

Library Costs and Benefits*

by Logan Wilson

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Let me begin by saying that I am honored to be with you for this important occasion. If we were dedicating a mammoth football stadium or a Hilton hotel type dormitory, I might have some misgivings, but I am an enthusiastic advocate of library development. Although Thomas Carlyle exaggerated the library's function when he described "the true university" as being little more than a "collection of books," today not enough individuals appreciate fully the significance of the library's central role in higher learning. It is gratifying to note that at North Carolina State University you do not underestimate the importance of adequate library services. In the D. H. Hill Library you have a physical structure which ingeniously combines the old and the new, and thus symbolizes the vital linkage of the past, present, and future in the advancement of knowledge and understanding. I want to congratulate all who had a part in bringing this undertaking to its present realization.

As a Ford Foundation Letter pointed out last year:

The sheer volume of recorded information, steadily mounting for the past twenty years, is straining the resources of libraries everywhere. In 1970, for example, the Library of Congress held over 61 million library items (nearly two million of them acquired that year), including manuscripts, maps, tapes, records and photographs, as well as books and periodicals. The library must not only classify, catalogue, and find storage space for all these materials but ensure their accessibility to readers and scholars. (Ford Foundation Letter, June 1, 1971.)

If you will tighten your seat belts for a few statistics, I shall try to illustrate for you the efforts of American college and university libraries to keep abreast of new and growing demands for their services. During the decade just ended, the number of academic libraries increased from 1951 to 2530. The number of students enrolled in institutions more than doubled. Total book holdings rose from 176,721,000 to about 324,000,000. Library employees increased in number from 18,000 to 35,000. Total library budgets were 100 percent more at the end of the decade than

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at the beginning. Between 1967 and 1972, almost a billion dollars went into building construction. What the book capacity was of your library here at North Carolina State back in 1960 I do not know, but I understand that your new structure will accommodate 1,100,000 books, and seat 2400 users. It may interest you to know by way of comparison that in a recent year there were 45 university libraries with holdings of more than a million volumes.

One survey of university libraries indicates that the number of volumes held doubles every 17 years and that library expenses double every seven years. All of this attests the fact that knowledge and its users have both been expanding at a phenomenal rate. Not only is there an accelerated growth in new knowledge, but also existing knowledge gets rearranged, and even superseded. For example, I recall reading somewhere that most atlases ten years old are at least 43 percent inaccurate, and that even a new atlas is slightly out of date the day it is published. This one illustration suggests the pace of change in which our libraries and librarians have been caught up.

As I have commented elsewhere, if these tendencies continue unabated, university campuses will be as taken up with libraries as the landscape of China is with cemeteries. Several decades ago somebody noted that the then current growth rate of the Yale library would in the year 2040 result in a book collection of more than 200,000,000 volumes, occupying 6,000 miles of shelves, and requiring 6000 trained catalogers.

Manifestly, of course something has to give, and this is the main reason I want to focus my remarks on library costs and benefits. Assuming that all members of this audience are library boosters, I would urge a concerted effort to share with professional librarians and university administrators in the quest for solutions to the increasingly complex problems of library operations.

My admittedly rudimentary understanding of such problems was aided recently

when friends at the Council on Library Resources brought to my attention a study they had just sponsored *On the Economics of Library Operations in Colleges and Universities*. This study showed that in the twenty-year period, 1950-1969, the annual percentage growth rate for six significant variables in a sample of 58 institutional libraries was as follows: book expenditures, 11.4; total library expenditures, 10.5; salaries and wages, 9.7; volumes added, 6.6; nonprofessional staff, 6.3; expenditures per student, 6.1. During this same period, the general price level rose by only some 1.5 percent a year. The rise in library costs, the survey concluded, is not to be explained by inflation or by the growth of the constituency served as sole factors.

The analysis goes on to note that library service may be categorized as labor-intensive service, similar to education in general, medicine, live artistic performances, legal services, or fire protection. It is unlike such industries as oil refining, automotive production, telecommunications, or other enterprises which can sharply reduce unit costs through labor-saving innovations. The "products" of library service are not readily standardized or automated. In many respects, the quality of service is improved only by increased personal attention. I would emphasize, however, that despite greatly increased academic library costs, library expenditures as a percentage of total educational and general expenditures in higher educational institutions in the last decade have risen from 3.0 to only 3.7.

It may be observed, by way of comparison, that in the twenty-year period ending in 1969, pupil-day costs in elementary education in this country rose at an annual rate of about 6.5 percent, higher education instructional costs at an average rate between 5 and 7.5 percent, and hospital expense per patient-day at any annual rate (over much the same period) of 6.2 percent. Similar trends can be noted in the private or profit-making sector of the economy wherever enterprise is labor-intensive. Notwithstanding the fact that the cost of services has risen and continues to

rise more rapidly than the price of commodities, public demand for services shows no signs of leveling off. What we can afford to pay, or think we can afford, the economists tell us, is a matter of social priorities.

