

The Farmington Plan Survey: An Interim Report

EVER SINCE it got under way, the Farmington Plan has been regarded, and has repeatedly been cited, as one of the most important, most enlightened, and most hopeful instances of interlibrary cooperation in the history of American libraries.¹ Throughout its ten years of operation,² however, there has been a relatively small but persistent stream of complaints from participating libraries together with expressions of doubt from various quarters as to the Plan's actual success or, indeed, its value. Consequently, the Association of Research Libraries, which administers the Plan through its Farmington Plan Committee, decided some months ago that a major survey was in order.

Mr. Robert Vosper, director of libraries at the University of Kansas, was asked to undertake the assignment, and I was accepted as his assistant. The Council on Library Resources granted funds to ARL to cover costs of the study, and the project got under way in late November. The final report and our recommendations will be ready in October, when they will be submitted to a national conference on the Farmington Plan.

By 1939, scholars and librarians had long been aware of the lack of any comprehensive American coverage of foreign

publications. It was the outbreak of World War II, however, which suddenly made this lack a crucial problem. Not only were scholars cut off from current European publications and prevented from visiting European libraries, but there were also many prewar European publications being sought by government and national defense agencies which could not be located in any American library. The significant books were here—usually in multiple copies, since many libraries naturally would have acquired them. Many less significant titles were now urgently needed, however, and one might say that libraries had unanimously overlooked them or simply rejected them as each library pursued its normal selective acquisition policy. From the standpoint of national defense it was an alarming situation, and something needed to be done to prevent its recurrence in the future.

Over the next several years many proposals toward solving the problem were made by leaders among librarians and scholars. I omit mention of all except one: At the urging of Archibald MacLeish, then Librarian of Congress, Julian Boyd drew up a statement calling for completion of the national Union Catalog and "agreements of specialization among libraries to the end that at least one copy of each research title [published abroad] might be placed in an appropriate library in this country." This statement was presented at a meeting of the executive committee of the Librarian's Council of the Library of Congress

¹ Paper presented before the Acquisitions Section of ALA's Resources and Technical Services Division on July 17 at San Francisco.

² Edwin E. Williams, *The Farmington Plan Handbook* ([Cambridge], 1953), 170 p. presents an excellent history of the Plan's development.

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in Farmington, Connecticut, in October, 1942. Present, in addition to MacLeish and Boyd, were such librarians and scholars as Luther Evans, Frederick Goff, David Mearns, Wilmarth Lewis, Keyes Metcalf, and Randolph Adams. Boyd's statement led directly to the formulation of a specific proposal, and it was from this meeting that the Farmington Plan got its name.

During the next five years, through various committees, proposals, counter-proposals, discussions, critiques, surveys of subject strength in various libraries and of foreign book production, and the experience of the Library of Congress Postwar Mission to Europe, what we now know as the Farmington Plan gradually, not to say painfully, evolved. It was the product of many minds, and anyone reading Edwin Williams's chronology must admire the imagination, the expert knowledge, the patience, and the immense store of good will and spirit of cooperation contributed by a great many librarians. There were many differences of opinion and compromises were legion.

Along the way, the Plan became a project of ARL. At a special two-day meeting of ARL in March, 1947, it was decided to launch the Plan with coverage of 1948 publications of three countries. Other countries were to be added as rapidly as possible until world-wide coverage was achieved.

The Plan was to operate in this fashion: The entire body of human knowledge, as embodied in the Library of Congress classification schedules, had been broken down into over eight hundred segments. Over sixty libraries which were to participate indicated which of these subjects each would be willing to cover, and a table of allocations was drawn up. Allocations were generally supposed to follow the principle of building on strength. (Some problems in the Plan probably traced back to

lack of complete success in applying this principle.) A designated agent in each foreign country was to collect all new books and pamphlets published in his country "that might reasonably be expected to interest a research worker in the United States," classify them according to the LC classification, and send them, with invoices, to the appropriate American libraries. The libraries agreed to pay for the books, list them promptly in the Union Catalog at the Library of Congress, and make them available through interlibrary loan or photographic reproduction. The agents were instructed to exclude twenty-seven types of material; some, such as reprints, juvenile literature, and sheet music, judged to have little research value, and others, such as periodicals and official government publications, felt to represent such special problems that they should be handled outside the Plan.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York granted \$15,000 to ARL to cover administrative costs of the Plan. During the first year or so all receipts were forwarded by agents to a single point in the United States, where they were classified before being distributed to the appropriate libraries. Later the agents sent the books direct to the libraries.

Problems and complaints arose as quickly as the first books started to arrive, and the next several years produced many changes in the original arrangements and routines as patient attempts were made to improve them, to iron out the wrinkles.

