

North Carolina Needs An Improved Depository System For State Documents

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In the 1965 report of the Governor's Commission on Library Resources in North Carolina, which was edited by Robert B. Downs, it was noted that the depository system for state documents did not enable the State Library or the UNC-Chapel Hill Library to obtain all state publications. According to the report, "if these two major depositories — the State Library and the University — experience difficulties in procuring official documents, other libraries are, of course, even more handicapped."¹ Eight years later the words of this report still hold true, and they will continue to do so until some major changes are made in the state depository law.

The North Carolina statute providing for the distribution of state publications to the depositories is G. S. 147-50.² This law requires state officials to provide upon request "any printed report, bulletin, map or other publication" to thirteen designated institutions. The number of copies of each publication to which each institution is entitled is specifically listed. The total number of copies of any one publication

which could be requested is seventy-eight. The thirteen depository institutions include ten colleges and universities within North Carolina, the State Library, the North Carolina Supreme Court Library, and the Library of Congress.

While the intent of G. S. 147-50 is clear, in practice it has not proven successful for a number of reasons. The greatest problem is that the law requires that the libraries involved must request each publication from the issuing agency, rather than the documents being delivered to the libraries automatically as is done with the federal depository system. Unlike commercial publishers, state agencies do not generally publicize what they have published. Moreover most of the agencies do not maintain mailing lists, nor do they issue listings of their own publications. Obviously, if the librarians at the depository institutions had no way of learning what publications had been issued by the state agencies, they would have a very difficult time requesting them; however, the librarians at the State Library compile

North Carolina Publications: A Checklist of Official State Publications which is an attempt to provide the needed bibliographic access to state documents. Unfortunately, these librarians at the State Library suffer from much the same disabilities as anyone else in finding out what the state government has published. It is only through patience, personal contacts, and visits to the individual agencies that they are able to list the publications that they do. Administrative reorganization, staff turnover, and lack of understanding on the part of the agency officials as to what publications are of interest to librarians, take their toll on the efforts of the compilers. The end result is that, while *North Carolina Publications* is eventually as comprehensive as humanly possible under existing conditions, in any issue there are a number of titles which have evaded the compilers for one or two years. The prospects of the depositories for obtaining these late listings are bad, because state documents are usually published in limited numbers which are quickly exhausted.

If a depository library wants to maintain a complete collection of state documents, it must mail out scores of requests for items gleaned from each new issue of *North Carolina Publications*. Processing and following up on these requests can be very time consuming. Moreover, if a librarian is asked to obtain a state publication which has not yet been listed in *North Carolina Publications*, he must be prepared for what is frequently a long and frustrating search. In order to request a publication, he must know which agency issued it, and identifying the origins of a state document can be quite difficult. For example, a study of disruptions in public schools could have been published by any one of

the agencies within the Department of Justice, or the Department of Public Education or even by a special legislative study commission. Often the quickest way to find the issuing agency of a state document not yet listed in *North Carolina Publications* is to contact the State Library whose staff is most familiar with who has published what in North Carolina. If this effort is not successful, then the librarian must start contacting each agency that possibly could have issued the desired title. While the personnel responsible for distributing publications in each agency are most cooperative and responsive in delivering their own publications, they usually can not be of much help if the desired document was issued by another agency. The time spent in searching for and requesting state documents naturally limits the number of items which the depositories with small staffs can obtain, and thus their collections will inevitably be incomplete.

Another problem with G. S. 147-50 has been that some agencies have through the years maintained that they were exempt from the provisions of this law and have charged the depository libraries for their publications. At first this was a minor problem involving only one or two agencies. Since the cost of the publications was less than the cost in staff time it would have taken to force the agencies to comply with the law, the depositories paid for the publications. However, as the years passed more and more agencies started charging the depositories for their publications, and the sums involved became quite substantial. This trend was slowed in October of 1972 when the Attorney General of North Carolina stated that in his opinion G. S. 147-50 was quite clear in requiring state agencies upon request to deliver all

their publications free to the designated depository libraries.³ The Attorney General also stated in this opinion that "if a state agency issuing publications desires to be exempt from this requirement as to one or all of its publications, it should seek from the General Assembly an express exclusion for all or certain of its 'reports, bulletins, maps and other publications . . . ' from the purview of G. S. 147-50." The first department to be exempted from G. S. 147-50 was the newly organized Department of Cultural Resources within which is the State Library.⁴ This action strikes a significant blow to any semblance of a depository system for state documents in North Carolina. If this department, which should be the leader in developing state library resources, charges the depository libraries for its publications, then we can expect the other departments to follow suit soon. It should be remembered that the objective of a state depository system is to provide the citizens of the state unrestricted access to the publications of their state government.⁵ It is not just a means of providing certain privileged libraries with free publications. If the depository libraries are charged for state documents, they might have to stop buying them when they are short on funds, thus depriving the citizenry of access to these publications.

