

## The Undergraduate Library: Is It Obsolete?

*The first undergraduate libraries in the United States were established during the early 1930s. The concept of a special book collection for undergraduates was slow in gaining acceptance, and more than twenty-five years later, in 1959, there were only ten such collections. However, the 1960s were boom years for undergraduate libraries, and by 1972 there were forty-nine collections in the country. Then, in the early 1970s, the trend reversed itself, and by 1977 the number of undergraduate collections had dropped to thirty-seven. Based largely on responses to questionnaires sent to undergraduate libraries and to those university libraries formerly having undergraduate collections, this paper attempts to outline the history and the precipitous decline of the undergraduate library concept in the United States.*

**S**PECIAL BOOK COLLECTIONS designed primarily for the use of undergraduate students were first established by university libraries in the United States in the early 1930s. During that period both Columbia University and the University of Chicago set up small (35,000 volumes at Columbia and 20,000 volumes at Chicago) collections within the main library buildings. These two collections remained the only undergraduate libraries in the United States for nearly twenty years.

Although the first separately housed (i.e., housed in its own building separate from the main library) undergraduate library was not established until 1949, the concept of a separate library can be traced to the mid-1930s when Keys Metcalf, then librarian of Harvard University, began advocating the construction of an undergraduate library building at Harvard.<sup>1</sup> For more than a decade he continued to plead for such a building, and by the late 1940s the Harvard administrators decided to follow his advice. In 1949 Lamont Library became the first separate undergraduate library in the United

States. The University of Minnesota followed by opening its "freshman-sophomore" library in 1952.

The number of undergraduate libraries continued to increase slowly during the 1950s, with Florida State, the University of Oklahoma, and the University of Colorado establishing "in-house" collections prior to 1960, and the University of Michigan, UCLA, and the University of South Carolina opening separately housed undergraduate libraries during the same period. Between 1930 and 1960 the number of undergraduate libraries had grown quite slowly, from two in the 1930s to ten in 1960.

The decade of the 1960s was the real growth period for undergraduate libraries. The number of both separate and in-house collections grew rapidly—from ten in 1960, to twenty in 1965, to forty-six in 1970.

The slow growth preceding 1960 and the boom years of the 1960s culminated in a high point of forty-nine undergraduate collections (twenty-four separately housed and twenty-five in-house) in 1972. However, the steady trend of thirty years of growth quickly came to an end, and undergraduate libraries began closing. The total number of collections dwindled to forty-three in 1974

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and to thirty-seven in 1977. Existing undergraduate collections in the United States in 1976 are listed below. Most of the closings were in-house collections, with holdings being redistributed among the main book collections.

*Separate Undergraduate Libraries  
in 1976*

University of California, Berkeley  
University of California, Los Angeles  
University of California, San Diego  
University of Chicago  
Cornell University  
Duke University  
University of Florida  
Harvard University  
University of Hawaii  
University of Illinois  
Johns Hopkins University  
University of Maryland  
University of Michigan  
University of North Carolina  
Ohio State University  
Princeton University  
Stanford University  
State University of New York at Buffalo  
University of Tennessee  
University of Texas at Austin  
University of Washington  
University of Wisconsin  
Yale University

*"In-House" Undergraduate Collections  
in 1976*

University of Colorado  
Columbia University  
Indiana University  
University of Iowa  
University of Miami (Florida)  
Michigan State University  
University of Minnesota  
University of Missouri  
Northwestern University  
Notre Dame University  
Pennsylvania State University  
University of Southern California  
University of Southern Illinois  
University of Virginia

THE FLAW IN THE CONCEPT

Studies of undergraduate libraries generally have been careful to distinguish between separately housed collections and

in-house collections. This distinction is probably not as important as it has been made out to be. The rationale behind the setting aside of a special collection for undergraduate use is the same in both cases, and problems such as excessive book duplication, service duplication, and book selection are identical. The matter has been further confused by the wishes of a number of university libraries that such collections primarily for undergraduate use not be called undergraduate libraries. Thus, terms are used such as "College Library" at Columbia, "Course Support Library" at Notre Dame, and "Cross-Campus Library" at Yale. Other terms used are "core collection" and "intensive use collection." Regardless of the name, all such collections, whether separate or in-house, are based on the same tenets and serve the same purposes.

