

Farewell
to Alexandria

*Solutions to space,
growth, and
performance problems
of libraries*

Edited by DANIEL GORE

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Farewell to Alexandria

Introduction

The publication of this collection of essays opens a new era for libraries, taking the first departure in 2,300 years from that durable model conceived by the librarians of Alexandria and endlessly replicated by every succeeding generation of librarians, right down to the present day. The Alexandrian model persists through the unexamined faith that to be good a library *must* be vast and always growing. The papers presented here examine that faith scientifically, demonstrate that it rests on nothing more solid than mistaken intuition, and consign it to the limbo of outworn dogmas.

With capital funds for new library construction rapidly disappearing, this collective departure from the Alexandrian model could not have been better timed, for it can take us swiftly in the direction of improving real service to readers, while drastically slowing growth of collections or halting it altogether. Enormous outlays of capital funds for new library building construction, amounting to several billion dollars over the last ten years, did not solve the space problems of libraries. Indeed, among academic libraries it appears that the space problem was even a little worse at the end of the building boom than at its beginning.

If capital funding on the grand scale failed to solve the problem, then its sudden disappearance should not be so potent a cause for despair as is popularly imagined. Intellectual capital can more than compensate for diminution of the other kind, and between these covers you will find it in sufficient abundance to turn your present adversity into bright opportunity, if you have the vision and the will to reach for it.

All of the contributions to this volume, except the last, were presented at a conference sponsored by The Associated Colleges of the Midwest, held in Chicago, April 17-18, 1975. Entitled "Touching Bottom in the Bottomless Pit," the conference was intended to open a national debate on space, growth, and performance problems of libraries—academic libraries in particular, but other types as well. Some 230 librarians participated in the conference, coming from all quarters of the nation, with a sizable representation from Canada.

Issues of great magnitude are not settled in a two-day conference: they are opened and explored, argued and reflected upon. What was remarkable and prophetic about this conference was the willingness, nay the *eagerness*, of so many librarians, all of them holding positions of significant responsibility in the nation's libraries, to entertain seriously that most heretical of questions: Can library growth be curbed or halted without detriment to the central mission of librarians, namely the provision of books to readers? Of those in attendance, many insisted that such a troubling question can be answered affirmatively and that the answer can be converted into effective action—if not immediately, then certainly in the foreseeable future. But before there can be any effective action, on the scale needed to resolve our present space and performance crisis, there must first be a period of intense and searching thought, of careful and widespread investigation, leading to the formation of widely shared convictions upon which group action can be fruitfully founded. This volume marks the opening of that period.

Good wine needs no bush. The contributors to this collection are all seasoned professionals, most of them well known for their published work, the others destined to be so. Their work needs no flattery from an editor to commend it to your attention. It is fully capable of standing on its own merits and is presented here essentially as it came into the editor's hands, with only occasional, and slight, editorial intervention when it appeared possible to add a little polish to the general clarity of the original.

The keenest pleasure in forming such a volume comes in acknowledging the gracious help of the people who made it possible. The most obvious debt is to those who spoke at the conference and offered their papers for publication. Their names appear on the conference program, reproduced at the end of the volume. To Dan Martin, president of The Associated Colleges of the Midwest, I wish to express again my deep appreciation for his lively and constructive in-

terest in the conference's venturesome theme, his generous offer to sponsor the conference under the aegis of The Associated Colleges of the Midwest, and his brisk and able performance as moderator of the panel discussion, printed here as a particularly vocal and provocative ornament to the collection. Jeanette McGrath of the ACM staff handled all the complex conference arrangements with such alacrity, meticulousness, and good-natured ease, she left me and all the conferees with the agreeable illusion that it was simply not *possible* for anything to go wrong. Nothing did, and that speaks volumes—to which I add here an equal measure of praise and thanks for that incomparable result. Judith Anne Duncan, calligrapher to the Macalester College Library, did the splendid calligraphic and other spritely art work for the conference brochure and program, which added a special pleasure (both literal and visual) to the proceedings.

Finally I want to thank my secretary Mrs. Dorothy Barnes for preparing the manuscript of this volume for publication and for overseeing the elaborate promotional work that led to such a fine turnout for the conference. Taking on those tasks in addition to her usual extensive library assignments constitutes, in my eyes, an authentic miracle—something I have learned over the years I can routinely count on her to create whenever the occasion requires it. That is a very good feeling to have, as is the gratitude it continually inspires among all of us who work with her.

D.G.

