

# **The College Catalog and The Library**

**by Alva M. Stewart  
Memphis State University**

Colleges and universities issue a plethora of publications aimed at prospective students. However, in the judgement of most academic administrators, the most valuable single publication for presenting information on all facets of college life is the undergraduate catalog.

One dictionary defines a college catalog as "An exposition of the objectives, viewpoint, curricula, tuition, calendar, and other data concerning an institution."<sup>1</sup> Characterized by wide diversity in both format and content, the catalog is considered by both college administrators and librarians

take an essential tool in recruiting students. In an era of declining enrollments, the importance of such a tool cannot be overestimated.

If the librarian accepts the catalog for what it is, a recruiting document, reason would seem to dictate that the few paragraphs in the catalog describing the library reflect careful thought. A cursory examination of college catalogs may lead to the conclusion that little time and thought go into preparation of the library statement. An extensive analysis of these statements leads to the inescapable conclusion that many are meaningless or useless to the student who is contemplating entering the institution.

A thorough examination of some thirty-five library statements in catalogs issued by colleges and universities, large and small, public and private, in ten Southeastern states since 1974, led this writer to conclude that substantial improvement is needed to make these statements optimally useful.<sup>2</sup>

Needed improvements range from the deletion of unnecessary information to greater emphasis upon services furnished by the library. The ensuing paragraphs indicate specific ways that the library statement in catalogs may be strengthened to enhance its utility to potential students.

Librarians are fond of asserting the important role of the library in the educational process. Yet, surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of catalogs contain not word about this role. Two notable exceptions are

the following concise but pertinent statements: (1) "The library program is conceived as an integral part of the educational process. It operates on the assumption that the ability to use an academic library with confidence in one of the distinctive marks of an educated person." (2) "A library is good, not because of the volumes it has, but because it is used by people who derive personal benefit from its use and who produce something as a result of its use that will be of benefit to our society."

Few statements stress the service orientation of library staff members which is portrayed in this statement: "Professional librarians are available to assist library users in locating material and in fully utilizing the library's resources." In a similar vein, another statement affirms that the "primary responsibility of staff members is to assist users in effective use of library resources."

Many academic libraries offer one or more types of instruction in the use of library resources. However, in less than six catalog statements is there any allusion to such instruction. The following statement in one catalog depicts the availability of library instruction in explicit terms: "To assist students in learning about library resources the library staff offers a two-credit course. The reference staff . . . has a daily workshop assisting students in finding, gathering, and compiling information for term papers."

Considering the library's importance in the educational program of a

college, the catalog statements describing the library were inordinately terse, ranging from five lines in one university catalog to a full page in a college catalog. The average length of this statement was one-third of a page. In half a dozen catalogs the library statement appeared in the section devoted to a description of campus buildings. In each of these catalogs the library statement was limited to a single paragraph which typically included the number of volumes and periodical titles in the collection, date the library opened, and any special collections housed in the library.

Perhaps the most obvious weakness of catalog statements is the undue emphasis placed upon statistical data (number of volumes, periodical titles, seating capacity, floor space) and the scant attention given to the library's purposes, services, and facilities.

No less than thirty-two statements contained data on books, periodicals, and microforms. Only five statements included any description of the library's reason for being, such as, (1) "To provide full support for the academic programs of the University," (2) "To provide service in support of the research efforts of the academic community," (3) "To make available to the campus community a well-balanced, selective, up-to-date collection of information and materials in all types of media."

From a somewhat narrower perspective, two statements characterized the purpose of acquiring

library materials as follows: (1) "To support the educational program of the College and the promotion of general culture within the college community," and (2) "To support the College curricula."

Almost one-third of the statements included a physical description of the library's interior and/or exterior: "A handsome structure," "A truly unique and beautiful building," "A modern, well-lighted building," "A pleasant and attractive center for intellectual pursuits." That hackneyed phrase "Academic heart of the college" appeared in only one of the statements.