The basic tenet of the undergraduate library concept is that undergraduate students have abilities, needs, and preferences in areas of library use that are quite different from the abilities, needs, and preferences of graduate students and faculty members. That the undergraduate population of a university is so homogeneous can be questioned. Thomas O'Connell, writing in 1970 on undergraduate libraries, saw the student body as being quite diverse:

I do not believe that the undergraduate students today can be seen as a whole and distinguishable segment of our academic society all at the same beginning level of scholarship. . . . New students come to our universities in many stages of preparedness.<sup>2</sup>

Proponents of undergraduate libraries generally point out that at least the majority of students come to large universities unprepared to cope with large research collections and can better be served by a smaller library with a carefully screened collection. However, if the level of preparedness really is a problem, there is the question as to whether it is a reasonable response to establish separate libraries "easy" enough for undergraduates to use. The alternative, of course, is to teach unprepared entering students how to use a large research library.

The major resource of a university, aside from its faculty, is its library. To purposefully segregate the single largest segment of a university community (i.e., its undergrad-

uates) from such a resource effectively removes the undergraduate student from an experience that a large university is uniquely equipped to provide. As early as 1953, William Dix (then librarian at Rice, later to be librarian at Princeton) saw the problem:

In principle we feel that the undergraduate should be constantly confronted by books a little beyond his grasp, that we are not concerned primarily with his finding specific books but with instructing him to learn to think, to use the library, and to grow intellectually. . . . Such an effect cannot be produced if the undergraduate works entirely with a few basic books which have been placed on reserve . . . or if he works entirely with a small collection supposedly within his grasp.<sup>3</sup>

It certainly can be argued that any graduate of a major university should be reasonably adept at using a research library. Looked at in this way, it becomes a university's duty to make certain its undergraduates gain the ability to use a large research library. The creation of a separate undergraduate library does, of course, just the opposite and serves to discourage students from using the main library.

#### THE PROBLEM OF BOOK SELECTION

An assumption central to the undergraduate library concept is that it is possible to assemble, from the millions of titles available, a 50,000- to 200,000-volume collection of "most important" books that will adequately serve undergraduate needs. For at least two reasons, this assumption is less valid today than it was twenty years ago.

First, universities today offer undergraduates a greater variety of courses and more degree programs than they did two decades ago. This diversification, or proliferation, of course offerings demands a wider range of research materials for support. It is much easier to anticipate undergraduate research needs when the number of course offerings is limited to survey courses and a few electives than when there is a multitude of seminars and individual research programs offered. This proliferation of courses has led to a decline in use of the undergraduate library at Harvard:

In recent years, overall use of the Lamont Library (the undergraduate library) has been on the

decline. A check of Widener's (the main library) circulation showed 60% of its use is by undergraduates. This is attributed in part to the intellectual curiosity of the Harvard student who wants to delve deeper into a subject than the Lamont resources allow and to the stepped-up pattern of education (honors courses, freshman seminars). The decline of both general collection and reserve circulation also seems to testify to this.<sup>4</sup>

The second problem with the book selection assumption has to do with changes that have taken place in methods of instruction. Since 1950 there has been a steady trend away from a textbook/lecture method of instruction toward a method with more emphasis on assigned readings. This change, of course, serves to make it more difficult to anticipate undergraduate research needs and makes the selection of books for the undergraduate collection correspondingly more difficult. Ellen Keever, writing in 1973, posed the question:

Is there a revolution in college education unalterably leading to a reversal of the present regime, which will in time reduce regularly scheduled lectures, call upon the student for more and more independent study, and finally render the undergraduate library, predicated upon definable undergraduate needs, obsolete?<sup>5</sup>

While a number of undergraduate library booklists exist, all are based on the supposition that the collection needed by undergraduates is easily definable and fairly small. This assumption that undergraduate reading interests and needs are quite limited in scope is probably more difficult to defend today than it was twenty years ago.

#### THE PROBLEMS OF DUPLICATION / FINANCING

The books that make up any undergraduate collection are, for the most part, duplicate copies of books held by the main research library. The extent of duplication ranges from 60 percent to 100 percent. The case could hardly be otherwise, given that the undergraduate collection must consist of the most important works in each subject field. This duplication, of course, is expensive. While multiple copies of some titles must be bought, the wholesale duplication that undergraduate collection building involves would not ordinarily be necessary.

The reversal in the trend of undergraduate library establishment can certainly be traced in part to the general restrictions on library funding that have taken place during the past five years. When book funds become scarce, building book collections that heavily duplicate existing holdings must be viewed as questionable.