One large problem that was foreseen was the extension of the Plan's coverage to countries using languages that few American libraries were equipped to handle, and to countries so lacking in well-organized book trades and bibliographies that the single-agent system could not work satisfactorily. When the time came, it was decided that one li-

brary should accept responsibility for acquiring all publications of a country or region, regardless of subject, and that it should make its own dealer arrangements.

In the course of this evolution of the Plan, the tendency was to reduce its scope. In addition to the exclusion of many types of material, it was first decided to restrict receipts to those in the Latin alphabet, and then to limit them to books and pamphlets in the regular trade. In the early stages of discussion, the definition of desired materials read, "every book . . . which might conceivably be of interest to a research worker . . .," but along the way the word "conceivably" was changed to the word "reasonably," a rather fundamental alteration in terminology. Finally, the scope of the Plan has been limited by the fact that it has fallen far short of world-wide coverage. These limitations have worried many librarians.

At present, the subject plan is in effect for thirteen Western European and three South American countries, Australia and Mexico, and eighty-five countries are covered on an all-subject basis by individual libraries. There are now sixty libraries participating in the Plan. During its first ten years, on the subject basis alone, the Plan has brought into the United States some 150,000 volumes at a purchase cost of about \$275,000. The assumption has been that a large percentage of these titles of research value would not have been acquired by any American library if it had not been for the Plan.

Perhaps our survey is itself as good evidence as any that the Plan has run into many vexing problems. In spite of diligent efforts by the ARL Farmington Plan Committee to correct difficulties as they developed, it has not proved possible to do so to an extent satisfactory to all the participating libraries. Hence the

decision by ARL to arrange for a major re-examination of the Plan's status after a decade of operation.

Mr. Vosper and I are following three general lines of investigation in our study. First, almost inevitably, was a questionnaire to all participating libraries. It ran to ten pages, but I should say in our defense that this length occurred only because we left large blank spaces in which the librarians were invited to provide uninhibited comments and advice. We achieved 100 per cent returns—this with the assistance of Western Union to stimulate a few laggards. The questionnaire was basically exploratory; we wanted to test general opinions, locate points of strain, solicit suggestions, and ask for copies of any studies of receipts that the individual libraries might have made.

The second phase of the study required about two months of living out of suitcases, as we visited as many of the participating libraries as limitations of time and travel funds would allow. These visits were aimed primarily at libraries with the largest subject allocations and receipts and those with special problems, but we were able as well to consult a number of the librarians who participate on a more limited scale. Mr. Vosper covered libraries in the north central states, from Michigan to Minnesota, and I journeyed to the West Coast and to Florida and Georgia. Together, we spent a month ranging from Washington, D. C., up to Cambridge and over to Ithaca. Finally, we went together to Urbana to see Robert B. Downs who, as chairman of the Farmington Plan Committee, is the man we are working for, and who is also director of one of the largest participants in the Plan.

The third phase of the survey is still under way. It consists of a number of studies of Farmington Plan receipts being undertaken at various libraries on

our behalf. Some of these studies are quantitative—comparing receipts from a given country, for example, with that country's publications as listed in bibliographies. Others, much more difficult, are qualitative—attempting to judge the quality or value for research of titles sent by agents and titles not sent by agents. We hope also to find out how many Farmington Plan receipts are unique in the United States, or—the other side of the coin—the extent to which they simply duplicate copies brought in by other libraries in the course of their normal acquisitions programs. We are not only investigating the performance of the Plan but also asking if it is really necessary. Further, we hope to answer the great question of whether it is more effective to have book selection done at the source of the books, by an agent, or by the library which is to house them. Our method is to compare what the Farmington library has received in a given subject with the collection in a library which, outside of the Plan, has set out to cover the same subject comprehensively.

The questionnaire returns were mostly mild in tone, with few expressions of strong doubt about the Plan or dissatisfaction with its operation. As a matter of fact, the great majority of the replies were distinctly favorable. Virtually all of them reflected agreement with the way the Plan is set up and a patient tolerance toward problems. None thought the Plan perfect, to be sure, but few seemed to favor any major changes except for extension of geographical coverage, especially to Japan, Russia, and the Iron-Curtain countries. We asked for opinions on a number of alternative programs, for example, one by which all receipts would be sent to the Library of Congress for classification and cataloging before distribution to libraries. The few who favored such alternatives were far out-

numbered by those opposing them. A number complained about the work of individual agents, especially the Bibliothèque Nationale, but this last was no surprise. In general, the replies were middle-of-the-road. On reading them over one might conclude that what few problems existed could be solved fairly easily and that they hardly justified the survey we were undertaking.

