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The Mellon Report

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The Mellon Report

*On the following pages is a look at a recent study released by the Association of Research Libraries. We welcome comments on the study from readers. The first look is by Albert Henderson, an information consultant, and the second look is reprinted from the **Bryn Mawr Classical Review**, issue 4.2.1 (1993) and is by James J. O'Donnell. — Yr. Ed.*

What Do Research Libraries Need? A Book Review and Opinion by Albert Henderson

University Libraries and Scholarly Communication: A Study Prepared for the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, by Anthony M. Cummings, Marcia L. Witte, William G. Bowen, Laura O. Lazarus, and Richard H. Eckman. Washington, DC. Published by the Association of Research Libraries for the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Nov. 1992 ISBN 9-918006-22-8. xxix, 205 p. illus. \$8.00

Major research libraries are troubled by a widespread lack of appreciation of their economic importance by the many communities that they serve. Library users come and go, using tiny fractions of the collections and other services available; few have a realistic view of the potential that exists. Many policy documents issued by the current and previous administrations avoid the word "library" whenever possible. Library administrators, particularly those in research universities, sometimes use a frame of reference that is equally narrow, concentrating on a particular set of policy objectives. According to William G. Bowen's foreword, the idea for this study originated in a conversation with Neil Rudenstine in 1989. As scholars and administrators, they felt that a "study of the economics of research libraries" was needed. Their principal objective was to describe the "library landscape" in a variety of ways in order to inform policy makers who control future developments. When I first thumbed through this two-part compilation of statistics and comments,

I noticed at once some unique data on how universities have been funding their libraries. The phrases "information needs" and "economic and legal issues" in the table of contents further whetted my appetite.

The first section of **University Libraries and Scholarly Communication** contains very important new information showing the extent to which major colleges and universities have cut into their libraries' budgets during the 1980s. Columbia, Stanford, and Princeton, for instance, reduced their libraries' share of total educational and general expenditures, respectively, 9.01%, 22.69% and 30.03% between 1979 and 1990. The libraries of 24 institutions, representing over 3000 colleges and universities, are analyzed in terms of their share of general budgets with details that are published no place else. For this alone the Mellon study is well worth its \$8 price.

The fact that colleges and universities have been cutting their libraries' budgets should not have been "surprising" (p. 2) to the Mellon studiers. U. Mass. librarian Richard Talbot called attention to this trend, observed in government education statistics since 1969, in his article for the 1984 **Bowker Annual**. The inadequacy of college library budgets is the foundation of the "serials crisis" literature. Faculty members have been consulting with their librarians to help decide on subscription cancellations for many years. What is new and important about the Mellon study data is that it provides a detailed look at how far some universities have chopped away at their libraries' slice of the pie for money to feed other, unspecified, appetites.

The "economics of research libraries" report envisioned by Bowen and Rudenstine is not delivered by the Mellon study. The contributions of Donald King (studies on the economics of science journals, photocopying in libraries, and use of libraries by scientists and engineers), Derek de Solla Price the father of bibliometry, who observed that the written work product of science doubles every 15 years after noticing how the bound volumes of **Philosophical Transactions** of the Royal Society increased in size), and

Eugene Garfield (author of numerous articles about the use of and relationship among learned publications), towering landmarks on the map of library economics, are ignored. Fremont Rider (whose analysis of 107 years of library growth indicated that great libraries had doubled in holdings every 16 years) is mentioned briefly and dismissed, missing an opportunity to examine the economic effects of changes in library funding that are presented in the following pages. The review of historical statistics lacks an authoritative discussion of library economics, particularly the causes and effects of the changes demonstrated in rate of collection growth, library funding, the growth of research product, and publication pricing.

Other omissions are many. The Mellon study does not live up to the promise of its title: it does not consider how university libraries are related to scholarly communication. The study observes a problem in financing, but it does not describe the consequences or causes of inadequate funding. It does not mention how the cancellations of departmental subscriptions has reduced the quality of education. It does not record researchers' expressions of frustration over red tape and an average two-week delay (according to OCLC statistics) in obtaining a photocopy by interlibrary "loan" — or being sent across town to read — from a journal that was recently browsable on site. (Actually, the Mellon study barely mentions library users at all.) It does not explore the notion of Stephan and Levin that "prestige that can be leveraged into resources;" many schools like Princeton and Stanford may now rely on past glory of their library collections for grantsmanship and recruitment. I would have been fascinated to read justifications by the presidents of those universities, of how they decided to cut library funding and how these cuts affected the quality of their education and research product. There is no mention of "indirect funding" of federally funded research, which includes a "library" component that paid \$160 million (equaling 15% of higher education library materials expenditures!) to 100 U.S. universities — which had no obligation to spend the money on

their libraries — during a recent year.