By far the most frequently mentioned item in the statements was the kind of library resources comprising the collection: books, periodicals, government documents, pamphlets, and microforms. All except one statement contained a reference to these resources, with the majority citing quantitative figures for each category. Two statements identified specific microform resources: ERIC and HRAF microfiche.

A reference to special services offered by the library appeared in seven statements. These services were an orientation to the library (three), a credit course in use of library resources (one), a courier service expediting the delivery of materials among several area libraries (one), an all night study room capable of accommodating some fifty students (one), and the issuance of borrowers' cards gratis to students by the local public library (one).

One librarian felt a three section, divided card catalog (author-title-subject) was sufficiently unusual to warrant a reference in the statement.

More than one half of the statements, or nineteen, alluded to special collections. Included in this category were archives, rare books, family papers, and subject area collections. The availability of audiovisual materials was noted in almost as many statements (seventeen), with references to recordings, films, strips, and cassettes in most of these statements.

Of the catalogs examined, using the index as an indicator, only one catalog contained no statement whatsoever on the library. Ironically the institution in question offered a graduate degree in library science. Only three catalogs had more than one page shown under the heading, "Library," in the index.

Several catalog statements contained extraneous information which may be appropriate for a promotional brochure designed primarily as a fund-raising tool. Illustrative of such statements are the following: (1) "The library is fully climate controlled, acoustically treated, and carpeted throughout," (2) "The building was erected with money given by Mr. and Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ and their children," and, (3) "An effort is made to serve the library needs of the local communities."

One conspicuous omission from most of the catalogs is photographs of students using library resources or facilities. Recognizing the truth of the proverb, "One picture is worth a thousand words," librarians would do well

to encourage greater use of pictures of busy libraries.

Unfortunately, a few librarians use the catalog statement as a vehicle for self praise: "The library has one of the finest private ornithological book collections in America." Undoubtedly a statement of this kind has value in some college publications, but a catalog is not one of them.

In many instances the inadequacy of library statements may be attributed to the librarian's attitude toward the statement as "just another chore that has to be done." If the statement were seen as a positive, meaningful declaration of the library's philosophy, resources, facilities, and services its quality would be likely to improve.

A statement which is completely devoid of any reference to library purposes, resources, and services has no value except the dubious one of filling space in the catalog. Such a statement may serve a useful purpose in another college publication, but its value to potential students is nil.

A final note: Libraries are never static institutions. Consequently, the catalog statement should be revised annually to reflect major changes in the library's purposes, resources, facilities, and services. Rotating the responsibility for writing the statement among several staff members could also help to insure that the same flaws are not repeated year after year. The one essential mental attribute needed by the author of this statement is a distinct user service orientation. Obviously, such a trait is not restricted to librarians in public service positions.

## Institutions Surveyed

### *Alabama*

Birmingham Southern College  
Samford University  
University of Alabama  
at Huntsville  
University of South Alabama

### *Florida*

Florida Atlantic University  
Florida International University  
University of North Florida

### *Georgia*

Berry College  
Georgia Southwestern College  
Mercer University  
Morehouse College  
West Georgia College

### *Kentucky*

Berea College  
Centre College

### *Louisiana*

Centenary College  
Northeast Louisiana University  
Southeast Louisiana University

### *Mississippi*

Millsaps College  
Mississippi State University  
University of Mississippi  
University of Southern Mississippi

### *North Carolina*

Davidson College  
Duke University  
Lenoir-Rhyne College  
Mars Hill College  
Saint Andrews Presbyterian College  
Salem College

### *South Carolina*

Clemson University  
Newberry College  
Presbyterian College  
Wofford College

### *West Virginia*

Bethany College  
Concord College

### *Virginia*

Old Dominion University  
Sweet Briar College  
Washington and Lee University

## "Footnotes"

<sup>1</sup>*Dictionary of Education* 3d ed. (1973), S. V. "College catalog."

<sup>2</sup>States represented by the catalogs are West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Kentucky.