Our visits to libraries turned out to be indispensable, for they gave quite a different picture. The questionnaire had confined itself to the Plan. On our visits, we deliberately asked, not so much about the Plan as such, but about the whole problem of foreign acquisitions. What foreign materials did the libraries want in their collections? Why and how did they set about selecting and procuring them? We asked for their views on what the national interest—as distinct from their own local interest—required. We asked about subject fields in which they attempted to collect foreign materials outside the Plan as exhaustively as some other library was presumably receiving them under the Plan—for again, the answers might indicate that the Plan was really bringing only duplicate copies into the country.

We interviewed the head librarians, and variously their chief assistants, acquisitions and reference personnel, subject specialists on the library staffs, and usually several faculty members. Each visit lasted several hours, and in one or two cases we allowed more than a day for a single library. These visits were invariably enjoyable and helpful, but the total effect of them was more than perplexing. We received every possible answer to every question, and every possible variation of opinion somewhere along the line. To paraphrase Newton's law, for every opinion we were given at one library we were likely to receive an equal and opposite opinion at the next.

Of the dozens of facets of the Plan, and of foreign acquisitions, that came up for discussion, three cause Mr. Vosper and me the most concern.

First is the one that permeates the Farmington Plan and causes most complaints. This is the lack of any definition of the phrase "research value," or of "scholarly utility," to guide the dealers. We now doubt that any two librarians could reach complete agreement on a general, working definition of "research interest" if they sat down to work one out. This, by the way, was tested back in 1952, when four well-known librarians set out to check in the Swiss national bibliography for 1949 the items they thought would meet the definition. Excluding fiction, drama, and poetry, they reviewed 1,022 items. They agreed unanimously on only 110 items, they voted three to one (either for or against) on 396, and on 516 items, just over half of the total, two voted yes and two voted no.

The situation has not changed. What one library calls junk, and complains that the agent should not have sent, another library pronounces of fundamental research value. There are dozens of examples. Here is one: local histories and guide books. One library with an allocation in history will protest that it certainly does not want to go that deep (and I should add that they certainly do not wish to give those books costly full cataloging)—while another library will say, "We are eager to get our hands on anything that illustrates local architecture and sculpture in the country." They are talking about the same books. Please do not conclude that the first library is being selfish and looking only to its own local interests; these people honestly believe that these books are not worth having, even in a single copy, anywhere in the country. Another example is *belles-lettres*, which constitute an especially

clean-cut problem, with one institution wanting only first-class authors, another wanting virtually all minor authors in addition.

On one side of the Atlantic are the poor agents, trying to guess whether the Americans will like this book or not—we are going to send the agents a questionnaire, by the way—and on the other shore the librarians are growling—or tearing their hair—because in their opinion the agent sent 25 per cent junk last year, or he failed to send 30 per cent of the significant publications of his country.

Who is right here, and who is wrong? We don't know. There were times when Mr. Vosper and I, examining receipts, did not agree. It is the familiar problem of comprehensiveness versus selectivity that faces every acquisitions librarian every day. He knows he must always draw a line somewhere, but the line may be drawn at different points in different subject areas, and for many different reasons.

A closely related difference of opinion among librarians concerns the basic Farmington procedure of dealer selection of materials. A small group of the very largest libraries says, "Using our subject specialists we can do a better job of selection than any agent abroad can possibly do. We have done it for years. We do exactly what the Plan sets out to do: acquire every book of reasonable research interest, and we do it better than the Plan can do it. Anything our specialists don't select isn't worth having." These librarians are entirely right. They would like to terminate the system of dealer selection and have the libraries take over on a basis of decentralized responsibility for a particular subject.

A far larger group, including nearly all the university libraries, says, on the other hand, "We are not staffed for such

a task. Automatic selection by dealers abroad is helpful to us. We simply want the dealers to do a better job." They too are quite right.

We questioned librarians closely about their use of blanket orders. The great majority do not use them, or, if they ever did, have discontinued them because they did not like the results. The few libraries that do use blanket orders are in some cases the same very large ones that I have mentioned. They value the automatic delivery of books that the blanket order produces. One of these blanket orders is not, however, simply a carefully phrased set of instructions to a dealer which, once sent to him, is allowed to stand unchanged. Rather, a blanket order may actually be a thick file of correspondence, as the library constantly modifies and refines its original instructions on the basis of experience. Each shipment of books may result in further refinement.

