

# LIBRARY ISSUES

## BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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### College Library, University Library: What's the Difference?

By John Mark Tucker

The difference between a college library and a university library is as important as the difference between a college and a university. Widespread but ill-defined use of the term “university” has resulted in misperception and, consequently, only limited understanding—especially among students and their families—of virtually any university service or program. This would certainly include the university library, thus the difference between the university library and its college counterpart becomes a topic that merits closer scrutiny and greater clarity.

#### The Differences Make a Difference

The differences are more than semantic; they go to the heart of institutional identity. To think more clearly about the college-university dichotomy, and consequent implications for the campus library, should help us make sense of the relative variations in every phase of a library's operation. Understanding and appreciating the difference between the college and the university, the college library and the university library, can provide a vitally important perspective in planning basic library programs, in making professional decisions, and in developing human resources.

One library example of the power of the university concept is a brief publicity film, produced by the University of Illinois, sometimes shown during a televised football or basketball game. Illinois claims to have the largest library, in numbers of printed materials, of any public university. Ranking behind Harvard and Yale as the third largest university library in the U.S., Illinois regards its library as a major resource in recruiting world renowned scholars and highly motivated students. The film addresses a perception confirmed in reports by the Association of Research Libraries

(ARL), that the size of collections is the principal measure of quality. And membership in the ARL has become, in fact, synonymous with high-quality university libraries.

But how might we appreciate the special character of thousands of college libraries not members of the ARL? What would library excellence look like in a liberal arts college or a community college? The late William A. Moffett, director of the Oberlin College Library from 1979 to 1990, raised these questions in an article subtitled, “Looking for Life and Redemption This Side of ARL.”<sup>1</sup> He identified the basic professional and cultural components of libraries in small colleges, underscoring that academic libraries are comprised of separate types, and urging that small colleges be appreciated for what they are rather than what they are not. On a continuum between two major notions of an academic library—a research library system in a large multi-campus university and a college library in an institution devoted to training undergraduates—stand thousands of academic libraries with characteristics derived from these two quite different iterations.

#### Terminology

The two concepts, by themselves, are of little informative value. Though typically referred to as “college library” and “university library,” the terms have significant limitations.

Coming Soon —

Textbooks and Libraries

“University library” is a term fraught with complications. The internal structures of universities, organized into separate colleges, are sanctioned by accrediting agencies and reflect the historic impulse of colleges to transform themselves into universities. Higher education administrators, admissions counselors, and publicity directors have gravitated toward the term “university,” hoping that it makes their institution more competitive, more appealing to prospective students, donors, and other campus constituents.

Educators fully engaged in their home institution certainly want that institution to become distinctive, to make a special curricular, research, or internship offering that helps it stand out. Many think that “university” communicates prestige, national or international visibility, a high quality education, or perhaps a robust research apparatus, and so apply the term too freely. When the word “university” is allowed to refer to many different types of institutions and their variations, educators run the risk of misperception.

**College library.** As the meaning of “university” has been watered down, it has also undermined the clarity of the term “college.” How, for example, does a college define itself when choosing to be known as a college rather than a university? And how does that definition determine the purpose of its library? A textbook author like John M. Budd addresses problems of nomenclature most frequently by bringing the two terms together, referring to “college and university libraries” or, with equal effectiveness, “academic libraries.” This rhetorical device facilitates communication, and Budd’s writings have emerged as reliable, well-informed standards.

### **The Size of the Library Collection**

A large retrospective library collection typically indicates a long-standing institutional commitment to support doctoral research in those disciplines that are book intensive—humanities subjects such as literature and drama, languages, theology and philosophy, and history. Research in these and related disciplines is non-cumulative, meaning that a current

interpretive model may be applied to an ancient text so that the text itself is analyzed alongside the current literature and becomes essential to the creation of new interpretations and new knowledge.

**Supporting doctoral research.** In general, the universities with larger retrospective collections in the twenty-first century are those that had begun developing doctoral programs during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While initial collection-building began in the humanities, the universities soon expanded holdings, incorporating basic and applied sciences along with the social sciences which had become much more specialized by the beginning of the twentieth century.

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Thus libraries became accustomed to incremental collection growth both by adding scholarly works to holdings in traditional disciplines and by adding initial works from emerging disciplines. This pattern of gradual but seemingly inexorable expansion resulted in a sense of predictability about budgeting and planning from one year to the next. After World War II, unprecedented growth in the numbers of colleges and in the numbers of students featured new graduate programs, creating pressure for university libraries to build collections essential to masters’ and doctoral research.

