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Twenty Years of Undergraduate Libraries:  
Whence and Whither?

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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate libraries as part of university library systems have existed since 1949, but there is little statistical data prior to 1971. This study examines statistics reported since that time, supplemented with electronic mail surveying, to show how such libraries have responded to the changing needs of an undergraduate population. The results show that change, and rapid response to external forces, are hallmarks of undergraduate libraries past and present.

KEYWORDS

Undergraduate libraries  
College and university libraries--services to undergraduate students

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# Twenty Years of Undergraduate Libraries: Whence and Whither?

## INTRODUCTION

Most would agree that Harvard's Lamont Library, opened in 1949, was the first truly separate library specifically designed to serve the needs of the undergraduate population in a university. As a result, undergraduate libraries, that is those parts of university library systems devoted specifically to undergraduate services, have existed for almost fifty years in the U.S. and Canada. For the past twenty-five years, one information source has collected information from these libraries and has made it possible to identify significant changes in them. Formal, statistical information about undergraduate libraries dates from 1971 when the *UGLI Newsletter*, a publication of the Association of College and Research Libraries' Undergraduate Librarians Discussion Group, began an annual statistical issue.

Throughout this time the statistical issue of the *UGLI Newsletter* has been remarkably consistent both in the kinds of statistics recorded and in the number of respondents. Over the years some have changed: a few have

ceased to exist, and others have missed an issue or two; however, a core group has remained consistent for approximately twenty years, and it is this group that provides the skeleton for an examination of the undergraduate library phenomenon in the second half of the twentieth century, both where it has come from and where it seems to be going. The flesh on these bones, however, must come from interviews and personal descriptions. To get a clearer look at the present picture, one must listen to the librarians themselves, particularly in light of the paucity of published writings on this subject.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To gain a picture of changes to undergraduate libraries during the past twenty-five years, the authors collated data submitted to the *UGLI Newsletter* for statistics in the following key categories: departmental staffing, use of student assistants, reference desk staffing, circulation, reserve loans, undergraduate student enrollment, ratio of students to staff, budget and salaries. They also compared undergraduate library figures with library system figures.

A core group of 20 undergraduate libraries consistently reported, and this provides a good basis for comparison. These libraries are at:

Cornell University  
Indiana University  
Ohio State University  
Southern Illinois University  
State University of New York, Buffalo  
University of British Columbia  
University of California, Berkeley  
University of California, Los Angeles  
University of California, San Diego  
University of Chicago  
University of Hawaii  
University of Illinois  
University of Maryland  
University of Michigan  
University of North Carolina  
University of Texas  
University of Toronto  
University of Virginia  
University of Washington  
University of Wisconsin

Since not all twenty libraries contributed data for each category during each of the twenty years, the data should be considered representational of undergraduate libraries rather than exact. Certainly, the data reflect overall trends in the way that undergraduate libraries have changed during the past quarter century.

### **CHANGES IN STAFFING, FUNDING, AND CIRCULATION**

In the last twenty years, staffing in undergraduate libraries has undergone many changes. In 1975, the average number of professional

librarians was six. By 1994, this had decreased by 33 percent (Graph I).

During this same time the average undergraduate enrollment at the twenty schools represented in the study rose from 22,305 to 24,883. This means that there were 3,718 undergraduate students per librarian in 1975, compared to 6,221 in 1994 (Graph II). Clearly, fewer professional librarians are now serving more undergraduate students.

The figures for non-professional staff also show a decline, in this case a 20 percent decrease (Graph I). Nonetheless, one area of staffing has actually increased. The average annual number of student assistant hours in an undergraduate library in 1975 was almost 27,000. This dropped to a low in 1982 but has been rising since and in 1993 was up to almost 28,000.

These changes carry over to reference desk coverage. In 1975, professionals staffed the reference desks an average of 85.5 hours per week; in 1994, professional staff hours had dropped to 52.8, a 38 percent decrease. Non-professional hours at the reference desk, however, increased from 29.1 hours in 1975 to 32 hours in 1994 (Graph III).

During the same time frame, circulation figures declined dramatically over this twenty-year period. Monograph loans per year decreased by 66 percent, from a peak of 1.8 loans per student in 1978 to .62 loans per student in 1994. In addition, reserve use, measured by reserve loans per student,

also had a dramatic decrease of 36 percent over these two decades. Because the budget figures had not declined proportionally, it seems likely that these figures reflect a change in patterns of use.