Federal Funding

The absence of a review of federal funding is like a vacuum: it begs for immediate filling. There must be a reason that it is missing because it explains much of part one of the study and provides a clear reason for part two. Consider the missing history of the Higher Education Act of 1965, the powerful economic engine that promoted the collection growth and library expenditures that the Mellon study charts at length. HEA followed the 1957 launch of Sputnik and a decade of bipartisan enthusiasm by policymakers (both parties carried a “library” plank in their national platforms in 1960!) for education, R&D and libraries. During FY 1966 to 1982, HEA Title II-A provided grants totaling \$195 million to an annual average of 2500 research libraries for procurement of books, periodicals, and other library materials. \$85 million was funded during FY 1966-69 (adding 10% to all higher education library materials expenditures). During most of the following 13 years, Title II-A was funded at about 40% of the 1967-69 level. With these facts a young reader can easily understand the sharp increase followed by the decline in “Volumes Added Gross” in larger libraries which is charted by the Mellon study’s fig. 2.6. The Nixon administration attacked libraries by impounding funds in 1973. Reagan, with the support of a Republican Congress, eliminated funding for Title II-A exactly ten years later. Mellon study fig. 3.5 (which was reprinted in *Library Journal* this April 15) traces the funding of its library sample from 1966 to 1990. They did well during the Title II-A years, particularly the first period. They went downhill afterward.

More importantly, the Mellon writers might have focused on the reasons for the loss of HEA library materials funding. The 1983 Senate Appropriations Committee (S.Rept. 98-247) observed, “The Committee shares the administration’s concern over the lack of any needs-based standards for making such awards and recommends that the program be modified accordingly before consideration is given to any future appropriations.” Until then, 40,000 small grants had been awarded to all applicants regardless of size and

need. Following that report, several attempts were made to restore funding, including an alternate bill and a subcommittee staff draft of needs criteria which would have evaluated libraries by comparing them with libraries in similar institutions. This needs formula thus would have eliminated the larger libraries from eligibility as being statistically less “needy.” By 1987, Congress had incorporated the new guidelines developed by ALA’s Association of College and Research Libraries into a revised bill. It didn’t work. HEA’s library materials section was never again funded.

The denouement of this story comes with the 1991 recommendations of Association of Research Libraries and American Library Association representatives Merrily Taylor and Richard M. Dougherty, who urged Congress to delete college library resources, Title II-A, from the Higher Education Act and replace it with a relatively new section called “College Library Technology and Cooperation Grants.”

Now we can see the reason that the second half of the Mellon study highlights the college library technology that falls under the new Title II-A section of the revised HEA (Public Law 102-325). Congress authorized \$20 million for 1993 for grants ranging from \$25,000 to \$50,000 each year to support new technologies that are being introduced or discussed by librarians: of probable benefit to less than 500 libraries. These technologies include electronic systems of bibliographic data, resource sharing and publishing. \$20 million is a lot of money.

What Libraries Need

What is the connection between sections one and two of the Mellon study: between the universities cutting library funding (after losing HEA library materials support) and spending federal money on new technology? It appears to me that the review of various electronic procedures is offered as a solution to libraries’ financial predicament, *deus ex machina*, as contrived alternatives to the traditional forms of collection development. If the Mellon writers hoped to provide convincing economic arguments for new technology based on lack of funding for traditional applications, they have failed. If they hoped to rationalize that

computers would adequately substitute for printed library materials, they have failed. We find only speculative generalizations made in lay terms about possible cost savings and usefulness. There are no detailed foundations for needs-based development or projections of investment cost, how operating costs are recovered, and measurable economic benefits to a variety of users. Even where there must be a very considerable record of costs and cost recovery, such as a decade of experience with “access” via consumable interlibrary loans versus “ownership” of books and periodicals, we are given neither economic nor market data. More important, I miss the observations of library users on how the new technologies have impacted the quality of research and education so far. My impression is that librarians want to explore the new technology simply because it exists; that’s okay with me — but not if it means letting the library collections go to hell in a handbasket.