The problem of distributing state publications to depository libraries has been solved in other states by a wide variety of means. Each system is geared to the individual conditions and needs of the particular state. The most successful and effective systems, however, have elements in common which, if adopted in North Carolina, could go far towards solving the present problems.

According to the experiences of other states and the recommendations of the Downs report, an ideal state depository system would work somewhat along the following lines. The distribution of state documents to the depository libraries must be centralized into one agency. In most states this agency is the State Library. In North Carolina the State Library would be the natural choice since it has the staff with the expertise to administer the program. All other agencies would be required by law to notify the depository agency of all their publications and be prepared to supply the depository agency with specified numbers of each document for distribution to the depository libraries.⁶ In order for this system to work the officials of the agencies must be provided with a specific definition of what constitutes a document. The definition recently formulated by the South Dakota Documents Study Commission is an excellent example of what is needed.

"Public Documents" shall include all multiply-produced media, regardless of format or purpose, supported wholly or in part by public funds, for distribution by any state agency, with the exception of correspondence, interoffice and intra-office memoranda. "Media" is defined as printed or audiovisual forms of communication and their accompanying technology.⁷

While being required to maintain a complete collection of all public documents itself, for economic reasons the depository agency would be allowed some discretion as to which documents should be distributed to all depositories. The depository agency would compile an official checklist of state publications, and would provide an adequate cumulative index to that checklist. The depository agency would have the power to decide which libraries could belong to the depository system. Since the public libraries have more con-

tact with the general public than the colleges and universities, they should be included in the depository system. The depository agency would establish standards for the depository libraries, and it would have the power to drop libraries from the system if they did not maintain these standards.

In some states the depository libraries are required to take all state publications, while in others they may be selective. Both systems have their strengths and weaknesses. A selective system allows smaller libraries to participate in the system, but the full depository requirement guarantees the citizenry access to all state publications and is least likely to be abused.

In an ideal depository system the depository libraries would be required to furnish the space and staff necessary for the proper maintenance of the collection. They would make the documents accessible to the general public and would circulate them through interlibrary loan. The depository libraries would be required to hold all the publications for a specified amount of time or they would be required to get the approval of the central depository agency before disposing of any documents.

Describing the general outline of an improved state depository system is easy, but working out the details of such a system is a difficult task that requires statewide effort. Almost invariably in other

states this effort has been initiated by the state library associations. The work of the library associations in California and Louisiana helped their states acquire fine depository systems for their state documents in the 1940's. More recently the library associations in Florida, Mississippi, South Dakota, and Nebraska, in varying degrees, have been instrumental in the planning and development of the new depository systems in these states. The North Carolina Library Association should take the lead in this state by supporting a thorough study of the present problems and future needs of the depository system and then recommending legislation which would provide for both.

FOOTNOTES

1. North Carolina, Governor's Commission on Library Resources, *Resources of North Carolina Libraries*, edited by Robert B. Downs (Raleigh: The Commission, 1965), p. 33.
2. N. C. Gen. Stat. § 147-50 (Supp. 1971).
3. North Carolina Attorney General Reports, XLII, No. 1, pp. 94-97.
4. North Carolina, General Assembly, House, *An Act to Further Effectuate the Reorganization of State Government Number 2, Ratified Bill, Chapter 476*, 1973 Session, House Bill 1127, p. 42.
5. American Association of State Libraries, Standards Revision Committee, *Standards for Library Functions at the State Level* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1970), p. 36.
6. North Carolina, Governor's Commission on Library Resources, *Resources*, p. 36.
7. *Report of the Interim Public Documents Study Commission to the 48th Session of the South Dakota Legislative Assembly*, Bob Carmack, chairman (Pierre: The Commission, 1972), p. 1.

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