While not to the extent involved in book buying, staffing an undergraduate library also involves duplication. Most undergraduate libraries are open the same long hours as their research library counterparts, and both usually have circulation and reference staffs on duty simultaneously.

#### THE RECORD TO DATE

Although the largest number of undergraduate collections in the United States at any one time was forty-nine in 1972, at least fifty-six universities in the U.S. have, at one time or another, had undergraduate libraries. With thirty-seven such collections still in existence in 1977, the record shows that nineteen universities at some point established undergraduate libraries, only later to disband them. These former undergraduate collections, with their dates of existence, are listed below. That so many universities have tested the undergraduate library concept and found it wanting is certainly reason enough to question the validity of the concept.

#### *Former Separate Undergraduate Libraries*

Cleveland State University (1967-72)  
Emory University (1970-74)  
Miami University (Ohio) (1966-70)  
University of Nebraska (1970-75)  
University of South Carolina (1959-75)

#### *Former "In-House" Undergraduate Collections*

Boston University (1966-71)  
Bowling Green University (1967-73)  
University of Cincinnati (1969-72)  
Florida State University (1956-74)  
University of Houston (1969-72)  
Iowa State University (1969-75)  
Kent State University (1968-72)  
University of New Mexico (1962-65)  
University of Oklahoma (1951-75)  
University of Pennsylvania (1962-66)

University of Pittsburgh (1969-74)  
Southern Methodist University (1965-71)  
State University of New York at Albany (1964-70)  
Syracuse University (1970-71)  
Texas A & M University (1968-74)

Because it is so difficult for a university with a large, established, *separately housed* undergraduate collection to disband its collection, few universities have undertaken to do so. Most of the disbanded collections have been in-house libraries. However, there is evidence that a lack of enthusiasm exists at some institutions that have such large, separately housed collections. James F. Govan, librarian at the University of North Carolina (which has an 80,000-volume separate undergraduate library), has said of such collections:

I have some serious reservations about the efficacy of undergraduate libraries. They require duplication of staff and resources and largely cut the student off from the benefits of a research library.<sup>6</sup>

In a similar vein, G. A. Harrer, librarian at the University of Florida, has described the problems caused by the undergraduate library (170,000 volumes) at that institution:

It has become apparent to us here that a great deal more research-type use of the collection is being made by the undergraduate population. Few of them are satisfied to use only the resources of the undergraduate collection for term papers, for instance. It therefore appears to us that only inconvenience is being caused by the separation of this collection from the main collection.<sup>7</sup>

Given the record of closings of undergraduate collections and the evidence of some degree of disenchantment at those universities still having undergraduate libraries, it is difficult to be optimistic about the future of such libraries.

#### CONCLUSION

The undergraduate library concept in the United States can best be looked at as a movement that, after slow beginnings, gained momentum during the 1950s and became quite in vogue during the 1960s. Shortly after 1970, however, the bubble seems to have burst and many undergraduate collections were disbanded.

The reasons for the disenchantment with the undergraduate library concept can be traced to (1) changes in curriculum and teaching methods, (2) tighter library budgets that preclude the extensive duplica-

tion of books and services required, and, (3) perhaps most importantly, the realization that a separate facility works to deprive the undergraduate of a learning experience that only a large research library can offer.

## REFERENCES

1. The history of *separately* housed undergraduate libraries in the United States is well documented. The most complete published account is Elizabeth Mills' "The Separate Undergraduate Library," *College & Research Libraries* 29:144-56 (March 1968). An unpublished paper by Lois Campbell, titled "Separate Undergraduate Libraries" (State University of New York at Albany, 1972), is also quite comprehensive. Finally, a series of newsletters, *UGLI Newsletter*, published irregularly since 1969 (first at the University of California at San Diego and later at the State University of New York at Buffalo), provides a good statistical record of separate undergraduate libraries.
2. Thomas F. O'Connell, "Undergraduate Library?" *Canadian Library Journal* 27:278-82 (July-Aug. 1970).
3. William S. Dix, "Undergraduate Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 14:271-72 (July 1953).
4. Irene A. Braden, *The Undergraduate Library* (Chicago: American Library Assn., 1970), p.25.
5. Ellen Hull Keever, "Reassessment of the Undergraduate Library: A Personal Critique," *Southeastern Librarian* 23:24-30 (Spring 1973).
6. James F. Govan, questionnaire of March 1975.
7. G. A. Harrer, letter dated February 6, 1976.