I am also disappointed in the recommendations of the leaders of the ARL and ALA, whose priorities seem to favor the enthusiasms of a handful of librarians over traditional service to the spectrum of library users. Are they unaware of the “serials crisis” and the impoverishment of libraries like Princeton’s following the loss of old Title II-A support? Isn’t ARL the organization that projected (*Publishers Weekly* July 27, 1992) that, based on the trend of inadequate funding, major libraries would stop buying books and journals entirely by the year 2017, relying then entirely on “borrowing” (actually mostly photocopies) for library materials (I recall the rhetorical comment, “borrow from whom!”)? Interestingly, no organization of library users testified or made recommendations to Congress regarding HEA’s library funding in recent years. As a library user, I would have recommended that Congress consider funding from non-education budgets — defense, energy, human services, state, and health — to experiment with unproven information technologies. These agencies are far better equipped and more experienced than the Department of Education to evaluate and monitor investments in new information technologies. They also use our university libraries while making no contribution to their upkeep.

Answering The Need

The first section of the Mellon study provides part of the evidence needed to develop rational needs criteria" as requested by Congress in the early 1980s to support HEA federal library materials funding with a potential for millions of dollars. Such funding would provide a true remedy for library impoverishment by enabling major research libraries to keep up with the output of research, thus maintaining standards of quality for collection development. For the other major part of the "needs criteria" we must look to the intrinsic needs of library users, rather than the statistical normalization of need attempted with the 1985 education amendments. Each library's clientele differs in many ways, arising from varied programs on campus and off. Every university librarian is aware of government contractors, industrial researchers, visiting scholars, writers, and other off-campus parties who make use of their collections. Interlibrary loan provides a good statistical demonstration of such off-campus use and need. Its rise in activity to offset subscription cancellations is well-documented. For another example, librarians at Georgia Institute of Technology established in the early 1980s that 20% of the uses of their collection originated from off-campus. If studied, the usage activity of many other large university libraries would no doubt reveal similar figures.

Congress should attach vital economic significance to the fact that off-campus users contribute nothing to the development and maintenance of the comprehensive collections upon which they rely. I would argue that if 20% of the uses of the Georgia Tech libraries are "public," more like a public library than a school library, then its collections probably deserve 20% public financing. A relatively small number of such major research libraries, like Georgia Tech, serve public requirements that extend far beyond their own campuses: Libraries that serve the general public need and deserve public financing because they are national information resources. I believe a good case can be made before Congress that the information needs of over 250 million people, 1 million PhDs and other researchers, 3400 colleges and universities, \$120 billion for

R&D — most of which is spent off-campus by industry and government — cannot be met without federal support for research libraries' collection development.

Computers or books: Should they have to compete for funds? Do research libraries need new technology more than they need up-to-date collections? Considering that many of the omissions cited above might provide evidence in support of funding collection development ahead of computerization, one might conclude that the Mellon study was designed to support an agenda for turning our large libraries into computer centers that depend on unnamed other library sources to actually supply information. Or, maybe there was no design — the Mellon study also lacks a complete bibliography of references cited and an index.

Albert Henderson is a free-lance information consultant based in Bridgeport, Conn. He was the primary researcher and writer for "Cost Effectiveness of Science Journals" and other articles relating to library budgets. He can be reached at: Henderson Associates, 2423 Noble Station, Bridgeport CT 06608; Phone: 203-380-0021 direct or 203-367-1555 msgs; FAX: 203-380-1703; 70244.1532@compuserve.com (internet).

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The Mellon Report and Electronic Publishing — A Perspective

by James J. O'Donnell

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Ann Okerson, ed., Visions and Opportunities in Electronic Pub-

lishing: Proceedings of the Second Symposium. Washington: Association of Research Libraries, 1993. ISBN 0-918006-61-9. Pp. vi, 178. \$24 (including postage and handling) from ARL, 21 Dupont Circle, Suite 800, Washington DC 20036; e-mail inquiries to osap@cni.org; phone to 202-296-2296.

Anthony Cummings et al., **University Libraries and Scholarly Communication: A Study Prepared for the Mellon Foundation.** Washington: Association of Research Libraries, 1992. ISBN 9-918006-22-8. Pp. xxx, 205. \$8 from the same distributor.