**Knox College example.** How, then, should we think about the differing libraries at Harvard, Yale, or the University of Illinois and, for example, Knox College? Located

in Galesburg, Illinois, Knox was established in 1837, and is an excellent private liberal arts college with library holdings of about 300,000 volumes and journal subscriptions of about 550. Harvard, Yale, and Illinois collectively hold more than thirty million volumes. Are these libraries (or hundreds of others with collections exceeding 300,000 volumes) better than the Knox College Library?

The larger libraries are better in that scholars browsing print collections are more likely to discover serendipitously a previously unknown source in their area of interest. While scholars in these settings are empowered to “follow the footnote back home” in a single location, this particular asset honors only one approach to the collection. It is one method of conducting research, and it best serves those disciplines engaged in non-cumulative inquiry, the humanities. Libraries with the largest holdings in the humanities are typically also those with the largest holdings in the social sciences, the sciences, and professional literatures. To become distinctive, Knox College would need to define a high quality library using criteria other than the size of retrospective collections.

**Supporting student learning.** The distinguishing characteristic of the small college library, a trait frequently undervalued by stakeholders, is rooted not in its limitations of size and resources but rather in its essential purpose. It supports the core curriculum and, often, the basic arts and sciences as well any technical programs that may be essential to curricular mission. As its principal work, the college library serves the student rather than the professor. It focuses on student learning outcomes; it becomes an instrument for learning and teaching in ways consistent with institutional culture. And the college library faces the added complexity of supporting an “intellectually broad undergraduate curriculum by developing resources and services directly pertinent to classroom teaching. The dilemma of the small-college [becomes] that of reconciling significant limits with a charge so general in scope.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the challenges it must face, the college library, above all, integrates itself into the main task of undergraduate education. With a mission of this nature, Knox College and hundreds of other small college libraries could conceivably play an educational role of importance equal to that of research university libraries.

For the college library to measure effectiveness by pursuing student-centered learning, it needs a set of variables more complex than the simple but powerful clarity of volume-count. To create a program of instruction, reference, and research assistance, particularly a program closely attuned to curricular strengths and learning outcomes, a library needs to be deeply embedded in the teaching and learning that characterize the institution. “Embedded librarianship,” a phrase that has emerged since the turn of the century, connotes that librarians are side-by-side with students and professors within the inner workings of the class. (The term may or may not have drawn meaning from “embedded journalism,” a phrase used to describe news reporters who accompanied troops during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003).

Steven Bell of Temple University and John Shank of Penn State Berks have promoted a similar idea with the term “blended librarianship” in their recent book, *Academic Librarianship by Design: A Blended Librarian’s Guide to the Tools and Techniques*. Whatever terminology may emerge as dominant, the overall concept may take a variety of practical forms, and its dynamic nature offers fresh hope for the college library—the teaching library—to impact pedagogy and achieve distinction.

### The Research Library and the Teaching Library

A student-centered library is not a mini version of the research library or a failed attempt to create something more majestic. The undergraduate library, in particular, is a teaching library where the librarian as teacher becomes its core concept. The librarian as a faculty partner on behalf of student learning becomes its mode of operating. Librarians immerse themselves in undergraduate cultures,

a knowledge of differing learning styles, and technological innovation in order to engage students in general education and other undergraduate curricula. Thus, two points of view, expressed as (1) quality and depth of specialization as measured by collection size and variation and (2) quality as measured by the library’s relative integration into the teaching-learning process, have emerged as defining concepts, the two obviously distinctive types of academic library.

We can label these types the research library and the teaching library, and the character of a particular library may best be considered in its relative position with respect to each concept. Most of the estimated 4,400 institutions of higher education in the U.S. have libraries that possess some basic element of each attribute. But at a deeper level, the intellectual contents of its holdings, must—if that library is to have academic credibility—stem from and support and enrich the programmatic goals of the institution it serves. Regardless of whether or not a library is designed largely for research or largely for teaching, it must build collections in those disciplines and fields of professional training that arise from the unique strengths of the parent institution.

### Building Collections

Research libraries and teaching libraries build collections differently.

**Research libraries** support professors who test hypotheses, challenge or amend existing assumptions, and, in effect, create knowledge. Collections must represent both retrospective disciplines and emerging, cutting-edge sub-disciplines. Some research libraries attempt complete coverage in selected fields, seeking every known publication in every language. Some libraries will not limit themselves to publications but also seek data sets, white papers, technical reports, research papers from working groups, and other forms of gray literature.

A number of research libraries are building digital institutional repositories in order to store and retrieve the wide range of intellectual products developed by university faculty and

research and policy centers. Routinely, research libraries build comprehensively in order to support doctoral programs and faculty research. Selectors use approval plans and publishers’ lists; they buy pre-packaged full-text research collections in multiple formats. Selectors are expected by faculty constituents to provide resources essential for basic and specialized research and to do so in timely fashion. Increasingly, this has involved providing materials “just-in-time” rather than “just-in-case”; but the goals of completeness and comprehensiveness remain intact.