## **PARENT INSTITUTIONS**

Undergraduate libraries have fared better than their parent systems in some, but not all categories. The average undergraduate library's percentage of the overall library system salary budget decreased 16 percent from 1975 to 1994. Its percentage of the overall materials budget, however, decreased by 38 percent (Graph IV). Like their parent systems, whose professional positions declined by 36 percent, undergraduate libraries suffered a 33 percent decrease in professional positions from 1975 to 1994. Similarly, non-professional positions in undergraduate libraries have undergone a 20 percent decrease, while library systems experienced a 26 percent decrease.

## **SURVEY OF UNDERGRADUATE LIBRARIANS**

Statistics are just one part of the picture. The experiences of librarians add greatly to this picture. As a supplement to the lengthy statistical record, nine of the larger libraries took part in an electronic mail survey in October, 1995, by responding to questions about book vs. periodical usage, staffing

size, reference staff philosophy, the library's status on campus, and the response to increased political emphasis on undergraduate education. All nine of the institutions are active in the UGLI Discussion Group, and the heads of these libraries have, for the most part, many years of experience at their respective institutions.

These interviews provide a more personal description, presented here as individual summaries. A number of common threads emerge: 1) a movement toward electronic databases; 2) increased use of library graduate students working at the reference desks at institutions which have graduate library schools; 3) a stable or decreased circulation rate; and 4) a perceived increase in the use of periodical indexes over the years, attributable to a variety of factors.

### **University of Wisconsin (Donna Senzig)**

Book circulation over the last twenty years has been relatively constant. It is a high use collection, weeded annually, with about 2,000 titles added each year. Perhaps as much as half the periodical use comes from full-text databases such as the ProQuest services, Nexis, and Expanded Academic Index. Professional and support staffing has increased, as have programs, including more than 200 classes a year. A Microcomputer and



Media Center relies heavily on student assistants. “Everything we do, from collecting of materials to user education, comes together at the reference desk. This is where students, and campus faculty, administrators and librarians, judge whether or not we are successful.” The move toward electronic sources has led to an increase in one-to-one reference assistance; thus, support staff are heavily involved in this area as are librarians and students assistants all as a team. The library’s position needs constant justification, but it is in a good position to be a campus leader in responding to the changes brought by technology. Curricular changes mean that the undergraduate library will soon be responsible for components of 130 sections of a required communication course and multimedia applications are under development, aided by a New Media Center in the library to assist faculty development of materials. Both trends will likely increase use of the undergraduate library and its services.

### **University of Washington (Paula Walker)**

The increased use of periodical literature comes both from use of computerized databases and from a shift in faculty assignments to greater emphasis on periodicals. Out of three positions cut in 1993, two have been restored; graduate library science students are heavily used at the reference

desk; and the circulation desk is increasingly being used as a second reference point. The undergraduate library, with its active service programs, is recognized for its important role in undergraduate education and is benefiting from the legislature's interest in this area.

### **University of Virginia (Jim Self)**

Clemons Library's circulation has been steady since 1986; staff size has remained constant. Staff and graduate students have always assisted in reference services and continue to do so in a time when service to undergraduates is being strongly emphasized. Although it is not officially called an undergraduate library, Clemons' high-use focus naturally emphasizes undergraduate services.

### **University of Illinois (Joyce Wright)**

Because of mutilation, many use the Magazine Collection's microfiche materials and electronic resources. Staff is stretched very thin, reduced to five from the seven librarians six years ago. The formal bibliographic instruction program has been suspended for review, but the campus mandate on undergraduate education may help to justify and

reinstate it, and a faculty Undergraduate Advisory Committee has been organized for assistance in responding to these challenges.

### **University of Michigan (Barbara MacAdam)**

Staffing has remained stable, although there have been cuts. The Peer Information Counseling Program helps greatly as have efforts to set strategic priorities such as doing fewer handouts and relying more on the WWW page for information distribution. Reference service has moved to a team approach using graduate and trained undergraduate students as a first level, more term and part-time librarians, and even working with a broadcast studio for information services over cable television. “The undergraduate library is probably in as strong a position as it ever has been” with an \$11 million new facility, campus commitment to undergraduate education and technology and a strong campus perception of the undergraduate library’s importance in the university’s mission.

### **University of North Carolina (David Taylor)**

Several local factors have combined to reduce circulation and use of the undergraduate library. Foremost was the opening of a spacious graduate library, plus a non-duplication policy and budget crises from 1986-1992,

curricular changes, and an OPAC that did not highlight for location. Staff reductions forced cuts in reference coverage and exacerbated reserve problems even as reference activity has increased. The less sophisticated users need more help with the present setup (more electronic sources) than they used to with free-standing InfoTrac terminals and dedicated book catalogs. In the midst of these difficulties, campus long-range plans for greater use of information technology, a recognition of the library's deteriorating physical condition, and political interest in undergraduate education are combining to support major renovation efforts. If all goes well, it will "offer new services integrating traditional library service with computer access, in an attractive physical setting," thus increasing the pressure to find new staffing sources.

