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# The Bottomless Pit, or the Academic Library as Viewed from the Administration Building

Robert F. Munn

*Library administrators could adjudge their likely fortunes in the academic tug-of-war for funds if they understood more clearly the attitudes of institutional administrators toward libraries. Some view the library as "a bottomless pit"; all recognize that the library is unlikely to generate much political pressure for its own aggrandizement. Many young institutional administrators are coming to apply more sophisticated measures to their funding formulas than have been utilized in the past. Librarians therefore would be well advised to become more proficient in modern management techniques and program budgeting concepts.*



Academic librarians worry a lot. One need only attend a convention or leaf through the library journals to be impressed by the range and intensity of their concerns. Some worry about recruitment, others about automation, and still others about interlibrary loans. There are even those who worry about the institutionalization of these ever-proliferating worries in the form of standing committees and round tables. There remain a few unifying themes, however, matters about which almost all academic librarians worry. Among the most important of these is "The Administration."<sup>1</sup>

Directors of academic libraries are especially prone to worry about the Administration, and understandably so. For it is the Administration which establishes the salaries and official status of the director and his staff, which sets at least the total library budget, which decides if and when

a new library building shall be constructed and at what cost. In short, it is the Administration—not the faculty and still less the students—which determines the fate of the library and those who toil therein.

While many academic librarians worry endlessly about the Administration, they usually know very little about it. Librarians are not normally part of either the administrative inner circle itself or the select group of faculty oligarchs and entrepreneurs whose views carry great weight. They are thus excluded from the real decision-making process of the institution. Indeed, librarians are often horrified and/or enraged to discover that decisions of crucial importance to the library have been made without their advice or even prior knowledge.

Much, though certainly not all, of this frustration might be avoided if librarians had a better understanding of how aca-

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demographic administrators view the library. It is the purpose of this article to offer a few modest insights.

The most accurate answer to the question, "what do academic administrators think about the library," is that they don't think very much about it at all. There are amazingly few references to libraries in the vast and repetitive literature of higher education. Libraries are almost never discussed at the national meetings of presidents, provosts, deans, and other academic luminaries. This rather deafening silence cannot be attributed entirely to the faculty club view that all administrators are illiterate. There are other reasons, several of the most important of which are noted below.

It has often been observed that administrators devote most of their attention to matters at either end of the spectrum and have little time for those in the middle. In the academic world, the library is definitely in the middle. It is unlikely to be the cause of either a crisis or a coup. It will not, on the one hand, trigger a riot nor on the other hand will it bring in a multi-million dollar grant. In short, the library is one of those academic sleeping dogs which the harassed administrator is quite content to let lie.

Administrators also devote much time and attention to those units which consume a large portion of the institution's total budget. The library is not one of these. Most universities allocate perhaps 4 or 5 percent of the operating budget to the library. This is not only a relatively small percentage but is also a remarkably consistent one, varying little from year to year. As a result, many academic administrators tend to view the library budget as a fairly modest fixed cost and let it go at that. It is certainly the case that librarians worry vastly more about the high cost of libraries than do administrators. (A study of why this is so might reveal much about personalities of academic librarians).

Of course, academic administrators do give some thought to the library. After all, it is they who determine the library's budget. It may be instructive to note some of the factors which the Administration is likely to consider in determining how

much of the institution's resources should be devoted to the library.

One important consideration is the fact that many academic administrators view the library as a bottomless pit. They have observed that increased appropriations one year invariably result in still larger requests the next. More important, there do not appear to be even any theoretical limits to the library's needs. Certainly the library profession has been unable to define them. This the Administration finds most disquieting. The science chairmen may request staggering sums for equipment, but at least they have a definite and perhaps even attainable goal in mind. It is possible to imagine that, with an assist or two from the National Science Foundation, the physics department might reach the point where it has all the equipment it wants; another reactor or accelerator would actually be in the way. Even the athletic director will admit, if pressed, that it would be assured to build a field house above a certain size.

Only the librarian is unable to place any limits on his needs. Research libraries are, after all, infinitely expandable. This being so, the Administration is understandably reluctant to devote a very great percent of its resources to the pursuit of an undefined and presumably unattainable goal.

The allocation of an academic institution's resources is influenced by many factors: truth, justice, wisdom—and pressure. While the library is the institution's official repository for the first three, it has never managed to accumulate much in the way of pressure. Almost everyone is in favor of more money for the library, but always at someone else's expense. Dean A and Chairman B will cheerfully support an increase in the library budget as a general proposition or even at the expense of some other unit. However, any suggestion that the funds should come from their budgets produces a reaction rather like that of a mother grizzily guarding its young.

In most institutions, a significant increase in the library budget is third or fourth on the priority list of most of the deans and chairmen—falling well below more money for salary increases and more

money for new staff. Depending on local circumstances, it tends to rank just above or just below more money for parking facilities. Indeed, only the librarian is likely to be intensely concerned about the library, and, as has been noted, he does not often carry great weight in the academic power structure. Thus the administrator who consistently favors the library does so largely because he happens to think it a Good Thing, and not because he is under great pressure to do so.

A third factor which the Administration is increasingly likely to consider in determining the library's budget is the advice of its own research staff. Until fairly recently few academic administrators had even heard of such concepts as program budgeting, decision matrices, and cost-benefit analysis. Now, however, almost all universities have established offices—often called the office of institutional research staffed by zealous young men learned in such matters. While they are doubtless disliked and even feared by many older administrators, the future is clearly theirs. Increasingly sophisticated attempts to achieve effective resource allocation are inevitable.

All this presents even the most "library-minded" administrator with a real dilemma. His long-held article of faith that the library is a Good Thing and somehow self-justifying is questioned. The young men are contemptuous of articles of faith. Even the fact that the prestige universities tend to have the largest libraries leaves them unmoved. They point out that this is simply a result of wealth, and that the prestige universities also have the best student psychiatric services.

In short, the conventional wisdom is

simply no longer useful in the area of resource allocation. It does not, for example, help the Administration determine whether an additional \$100,000 a year would be better spent on books or on the addition of new staff in the department of civil engineering. At the moment, neither do the analytical techniques developed by institutional research. The young men are hard at work, however, and their mere presence has forced administrators to think in terms of cost-benefit. Since nobody yet appears to have the slightest idea how to make a cost-benefit analysis of the contribution of the library, few administrators feel justified in straying far from the traditional percentage.

In summary, academic administrators devote little real thought to the library. Tradition, what other institutions are doing, academic politics, and the personal predilections of the officials involved tend to determine budget support. Such criteria may not seem very impressive, but at the moment they are about the only ones available.

The current pressure to introduce modern management practices into the universities will not leave libraries unaffected. Such techniques as program budgeting require a much more rigorous analysis of the balance of return against investment than has ever been applied to libraries. Just why should the library receive 3 or 6 or 1 or 10 percent of the institution's total budget? How should the claims of the library, the computer center, and educational television for budget support be evaluated? These and similar questions are certain to be asked. It might be prudent for academic librarians to have some answers.

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## REFERENCES

1. "The Administration," as all academics will know, consists of the institution's president, vice-presidents, provost, and their entourage of executive assistants, plus perhaps a few of the more powerful deans. On some campuses the Administration is referred to as "it"; on others as "they."