Even so, as many of you well know, higher education has already moved into an era of increased accountability. Public willingness to support any and every endeavor related to formal education has diminished. More information is being demanded about the relations between inputs and outputs. As Howard R. Bowen and Gordon K. Douglass have pointed out in their recent book on *Efficiency and Liberal Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), the total costs of higher education are so great that "nothing short of superb outcomes from the educational process can be justified or tolerated." Just one freshman-level course with about twenty students, for instance, normally costs no less than \$20,000, and the two or three courses a professor may offer in a single semester will equal the outlay for a substantial house.

Unfortunately, few denizens of the campus are aware of the investments required to underwrite the education of students and to advance higher learning, but tightened purse strings are bound to make everybody more cost conscious. Even though many libraries have long operated under parsimonious principles, librarians too are under pressure to modify conventional procedures to avoid having their services simply priced out of the market, or else reduced to the point of ineffectiveness. The managers of university libraries, accordingly, must these days have some familiarity with computer technology, systems analysis, and the hard economics of their complex undertakings. Microfilm and microfiche, as aids to reducing costs, are in use nearly everywhere. Resources are being increasingly shared among college and university libraries to decelerate the expansion in size of individual collections. North Carolina, incidentally, ranks among the nation's leaders in intrastate library cooperation.

Turning now from costs to benefits, I want to agree with some remarks Professor Henry S. Commager made several years ago at a Library-College Conference in Chicago (See his article, "Problems of the University Library," *The Library-College Journal*, Fall 1970, pp. 44-52). In speaking of mechanization, Dr. Commager recalls the original high hopes for a revolution in teaching to be accomplished through films and television — "hopes now not so high except perhaps in the teaching of languages and perhaps of surgery." I certainly concur in his assertion that "just as there is no substitute for the teacher, there is no substitute for the book, or the collection of books, for the scholar." Moreover, I share his aversion to the term "information retrieval" when it carries the implication that the main job of individual learning is simply to assimilate information.

We must indeed mechanize and electrify the library's routine operations, but I trust that we shall not thereby "electrocute" the library as a vital campus organism. Milton's famed statement about the precious "life-blood" that flows through good books is no less relevant in our technological era than when he wrote it many years ago. In my judgment, undergraduates as well as advanced scholars benefit from direct access to large and varied book collections. Also, I have some serious misgivings about the library deprivations students necessarily are subjected to when their advanced education is provided largely through off-campus arrangements such as those now being promoted in the so-called "open universities." Close proximity to well-stocked libraries, with understanding help from trained librarians, is to my way of thinking an important component in the undergraduate's intellectual experience. Few if any students can afford to buy all the books and periodicals they ought to read, and not many public libraries are intended primarily to serve the needs of students and scholars. I would therefore caution against institutional schemes which relegate library resources to peripheral roles in teaching and learning.

Although television viewers now outnumber book readers in our society, I doubt that the fundamental aims of higher education have been advanced very much by the invention of television. The printed page, however, is fundamental to the furtherance of higher learning, and I hope that the popular zeal for various audio-visual aids will not cause us to neglect the further improvement of library book holdings. In a pluralistic society, moreover, books, magazines, and newspapers afford an infinite variety of interests and points of view that are impossible through such mass media as television.

At a time when academic budgets are no longer spiralling and, in some institutions, are even being cut back, we ought to remind ourselves that the curriculum need not proliferate endlessly. Virtually every kind of knowledge anybody wants or needs is available somewhere in print, and it is certainly more economical to add books to the library than it is to multiply courses in the catalog. If relevance to some student needs is missing in the classroom, surely it can be had in the library by those who are sufficiently motivated for independent study. Moreover, colleges and universities increasingly give credit for recognized kinds of intellectual accomplishment without tying it to specified hours of class attendance. Nowadays one hears many complaints from students and others about the rigidities of the typical academic curriculum, but I have never heard anyone complain that libraries are a party to any alleged conspiracy to impose a lockstep on higher learning. In most colleges and universities, there are open stacks where everybody on the campus is free to browse, pick his titles, and set his own pace of learning. If particular titles are not locally available, there are arrangements for getting them on interlibrary loans. Freedom for individuals to run the gamut of recorded human thought for virtually all times and places is almost unlimited.