**Teaching libraries**, by contrast, focus on the highest quality and most pertinent literature with the goal of providing students with the resources for critical comparison and evaluation. Teaching and learning take precedence over research. The smaller acquisitions budget means that selectors read reviews from disciplinary and professional journals and make difficult, sometimes, time-consuming choices.

**Selector attributes** also differ. Research librarians often hold doctorates in a subject field and contribute to the literatures of the sciences, social sciences, or humanities. In teaching libraries, professional staff members are less likely to hold graduate degrees in fields other than library and information science. And in teaching libraries, the librarians become generalists, knowledgeable about the whole curriculum with an introductory acquaintance with the vocabulary and ways of organizing scholarly communication in undergraduate majors and general education curricula.

### Reference Services

Providing reference services differs from one type of library to the next. In a research library, there might be 25 reference librarians for a campus of 40,000 students. And while reference work may not typically constitute the librarian’s entire work responsibility, it could be the main function. Reference transactions involving hundreds of students each week will of necessity be more rushed, perhaps even trun-

cated when students line up to ask for help. This kind of setting is enriched, however, by the fact that the librarian becomes acquainted with a large number of online databases and other reference sources.

Compare this experience with that of, perhaps, one reference librarian who serves a campus of 1,500 students. The nature of the reference transaction, much less hurried, facilitates more in-depth conversation and the greater potential for follow-up. But the generalist reference librarian, even though working in a variety of disciplines, typically relies on a much smaller core of materials.

### Information Literacy

Information literacy holds the potential for similarity of experience in both library settings, depending on the number of variables that make the librarian-professor collaboration possible. In both settings, the librarian can play an important role in course development and in how he or she has the opportunity to interact with students in a given class. Course-related instruction could look very much the same in both types of library. Librarian attributes, however, may point to differences: specialists are more likely to be in research libraries and generalists are more likely to be in teaching libraries. This kind of difference frequently determines the nature of librarian opportunities; research librarians may be more easily accepted as faculty peers and thus afforded more frequent opportunities for collaboration.

### Comparing Libraries

Differences among institutions also impact perceptions of quality. Libraries seeking to improve their position on campus, or reputation

beyond campus, would do well to acquaint themselves with the work of their colleagues around the nation. To encourage library planning in appropriate institutional contexts, the ACRL (Association of College & Research Libraries) has recommended peer comparisons.

Through its College & Research Libraries Task Force, ACRL encourages each academic library to determine its own peer group using "criteria such as the institution's mission, reputation, selectivity for admission, size of budget, size of endowment, expenditure for library support, and/or size of collection."<sup>3</sup>

Libraries should collect data using both input and output measures and systematically address progress in the following areas: instruction, resources, services, access, personnel, facilities, budgeting, administration, cooperation, and communication. Benchmarking, then, has emerged as a widely sanctioned tool for planning and program development as well as for appreciation of the relative differences between types of libraries, between a research emphasis and a teaching emphasis. Although benchmarking can take analysis to an in-depth level, a comparison of the basic functions (the three we have considered: collection building, reference services, information literacy) can shed light on a continuing conversation in academe, the meaning of the teaching library-research library dichotomy.

### Final Thoughts

Administrators, faculty leaders, and library directors, who appreciate the nuances of the research library-teaching library differences, thus equip themselves for effective decisions about resource allocation. They will have learned what to look for in service and pedagogical

perspectives, as well as academic credentials, when recruiting library talent. They will have a sharply honed sense of the place of the Library in the local campus context. And they will have developed even further their capacity to articulate the Library's purposes and continuing needs to the stakeholders who determine its future. --Mark Tucker is Dean of Library and Information Resources at ACU and Professor Emeritus of Library Science, Purdue University.

### Recommended Readings

Bell, Steven and John Shank. *Academic Librarianship by Design: A Blended Librarian's Guide to the Tools and Techniques*. Chicago: ALA, 2007.

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<sup>1</sup>William A. Moffett, "Reflections of A College Librarian: Looking for Life and Redemption This Side of ARL," *College & Research Libraries* 45 (September 1984): 338-49.

<sup>2</sup>Herbert D. Stafford, "The Small College Library Director," in Gerard B. McCabe, ed., 19-20. *The Smaller Academic Library: A Management Handbook* (NY: Greenwood Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>"Standards for Libraries in Higher Education: The Final, Approved Standard," *College & Research Libraries News*, 65:9 (October 2004), 536.



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