Let's say you are an American professor, or want to be. Publish or perish, you've heard it said. The phrase 'tenure book' is not one you have to look up in your dictionary. You have written a well-spoken-of dissertation, one that with just a little effort can be made readable, even elegant. It will give the world just that poignant and revelatory reading of Ovid that others have struggled for but not quite achieved.

So you take a copy around to your local university press, introducing yourself to the editor with what you hope is the right mix of deference and authority. You hope for great things. There the fantasy hits some bumpy water. The traditional system of scholarly and academic publishing in this country isn't on life support yet, but it's been smoking heavily for years, and the diet isn't working. How long it will be able to serve you and us is a deadly serious question.

The main facts are simple. The costs of "serials" (journals of all kinds) have gone through the roof, and major libraries (like Princeton) are doing serious cutting of their subscriptions just to stay afloat. But even so, "monographs" are a more flexible part of library buying than serials (miss a volume of **JRS** and your collection looks funny; miss a monograph even from Princeton University Press, and nobody much notices right away) and so our major libraries have been cutting back in absolute numbers on monograph purchases even as the number of titles grows. Sales per title of serious books by university presses are

in a bad way: one major press editorial director was quoted in a national magazine as saying that things that used to sell 1000 copies are now lucky to go 300-500 over the natural life of the book.

To price the books with those sales projections means that prices will begin to "shoot" up, for as total sales drop, costs per copy begin to ascend a very steep curve. The first copy a publisher prints costs many thousands of dollars, for editorial, composition, and production costs, and a certain base of sales is necessary to get the per copy cost down to where the market will bear the price. The problem is that the scholarly monograph market is flirting with the bottom end of the range where it can be priced at all plausibly.

The picture is clear enough. What is to be done?

(1) Get the word out and around. Scholars need to be informed, and insofar as we are the constituency that deans answer to, we need to make the question of how we are to do the publishing that our careers depend on a serious issue inside the main deliberative bodies of academe. For too long, the libraries' fates have been a second-tier issue in our institutions, and the university presses a third order concern at best. The libraries are troubled, the university presses are genuinely at risk: solidarity of the professors with their colleagues in the scholarly communication profession is essential.

(2) Think pragmatically. Electronic publishing is not a cure-all, and not as cheap as it might look. Estimates are that in traditional publishing, only 30% of costs go to production and distribution, and if you save that by not killing trees, you have **some** costs in e-distribution. But failure to exploit electronic publishing resourcefully and swiftly would be a culpable error for us all.

The two books noticed here can help on both counts. I have a paper in one of them and so cannot claim any detached Olympian objectivity, but am frankly partisan. But I give both my highest rating.

The **Mellon study** is the more historical, detailed, and frightening. It is a careful analysis with an abundance of hard evidence of what has happened to the scholarly publishing enterprise in the last twenty years, with a focus on libraries as essential mediators — one

might almost say the capillaries — between other participants in the process. The picture drawn is compelling and riveting. It is important to note that this is the Mellon team that began by looking at Ph.D. productivity, the job market, and graduate education: they turn their attention now to libraries and publishing not because they have an agenda, but because they genuinely want to figure out what is going on. It's a dramatic, storm-tossed scene.

To take only one example: the skyrocketing prices of serials have given librarians the leverage to get from their provosts and presidents increases in budget that have stayed well above the ordinary cost-of-living indexes. But that is not enough, and the slide in monograph purchases and the cancellation of serials that have resulted are beginning to eat into the marrow of the whole scholarly publishing system. It is a paradox that libraries have been very well treated, but there have been an increasing number of claimants on campus that it has not seemed to be enough to sustain unbowed the pressures put on them by the flood of materials at spiraling prices. These are difficult issues to grasp carefully, but this is a report that repays the thoughtful reader.

The **Visions** volume is a pragmatic guide to the state of the art in current thinking and practice about electronic publishing as one alternative. It includes a long-range visionary overview by a leading software developer, and practical examples of specific projects now under way on campuses and in learned societies — including, e.g., Perseus, but also including large-scale corporate undertakings like the Red Sage project that will link AT&T, Springer Verlag, and the University of California Medical Libraries. Some very smart people are out there working very hard to make the future happen.

An elderly ecclesiastical historian of my acquaintance, who in secret would probably rather have been a military historian, likes to say (and I like to quote him), "Time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted." These books address concerns that should already be, and at any rate soon will compel themselves to be, central to the lives of working academics. Buy your dean a copy. Buy your provost two copies! ☺

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