This is significant, because in essence the Farmington Plan is actually a gigantic, complex, inflexible blanket order which attempts to cover all subjects and many countries with one generalized definition of what is wanted, and a uniform list of exclusions. There is no way, under the Plan, to differentiate between the degree of selectivity or the types of materials desired for one subject or country and those desired for another. It is no great wonder that there is wide dissatisfaction with receipts. Early in our travels Mr. Vosper and I recognized the need for some means of drawing such distinctions.

We think there may be a way to accomplish this, if the librarians will accept it. It would involve four things. First is the decentralization of responsibility, such as the large libraries propose. Each library, having accepted responsibility for one or more subject fields, would choose its own agents.

Second, to preserve the advantages of automatic selection abroad, is the use of blanket orders written by individual libraries, these to be tailored as necessary to the particular subject field or country of publication. Third, is the establishment of a national supervisory group—call them referees, if you will—which would monitor these blanket orders, and their subsequent amendments, to assure protection of the national interest. (This is essential, we think, because of the human tendency—and we found some instances of it—to confuse the national interest with one's provincial point of view, to say, "If we are not interested in this particular type of material, how could anyone else be?") Fourth is a regular review by statistical studies, say, every five years, to check on how well the Plan is functioning.

We think this method of operation might relieve the most irritating problem of the last ten years, that of selection. It raises two immediate questions: Will the libraries accept the job of getting out these blanket orders? This might not be too onerous, since the present Farmington Plan terms can be used as a point of departure. Second, will these librarians, individuals all and accustomed to calling their own shots, accept the idea of anyone's questioning their blanket orders, their definition of "research value"? We haven't yet asked them. In any case, we think this might be an improvement in the Plan as it operates in those countries now covered on a subject basis.

The second of the major problems that especially concern us pertains to the so-called "critical areas," countries or regions where language problems or inadequacies of book trade and bibliography led to the assignment of responsibility for acquisition of all publications to a single library, with the

library making its own dealer arrangements.

The problem here is getting the publications, or even learning of their existence. It is frequently difficult to find a dealer who will do the job required; all too often, arrangements laboriously arrived at fail to last, and the library must start all over again. We are told that personal contact, rather than correspondence, is often required. We are told, for example, by the University of Florida in connection with its coverage of the Caribbean that some book stores won't bother with billing. If you want their books, you must put cash on the counter.

We are convinced that these libraries are doing their best with the means available to them, but they meet with widely varying success. Both they and we fear their best is not enough. One strong indication of this is the concern expressed by various organizations of scholars which are currently working independently on their own possible solutions to publication procurement problems in these critical areas and other areas not yet covered at all by the Farmington Plan. (Let me say that the Plan's failure thus far to make its coverage world-wide is due primarily to these known difficulties of procurement.) These other groups include the Social Science Research Council, deeply concerned with coverage of the Middle East; both the American Oriental Society and the Association for Asian Studies, worried about the Far East; and the Joint Committee on Slavic Studies of the American Council of Learned Societies and the SSRC, studying Slavic and East European publications. An International Conference on Scientific Information is to be held in Washington in November. The Seminar on Latin American Acquisitions meets annually. All of these groups are working on problems that

the Farmington Plan was expected to solve.

If adequate procurement from these countries is to be achieved, it does indeed appear that regular visits, either to establish and maintain library-dealer relationships or actually to buy and ship publications, are necessary. Libraries, however, cannot afford to support roving procurement officers. We are not sure of the solution, but one possibility may lie in the use of American governmental personnel already abroad. Many of what we term critical areas have become truly critical in the world-wide political scene since World War II. I need mention only the Near East, Southeast Asia, the Far East, and Africa. This raises the question of the national interest in information about these areas for intelligence purposes. It was the failure of the nation's libraries to meet intelligence and defense contract needs during World War II which, after all, triggered the Farmington Plan. We do not know how much American intelligence agencies now depend upon the resources of our research libraries, but we are trying to inquire into this. If this dependence is significant—if the intelligence agencies are not self-sufficient along these lines—then it seems that a case might be made for governmental assistance to libraries attempting comprehensive coverage of publications in these areas. This might take the form of close cooperation by an enlarged corps of publications procurement officers abroad. It might be in the form of governmental contracts with a few major libraries employing and supervising their own procurement personnel abroad. Failing some such arrangement, we see no ready and adequate solution to this part of the problem.

