

Reframing the Narrative: Librarians as Innovators in the Past and Present

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Abstract

This paper examines the revolutionary impact librarians had on American higher education in the late 19th century. Librarians were transformative agents in the evolution of today's American higher education. The argument that libraries aren't "just books," reinforces negative perceptions and undermines the legacy of innovation and impact of historical librarians and library staff. We will benefit from better understanding our role in transforming higher education in the past, and championing our legacy as innovators.

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This paper examines the revolutionary impact librarians had on American higher education in the late 19th century, shares the creative strategies and innovative instruction methods they employed, and posits that libraries have been at the heart of educational innovation for over 150 years. Early academic libraries were far more innovative than conventional wisdom suggests. Librarians were transformative agents in the revolution in academia that took place in post-Civil War America, a period of dramatic overhaul with many parallels to today's challenging environment.

There is a common narrative when discussing libraries and the value they provide on a college campus. According to this narrative, the traditional library was valued for the collection it stored, and the modern library is valued for its services — that libraries are no longer “just books.” This rhetoric can dangerously reinforce negative perceptions, and neglects the innovative services and scholarship that library workers have engaged in consistently.

It is equally important to acknowledge that this rhetoric is not new. Compare the current “not just books” argument to that of Daniel Coit Gilman, a 19th century educator and librarian: “A library, however, is not merely a magazine or storehouse. It is, rather, an organism which has life...” (p. 258). Likewise, the librarian Otis Robinson wrote that “the time is passing also when the chief duty of a librarian was to collect books and preserve them. How to get them used most extensively, most intelligently, and at the same time carefully, is becoming his chief concern” (1880, p. 15). Gilman, Robinson, and their contemporaries were advocates of the library as a learning laboratory, a fight that pitted them against the conservative college administrators of their day, and it was a fight that they would win, elevating the status and stature of the library.

While this paper emphasizes examples of innovative library practices and advocacy, it is also important to apply a critical lens; many of the contemporary issues that affect information professions, such as the patriarchal and white systems of power and privilege, were fostered and codified in the same time period. We must acknowledge both the positive and negative legacies of our professional predecessors.

An elegant polish for young men

In Orvin Lee Shiflett's history of American academic librarianship, he identifies a transition period that saw a radical redefinition of higher education, from the “classical college” era prior to the Civil War, to the late 19th century's “university movement” (Shiflett, 1981). Many factors contributed to this shift, among them the ongoing scientific and industrial revolutions, changing demographics, westward expansion, and legislation that encouraged the establishment of universities (the Morrill Act, 1862). Concurrent with this shift was the growing public library movement, creating a professional class of librarians, marked by the 1876 founding of the American Library Association.

The classical college era bore very little resemblance to modern higher education. There were far fewer colleges and no American college awarded advanced degrees. Colleges lacked formal criteria for admittance and students could be as young as fourteen (Shiflett, 1981). Writing in 1894, librarian C.E. Lowrey was clear on the subject: “higher education of the earlier day was distinctly instruction for a limited class, an elegant polish for young men destined for the so-called learned professions” (p. 265). The classical college was a training ground for upper class white boys, to be trained in the expectations of a classical gentleman.

Curriculum consisted of Greek, Latin, and religious studies. Classes were limited to lectures, examinations, and recitations. Students were not encouraged to read independently. There were no elective courses. In this environment, libraries were not relevant to a student's education. Library collections were small, primarily made up of donations from faculty, and often crowded into shared buildings. Students were not allowed free access and most libraries did not circulate materials.

During the classical college era there were few librarians as we recognize the term today. Most were active or retired faculty with part-time library responsibilities, or were hired custodians, such as Columbia's infamous Reverend Beverly Robinson Betts. Betts took pride in not spending all of the small budget provided to him for new books, because he felt that the books Columbia already had were adequate. A professor remarked that he "seemed displeased when anyone asked for a book and positively forbidding when asked to buy one" (Shiflett, 1981, p. 40). As the university movement took hold and librarianship was established as a distinct profession, he was forced out of his position.¹

The poor state of the classical college library was summed up in an exchange at Yale College. The Yale librarian, after nine years of service, resigned in frustration after the administration denied his requests for better funding, ventilation, and staffing. College president Theodore Woolsey, who did not see value in the library, replied to his letter of resignation that the library "does not possess that importance which a man of active mind would naturally seek; and the college cannot, now or hereafter, while its circumstances remain as they are, give it greater prominence" (Franklin, 1910, p. 78).