Despite the unlimited benefits a well-stocked college or university library affords

for free learning, it is disappointing to note that most student users conform closely to the course of study they are pursuing in taking advantage of library resources. The majority simply adhere to lists their professors provide to supplement textbook readings with required or optional titles and standard and general reference works. Some students rarely if ever go to the library. Others utilize it merely as a quiet place to read materials they bring with them. Although statistics on the use of academic libraries are fragmentary and sometimes contradictory, there seems to be general agreement that seniors make more use of them than do freshmen, and this is encouraging. The extent to which libraries contribute positively to the formation of students' lifelong reading habits, however, seems to be unknown.

It is also encouraging to note the enhanced role of the library on those campuses where honors readings, tutorial instruction, and various independent study programs break away from the customary pattern of passive listening in large lecture classes and give students more freedom to follow and develop their own interests. As a report commissioned by the National Advisory Commission on Libraries (1967) points out:

The usual pattern of mandatory attendance at class meetings and lectures, mandatory textbook assignments, and voluntary additional reading in the library would, in a sense, be reversed. Library reading (or use of other library materials) would be the basic element in the student's independent pursuit of knowledge, and discussion meetings would be optional; that is, the student would be free to request a session with a tutor or preceptor when he felt his work required it. Each student would move at his own pace and, to some extent, in his own direction. Each student would face comprehensive examinations in different areas and would be required to produce papers at frequent intervals. (*Libraries at Large: Users and Uses*, p. 104)

This individualized approach to higher learning has long been the mode at Oxford and Cambridge, of course, and hence it is not a new invention. Its worth for bright, highly motivated students of an intellectual bent has already been demon-

strated. Whether it will work as well for the large masses of students now enrolled in many American colleges and universities remains to be seen. Great books require great readers, as Howard Mumford Jones said, and I think we shall continue to need effective teachers to help students realize greater benefits from the library resources available on our campuses.

Studies of undergraduate use of the library in a number of places suggest that underutilization of resources at hand continues to be a main problem. A persistent challenge, therefore, is to find more effective ways to inculcate improved reading habits as an essential part of the educational process. Altogether too few students read widely enough or deeply enough to experience the added dimensions that can be brought to their mental outlooks. In an era when the "quality of life" has become a cliché in daily conversation, altogether too many persons, including a large component of young activists, think of it as an entity shaped largely by governmental edict. If rhetoric is to be transformed into reality, the improvement of our society must be preceded by a betterment of the individuals who comprise it. And what better vanguard could there be to begin with, I would ask, than the millions of college and university students now on the nation's campuses?

Although the role of the library is important in the education of undergraduates, it is indispensable in the work of graduate and professional students, scholars and scientists. Demands of these latter for library services often appear to be insatiable, and university efforts to meet their needs account in considerable measure for the heavily increased costs in recent years of library operations. A diligent researcher, as every librarian knows, can impose greater service burdens on the library than dozens of ordinary users. Even the Harvard Library, with more than eight million volumes, never has all of the items that some of its users want.

Faculty indifference in many places to institutional athletic standings is offset by scholarly pecking orders often attached to library holdings as symbols of academic merit. From my experience at The University of Texas, for example, I can recall distinctly that the enthusiasm of some of our alumni when the Longhorns won the Cotton Bowl was at least matched in other quarters when the University Library scored a coup against the competition of other universities in acquiring an expensive private collection of books. Institutional rivalries in the library field seldom make newspaper headlines of course, but they do have considerable impact on the budgets of all major universities.

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However this may be, a desire to keep up with the institutional Joneses is actually a minor factor in spiralled library costs. Two decades ago upwards of 10,000 books were published in the United States; today the annual total of new books and reprints exceeds 30,000. The number of journals and periodicals rises every year. New fields of inquiry have opened up. Research is a vastly more significant activity on every university campus than it once was. Books and magazines now cost more, and the cost of cataloging a volume typically exceeds the purchase price. Institutions that have been transformed from colleges to universities need to acquire titles that have long been on the shelves of well-established universities. And so on.

In short, these developments make it clear that ambitious librarians and avid book collectors on the campus are not primarily responsible for the staggering increase in library costs. As I remarked earlier, librarians individually and collectively are evolving ways of reducing unit costs without curbing the quality of service, and wasteful institutional rivalries are being replaced by joint arrangements for a more economical sharing of resources which need not be and cannot be duplicated everywhere. We all must face the fact that knowledge is more important to our complex society than ever before in history. The knowledge industry, as Fritz Machlup calls it, is one of our largest, and all of us are highly dependent upon it for our survival and well-being.

Libraries do indeed cost more, but their growing benefits in my opinion vastly exceed their costs. The millions of dollars you have expended here for the D. H. Hill Library represent one of the best investments that could have been made to benefit the generation now being served by North Carolina State University, and I am confident that its resources will continue to be strengthened and appreciated by generations yet to come. All who are assembled here this evening will agree, I am sure, that the edifice we are dedicating is another symbol of progress both locally and in the world of higher learning.

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