### **Indiana University (Lou Malcomb)**

The decline in circulation which began in the 1980s can be attributed to curricular changes which stress short papers and current information, plus the CD-ROM and online databases now available. In response, funding has been switched toward periodicals and indexes. The undergraduate library is "on solid ground but that ground shakes every time there is a budget concern/deficit/or reduction." Without a definite faculty constituency, the

library needs greater faculty involvement as well as funding support for the undergraduates' instruction needs.

### **University of Toronto (Lari Langford)**

The Sigmund Samuel Library probably will end its existence as an undergraduate library sometime in 1996. Numerous campus libraries more relevant to the students' curriculum, severe fiscal restraints, staffing reductions which have replaced most of the reference staff with non-professionals and graduate students while sharing professional staff from the Science and Medicine Library next door all have combined to bring about this situation. The emphasis on teaching undergraduates, however, is "certainly alive and well" and undergraduate services "will remain a priority of the library system, coordinated by an undergraduate services librarian, but the separate space and identity of this library as an undergraduate library will not." Indeed, they have "accepted the fact that service to undergraduates is not something that can be attached to one physical location on this campus" and are relying more on remote access.

### **University of Texas (Ralph Alberico)**

Circulation has remained relatively stable, but the perception is that a dramatic increase in the use of full-text digital sources has been a major factor in the greatly increased use of periodical literature. Staffing hasn't declined much but duties have increased; students don't serve at the reference desk but are heavily involved in other service points, while library school graduate students increasingly provide reference assistance. The undergraduate library as an institution is not threatened, but its space has decreased with the introduction of a microcomputer facility and a writing center. Without the strong faculty constituency of a subject-based library, "it is important that we change in response to events and justify our own existence by providing services that are perceived as vital by the students themselves."

## **CONCLUSION**

Many undergraduate libraries over recent years have reduced the size of the undergraduate monograph collection for various reasons, including the need to convert book stack space to space for computer technology, as well as acknowledging that undergraduates may choose to borrow materials from other libraries on campus. Data on undergraduate borrowing of books

from the library system is not available in this study, but it is obvious from the study that they are borrowing fewer books from undergraduate libraries.

Professional librarian hours in the undergraduate library declined during the late 1970s, matched by an increase in the hours worked on the reference desk by nonprofessionals. In the early and mid 1980s the non-professional hours dropped, while a steady increase began in the number of hours worked in undergraduate libraries by student assistants. From the statistics alone, one might conclude that student assistants replaced nonprofessionals, who had earlier replaced professionals in undergraduate reference services.

The anecdotal evidence from the surveyed librarians points to a shift in usage from books to periodicals for a number of reasons. In many cases the curricular changes de-emphasize the traditional term paper in favor of more, and shorter, papers using current (periodical) sources. The mushrooming of CD-ROM indexes, widely available at these larger universities, plus growing numbers of full-text databases, also are changing how students look for information.

Librarians are being stretched to their limits -- with little relief in sight. Paraprofessionals, graduate students (especially library school

students) and even specially-trained undergraduates are doing more initial contact work at reference desks, including helping with the technology.

These staffing pressures and changes are reflected at the reference desk, where there may not be as many librarians as much of the time as in the past. In addition, the bibliographic instruction methods have to make use of multimedia to reach the large numbers requiring assistance. And yet, instruction generates questions and a need for more one-on-one assistance as well.

The status of undergraduate libraries is not easily summarized. Some, such as Toronto, are fading or merging with other facilities on campus. Others, such as Wisconsin, Washington, Texas, Indiana, and Illinois are solid but always aware of how quickly stability can change. A few, such as Michigan and North Carolina, are remodeling, expanding, and growing in influence on their campuses.

In the end, what one can say about undergraduate libraries is that they must be continue to be flexible, able to adapt quickly as pressures, trends, and outside forces shift. Change has always been fundamental to the mission of undergraduate libraries, because many were begun in order to be able to change more readily than their parent systems. Declining monographic circulation, decreases in staffing (especially professionals), and



funding restrictions all are not likely to reverse soon. As a result, undergraduate libraries must:

- use technology to teach technology
- modify bibliographic instruction programs, making use of multimedia to teach access to information throughout the library system
- emphasize training of support staff
- continue to provide a welcoming environment and personal assistance to the beginning library user.

Sometimes changes lead to the disappearance of a physical library, but in nearly all cases the ideal of service to undergraduates continues strongly in the staffing and programs firmly established during the twenty years of the study, even as challenges escalate and methods evolve to meet the changing needs of undergraduate students.

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