Our third major concern is serials. The only provision for serials in the Farmington Plan countries covered by

subject is the instruction to dealers to send a sample copy of each new title to the appropriate library. It is then up to the library to place a subscription or not, as it sees fit. If it decides not to subscribe, the library is supposed to send the sample copy to the Farmington Plan office at Harvard, which will attempt to find a home for that title in another library. There is no certainty, however, that any library will subscribe, and we have found lots of evidence that many serial titles are not picked up by any library. Yet, it goes without saying that in many subjects, particularly the sciences and technology, serials are much more important than the monographs the Farmington Plan so painstakingly acquires. On the other hand, libraries cannot be asked to accept the same responsibility for serial publications in a subject as they do for monographs. Most of the librarians we consulted could suggest no solution that would permit all of us to feel secure in the knowledge that foreign serial publications are being covered comprehensively. One, however, has studied the problem closely and has some very cogent ideas as to how it may be solved; this is Herman Henkle, of the John Crerar Library. We have asked him to present these ideas in a working paper at the conference on the Farmington Plan to be held in the fall.

To tie up some loose ends:

Government documents are excluded from the Plan in its subject coverage. Mr. Vosper and I have decided that this does not worry us at all. The Library of Congress sets out to collect foreign government documents through treaty and exchange arrangements. We feel secure in the results of its efforts and positive that anything LC isn't accomplishing cannot be accomplished by any other library or group of libraries.

Cataloging is another area, of great

concern to the founders of the Plan which does not worry us much. The question of quality of receipts arises here. We received one or two confessions that librarians had rebelliously thrown a particular piece of "junk" into the wastebasket—rather than retaining it, much less cataloging it—a procedure strictly not permitted within the terms of the Plan. In more cases, librarians have given minimal cataloging or even the briefest of listing to very low grade receipts, but they have reported them to the National Union Catalog. The quality of entries in such cases may leave something to be desired. For all receipts within reason, however, we believe that the librarians take very seriously their responsibility for adequate cataloging and prompt reporting to NUC. Some may miss the thirty-day deadline on reporting, but not by much. They recognize how essential such reporting is to the success of the Plan.

We found a considerable lack of enthusiasm toward proposals for centralized cataloging of Farmington receipts, apparently because of the possible delays in transit of books and the probable costs. We are inclined to think that the problem of centralized or cooperative cataloging must be solved on its own merits and on a broad base, not by way of the Farmington Plan. If cataloging in source becomes a reality, our foreign acquisitions will, of course, come to us already cataloged.

As to subject allocations, quite a few changes seem to be in order. Several libraries indicated a wish to relinquish certain of their allocations, sometimes because of dissatisfaction with their receipts, in other cases because of diminishing local interest in particular subjects. Anyone setting out toward major, over-all reallocations would be wise to proceed with caution, however. Many libraries value their allocations highly,

and he who tries to take them away would be safer doing it at a distance than by personal contact.

While the Farmington Plan was being set up, it was decided by ARL that it was preferable to have large subject blocks allocated to relatively few libraries. A few months later ARL reversed itself and decided to try to accommodate all libraries wishing to participate. This resulted in many very small subject allocations and tended to multiply the complications. There may be advantages in return to the original idea of having fewer libraries involved in the Plan, if those libraries are willing to accept the larger subject blocks.

All that I indicate regarding our conclusions must be considered tentative. In view of the great lack of consensus among the participating librarians, our final report must depend, much more than we had originally suspected, on the findings of the various statistical studies of receipts not yet completed. We hope that they will tell us how important the Plan actually is, and how well it is really doing. It is conceivable, for example, that so many Farmington receipts will prove to be duplicated by the regular receipts of American libraries, that we will conclude the Plan is redundant and should be dropped. I doubt, however, that we will discover any such thing. For that matter, many librarians will argue that such duplication is worth while. For the present we strongly believe that the Plan is essential to the national interest. However, after talking with many librarians, we are convinced that a number of fundamental changes in procedures must

be made if the Plan is to survive; too many librarians are too close to being fed up.

We have arranged for a number of working papers to be presented at the conference this fall. Some will deal in detail with problems of procurement in various critical areas. One will take up the problem of serials. Another will describe programs, now being carried on by groups of libraries in Europe, with objectives paralleling those of the Farmington Plan. We will report our findings, and either make firm recommendations or describe possible alternatives regarding the future of the Plan. The Plan's future (if any), its objectives, and its procedures will then depend, as they always have, upon the decisions of the participating libraries.

The Farmington Plan, for all its shortcomings and whatever its future, has already been worth while in many important ways. It has brought our major libraries to the recognition of their collective responsibility for covering the world's publications in the national interest. It has established the fact that the job must be done on a cooperative basis. It has reaffirmed the fact that our libraries are, and must always be, interdependent. It has demonstrated once more that major cooperative projects can, despite irritations and difficulties, be made to work.

We believe that with patience and persistence, the Plan's present problems can be alleviated and that it will eventually achieve a measure of world-wide coverage. We believe it will bring important benefits to American scholarship.