Winsor's dining room

We take it for granted now that the library is the "heart of the university," but it wasn't true in the classical college era. That well-known expression is frequently attributed to the influential Harvard president Charles William Eliot. In coining the phrase, Eliot may have been paraphrasing and simplifying the sentiments of his college librarian, Justin Winsor. Winsor was among the most important early library activists, contributing to the evolution of both the public and the academic library. Winsor compared the college to a house, and wanted to establish the library as the dining room, "the place to invigorate the system under cheerful conditions with a generous fare and good digestion" (1880, p. 8).

He argued "to fulfill its rightful destiny, the library should become the central agency of our college methods, and not remain a subordinate one, which it too often is" (Winsor, 1880, p. 7). He was dubious of the value of textbooks, and saw libraries as a necessary counter to the rigid form of teaching the textbook represented: "I will not say that the library is the antagonist of the text book; but it is, I claim, its generous rival and abettor, helping where it fails and leading where it falters." He proposed to make the library the "grand rendezvous of the college for teacher and pupil alike, and to do in it as much of the teaching as convenient and practical" (Winsor, 1880, 8).

Under Eliot and Winsor's influence, Harvard transitioned from classical college to a university. Harvard was the first school to adopt an elective system of undergraduate education. Harvard was responding to competition from emerging institutions that were free from the traditions of the classical college-era; new private and public institutions dramatically expanded

¹ Betts' successor at Columbia was Melvil Dewey.

the range of subjects taught in American colleges, launching an age Winsor referred to as “the new learning” (1894, p. 370).

This new learning was represented by the adoption of two forms of classroom instruction that originated in Europe, the seminary and topical methods. The advocate who evangelized these methods was the same librarian who was chased away by Yale’s refusal to fully fund their library: Daniel Coit Gilman.

Gilman’s honeycomb

Perhaps no 19th century academic librarian had a more profound impact on American higher education than the one who had resigned from Yale in protest. After his Yale tenure, Gilman became the founding president of Johns Hopkins University, which he designed on a wholly different model from the classical colleges. It represented America’s first research institution. His chief innovation was the introduction of a radical pedagogy built around the library as laboratory, modeled on the seminary and topical classes he experienced as a student in Europe.

The seminary method was for advanced students. Gilman disciple Edwin Woodruff, a Cornell librarian, described the seminary method: at the beginning of a term, students are assigned a subject, and “work on that subject is carried perhaps through a year, reports of progress being made to the professor at period meetings of the seminary. [...] Errors of fact may be rebuked by the professor’s reference to an authority which has escaped the student’s search, and which he is asked to consult then and there, for the room in which the seminary is conducted, is, or should be, in the library building” (1886, p. 222). Woodruff’s colleague George Harris noted the seminary system had been adopted (“more or less intelligently”) by “almost every one of our larger colleges and universities” (1893, p. 43).²

The topical method was intended for novice students. Woodruff explained “students are assigned topics directly connected with the subjects being treated by the professor in lectures or recitations, and are required to make a report to the class, at a given time, upon the results of their library-work on the topic. They are directed to a few authorities by the professor, and, in consulting additional ones, they are governed by their zeal and the time at their disposal” (1886, p. 222). The topical method was the beginning of inquiry-based learning, revolutionary in its time. Cornell professor Moises Coit Tyler was a convert: “I have found it impossible by [recitations and lectures] to keep my students from settling into a merely passive attitude; it is only by the [topical method] that I can get them into an attitude that is inquisitive, eager, critical, originating. My notion is that lecturing must be reciprocal” (Woodruff, p. 222).

Gilman’s vision was that instruction would take place within the library itself. Speaking at a library dedication at Cornell, Gilman explained the operating model of the Johns Hopkins libraries: “Not far away is the library of the Johns Hopkins University, [...] under ten roofs, and in even more compartments, so that the teachers and students of any branch may have at hand in the seminary or laboratory the books most important for the prosecution of that study” (1898, p. 248). Gilman recognized that the best libraries were not static institutions, but in a constant state of flux, “not because its elements are shaken up like the beads of a kaleidoscope, but because

² The seminary method survives today as the senior thesis or capstone paper, a nearly universal measure of student research practice.

they grow like the cells of a honeycomb” (p. 258). He felt “a library is valued [...] by its adaptation to the wants of its clients” (p. 250).

