

College Libraries: Are 100,000 Volumes Enough?

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A current interest of academic librarians in North Carolina is the assertion that no undergraduate library should exceed 100,000 volumes, or that this number is adequate to serve the needs of all undergraduate campuses.¹ There are many existing factors which refute this contention and should be considered before accepting it.

The most obvious would be the diversity of institutional goals. A glance into college catalogs will show a wide variety of things the particular institutions strive to achieve. Some of the goals will require little support from the campus library; others will require considerable.

Closely allied to institutional goals are the curricula, vehicles through which the goals are attained. Some curricula require extensive literature support, while others, especially those oriented toward science

and technology, do not. Teaching methods vary. Some require heavy use of library resources, while others rely primarily on textbooks and lectures. In an institution whose goals require considerable library support, whose curricula are of a nature demanding extensive library resources, and whose faculty for the most part require much library use in support of teaching methods, formidable powers of persuasion would be required to convince the campus community that an arbitrary number of 100,000 volumes is sufficient for its library needs.

Davidson College currently holds 191,000 volumes, while North Carolina Central University (formerly the North Carolina College at Durham) holds 246,000, with over 170,000 in the campus library. In 1970, Colby and Bowdoin in Maine held 260,000 and 400,000 respectively. While it

is probable that the shelves of these libraries harbor a certain amount of deadwood, it is doubtful if even the most ruthless of weeding programs would reduce their holdings to 100,000 volumes. Admittedly, the four colleges named are institutions with established qualities of excellence, no doubt due in part to their libraries. However, if a universal standard of this nature is to be applied, it would affect all colleges, superior or mediocre, by asserting that each is the exact counterpart of all the others, at least in terms of library holdings. Any factors which affect holdings such as institutional goals, curricula, teaching methods, and number of enrollments would be disregarded, including the question of having the same number of volumes in a college library serving 600 as in another serving 6,000.

Another factor refuting this proposed standard is the lack of standards in this particular area. Despite several attempts, no yardstick has as yet been developed which is universally accepted. Several projects have been carried out whereby librarians anticipated a set of standards would result. For various reasons they failed to materialize. At the root of these failures is one overriding cause. In the words of K. W. Humphreys: "Almost all the standards . . . have little or no validity outside the environment [that is, the particular institution] for which they were invented."² Although the 100,000 volume assertion would, if accepted, settle any dispute about what size a college library collection should be, its weakness lies in what is disregarded, almost like shoes made in only one size for every one to wear.

Disagreement among librarians regarding standards is divided generally between those favoring a quantitative approach and those stressing quality. The former hold the view that library holdings can be determined only by the quantity and range of materials being published which are relevant to the academic programs they are supporting. The latter group feels that the content or quality of a collection is of primary importance. Both views indirectly

refute the 100,000 volume assertion. The quantity view is limited only by the quantity and range of publication, not an arbitrary figure of 100,000, while the qualitative approach would impose no limits on collection size as long as each volume is deemed meritorious. Thus, even the two sides of the standards argument leave no provision for a cut-off in acquisitions at 100,000 volumes.

Yet another factor denying the assertion is the information explosion. Although 200 years ago technology doubled every 150 years, it now doubles every several years. If it is accepted as true that man's knowledge is increasing at a tremendous pace, and that much of this knowledge is deposited in the form of books, it should also be reasonable to assume that libraries to house this wealth of information would of necessity increase their collections.

A last factor, and perhaps the most telling, is traditional evaluation procedures. An experienced evaluator will attempt to base his work on both qualitative and quantitative considerations, that is whether the collection is adequate in number of volumes and the books merit the shelf space they occupy. Two formulas have been developed which are often used for a quantitative evaluation. In 1959 the American Library Association produced a formula based on student enrollments and a minimum collection of 50,000 volumes.³ Stressing that the basic collection was a minimal figure, the ALA included the statement that steady growth of the collection is essential but may slacken at 300,000 volumes — a clear refutation of the 100,000 volume contention. In 1965, Clapp and Jordan⁴ produced a formula based on a core collection of 50,000 volumes, plus other quantitative factors such as enrollment and number of faculty. Yet the Clapp-Jordan report recommended qualitative evaluation procedures as "the best yardsticks of adequacy," defining them as "those to which we have become accustomed — the book-selection list and the specialized bibliography, frequently reviewed and brought up to date by experts

and in the light of use." No limits were set except minimal ones "for providing threshold adequacy." Hendricks, who used this formula in recommending quantitative standards for academic libraries in Texas, says that "strong arguments can be marshalled for the correlation of collection size and academic quality."⁵ Although the statement was in reference to university libraries, this also refutes the 100,000 volume argument, for a library confining its collection to a certain number could not aspire to any richer academic quality than is commensurate with that number.

The qualitative evaluation procedures deny the 100,000 volume argument in a way more convincing than all the other factors mentioned, that of history. Beginning in 1931 with the Shaw⁶ list, all the successive book lists compiled for college libraries have shown a steady increase in number of titles included. A special case in point is Harvard's *Catalog of the Lamont Library*,⁷ a list of holdings in the undergraduate library. The 39,000 titles comprising the original list were selected by the criterion of probable use by undergraduates, with book selection to continue on the same basis. The history of this particular library, and its programs especially, destroys the contention of the 100,000 volume argument. The planning for the Lamont Library envisioned a library of constant size — a maximum of 100,000 volumes — but always changing. Daily criticism from faculty and librarians would ensure a dynamic collection of constant size. The collection was considered impermanent and so were any existing deficiencies. Despite an intensive and continuous weeding program, by 1972 the library had grown to 172,000 volumes. Philip J. McNiff, librarian of the Lamont Library in 1953, provided a fitting summary of all the above factors refuting the 100,000 volume collection. In the introduction to the *Catalogue of the Lamont Library* he stated that

. . . the *Catalogue* is not intended as a list of the best books which should

be in every college library. No two persons or institutions will agree on the choice of titles best suited for undergraduates. If a college library should reflect the aims and educational policy of its institution, the diversity of aims among our colleges militates against identical book collections.⁸

In order to convince librarians, professors, and administrators that no undergraduate library need exceed 100,000 volumes, it will be necessary to produce in detail proof of the contention, which would include a demolition of the factors just mentioned. When institutional goals are identical, curricula and teaching methods are uniform, enrollments equal, acceptable standards are developed, and man's acquisition of knowledge is at a standstill, then it will be far more feasible to attempt a plan wherein each college library contains only 100,000 volumes.

NOTES

¹Jerrold Orne, "A Time for Reflection, And a Program for Action," *SOUTHEASTERN LIBRARIAN*, XXI, no. 1 (Spring, 1971), 40.

²K. W. Humphreys, as quoted in Donald D. Hendricks, "Standards For College Libraries," *TEXAS LIBRARY JOURNAL*, XLVIII (May, 1972), 76.

³American Library Association, Association of Colleges and Research Libraries, "Standards For College Libraries," *COLLEGE AND RESEARCH LIBRARIES*, XX, no. 4 (July, 1959), 274-280.

⁴Verner W. Clapp and Robert F. Jordan, "Quantitative Criteria for Adequacy of Academic Library Collections," *COLLEGE AND RESEARCH LIBRARIES*, XXVI, no. 5 (September, 1965), 371-380.

⁵Hendricks, *Op. cit.*, 74.

⁶Charles Bunsen Shaw, *A List of Books for College Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1931).

⁷Harvard University. Library. *Lamont Library. Catalogue of the Lamont Library* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).

⁸*Ibid.*, vii.