensus, and I am aware that this approach makes the job of a university librarian rather more difficult than that of the average college dean. Conflicts will inevitably arise, but they will surely be there anyhow, and their joint resolution by librarians and faculty will have an important effect in building both a well-functioning library system and faculty support for it. In the rare cases where it may be necessary, the mediation of such disagreements (presumably at the request of the library committee) is one of the proper roles of university administration.

In general, there should be very little need for the central administration itself to become involved in the details of library decision making. What is terribly important, however, is for the administration to have—and to be seen by the university community to have—a deep, in fact passionate, commitment to building and maintaining a first-rate research library.