To succeed in making the library central to university instruction, Gilman was clear about the importance of the librarian: “The librarian’s office should rank with that of the professor. [...] The profession of librarian should be distinctly recognized. Men and women should be encouraged to enter it, should be trained to discharge its duties, and should be rewarded, promoted, and honored in proportion to the services they are render” (1898, p. 255).

Palaces for instruction and delight

Daniel Coit Gilman’s revolutionary methods at Johns Hopkins University quickly spread. Nationally surveying the increasing partnerships between librarians and faculty, John Hopkins professor Herbert Adams declared that the libraries of American universities would be “palaces for the instruction and delight of the people and of their sons and daughters,” rather than “stately” and “solemn” (1887, p. 456).

The Reverend T.K. Davis, librarian at the University of Wooster, celebrated the spread of topical education: “Whereas college work used to consist in the memorizing of text-books, *subjects* are now studied. The effort now is to make the student acquainted with things as they are, rather than with what this or that text-book oracularly decides to be the final truth” (1885, p. 100).

Davis also advocated for the elevation of the librarian’s role on campus, calling for both respect and funding: “I enter a plea for the college library as an educational appliance for everyday use of unspeakable value, I plead also for the office of librarian as one second to no other, in some respects, in interest and opportunity — an office distinct and different from that of the class-room instructor, but one without whose supplemental work that of the learned and accomplished professor is incomplete” (Davis, 1885, pp. 101-102).

The University of Rochester’s Otis Robinson was a noteworthy advocate for student access to libraries in a time when closed stacks were still common. “Send the students to the library with these questions, and others like them, and let them bring the answers into the classroom...all sorts of mistakes will be made at first, and so much the more need of continued effort. Point out the mistakes and send them back to the library” (Robinson, 1881, p. 101).

Bowdoin’s George Little taught students directly by partnering with a professor: “The hour following the lecture was spent in practical work [...] in the college library. Each student was given a particular question [...] the class was then studying. In his note-book he was told to put down not only the results but the methods of his work, e.g., titles of books consulted, whether found to be of assistance or not. This requirement enabled me to make more effective suggestions for his future assistance, as the note-books were examined at the close of each exercise” (1892, p. 87).

There was also an emphasis to ensure that libraries were working institutions, not mausoleums. Edith Clarke of the Newberry Library chided Columbia for keeping volumes that “belong to the museum department...they are of no earthly use, but are objects of antediluvian interest” (as cited in Shiflett, 1981, p. 138).

Each of these librarians helped transform higher education, shifting the model of instruction away from one of recitation and memorization, to one in which student inquiry drove the college experience.

Problems, past to present

While college demographics began to shift during the university movement, the environment remained predominantly white and privileged, and this was reflected in early librarianship. Edward Christopher Williams, one of the first black professional librarians in the US, was extraordinarily successful as the Librarian of Case Western University, securing a dedicated library building in 1896 and overseeing a significant increase in the size and prestige of the collection and in the number of users (Josey, 1969). However, he resigned in 1909 due to the poor treatment his wife received from the white spouses of university faculty (Cramer, 1979).

Women who entered the profession had to overcome numerous obstacles. It was historic when the all-male University of Mississippi appointed Julia Wilcox as university librarian. However, she was also expected to simultaneously serve as the campus postmistress (Shiflett, 1981, p. 135). Ada North was rewarded for her groundbreaking work as Iowa's state librarian by an appointment as the librarian of the University of Iowa, only to be dismissed in 1892 so that Iowa's board of trustees could appoint a male, non-librarian crony to the position (Shiflett, 1981, p. 147). Even Justin Winsor, who was otherwise noted for encouraging women to enter the profession, forbade his female staff from appearing in the public portions of the library while it was open to students (Shiflett, 1981, p. 224). Systemic disparities relating to race and gender in hiring and promotion continue to affect the academic librarian profession, an inequity that was clearly established in this initial period of American professional academic librarianship.

The library remains

Contemporary academic libraries face many challenges, such as adapting to emerging technologies, shrinking budgets, rising costs, and public perceptions. But early academic librarians faced a similar if not more daunting set of uphill battles. They had to prove the value of their role when librarianship was not an established profession, when having a dedicated circulating library was not a certainty, and when there was no standardization of library practices. As 21st century librarians grapple with questions relating to professional status, equity, and perception, it is informative to examine how early librarians encountered and overcame many similar obstacles. Creativity and collaboration has been a constant hallmark of librarianship and the cornerstone of the value libraries provide. As Herbert Adams declared, "professors change; students come and go; but the library remains" (1887, p. 454).

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