Macalester College
St. Paul, Minnesota
June 10, 1975

Sizing Up the Space Problem in Academic Libraries

Most libraries now have a space problem to solve, or soon will. Historically, libraries have exhausted book storage space long before they were designed to. I will not dwell on the reasons for this problem here, but the general causes are clear: volume of publication has reached astronomic proportions and shows no sign of receding; the librarian's urge to keep pace with that volume, combined with a reluctance to weed heavily, has led inevitably to prematurely overloaded libraries.

During the biggest building boom in library history, 1967 to 1974, book collections grew a little faster than the new space to hold them. Hence, when the boom was over, the aggregate space problem was just a little worse than it was at the beginning.

During the roughly eight-year span of the boom, about 570 new or expanded library buildings were built on the campuses of four-year and graduate institutions throughout this nation. It was, in the words of Jerrold Orne, "the greatest flowering of academic library building experience this country has ever known or is likely to see."¹ This flowering generated new building space to accommodate 163 million additional volumes. But aggregate collection growth over the same time span added up to 166 million volumes: three million more than space was provided for. (See Appendix I for data sources and analysis that yield these results.) This space deficit would have been fivefold worse except for the weeding of 12 million volumes from academic library collections during the boom years. Had the weeding not taken place concurrently with the building, the failure of efforts to solve the space problem by adding more space would have been perceived sooner.

Balbus; or the Future of Library Buildings

If you collected the works of Robert Graves, as I do, you would have to be acquainted with the Today and Tomorrow series of books, published in the mid- and late 1920s by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner in London and by Dutton in New York. This series numbered more than a hundred rather brilliant, short monographs, on topics of social interest (which happily in those days were not swabbed with the cliché “controversial”). They purported to delineate the future, and their sales were enormously successful. Each title began with a Latin proper name, and Robert Graves’s *Lars Porsena; or The Future of Swearing* went through six editions in four years. None of these books, of course, delineated the future with any accuracy at all, but even today most of them make very sprightly reading. With the title of my address, I therefore presume to join this great English tradition of highly literate, dynamically rationalized inaccuracy. However, I am not daunted by the thought that some of what I say may possibly turn out to be right.

The first approach to my task is to proceed entirely unencumbered by facts. Frequently this is the only approach taken to library problems, but as the day wears on I will supplement it with other approaches.

1. Let’s expand the tiresome cliché “the right book to the right person at the right time” to read “the right *library* to the right person at the right time.” The proper construct to answer this need is the variable-pitch space satellite library, which descends to the user at the press of a button and pours from a cornucopia the very books that he

Limiting College Library Growth: Bane or Boon?

In the past few years I have given a course on the Depression—not the one we're going through now, but THE Depression—focusing on the literature and the arts of the 1930s and going into the economic and political context. In studying and talking about that decade, even while indulging one's nostalgia one cannot help but be struck by the massive unemployment and the accompanying misery and despair resulting from the Crash, and, even more, by the creative responses to them.

The idea of "challenge and response" is hardly a modern notion. Toynbee applied it to entire civilizations, and many writers have individualized it in poems, stories, essays, and aphorisms. "Adversity makes men better," "Are afflictions aught but blessings in disguise?" are a few of the many versions. However one phrases it, perhaps the idea that going through a difficult period can have a salutary effect may be one we should keep in mind. Maybe we will *have to* keep it in mind, if only to preserve our balance. I don't think this is simple rationalization, nor do I mean to sound like Pangloss; this period of economic trauma is surely not the best of all possible worlds. But the present world is, after all, the one we live in, and we should see how we can respond to it creatively and constructively. The economic pressures on higher education are forcing us to take a careful look at what we are doing and why, and *that* can turn out to be a boon.

The space problem has been with us for a long time. Over the past twenty or twenty-five years, however, the years that produced the

Michael K. Buckland
and
Anthony Hindle

Acquisitions, Growth, and Performance Control Through Systems Analysis

Little critical attention has been devoted to the problem of library size, probably because of the complexity of the issues involved and the difficulties of measurement. This inattention is nonetheless remarkable in view of the substantial capital investment required for chronic building expansion, and the amount of attention that has been devoted to other aspects of librarianship.

This paper explores and explains what appears to be involved in a systems approach to the related problems of acquisitions, growth, and library size. The first part of the paper discusses in general terms some of the relevant factors; the second part examines the potential for mathematical modeling in key areas related to collection size; and the third part considers the effects of decentralization and automation.

Part One: Generalities

OBJECTIVES

Library size is determined by the net effect of the numerous decisions that have been made concerning acquisitions and withdrawals. It would, therefore, seem proper to concentrate on decision-making in libraries and on the impact of decisions on library size.

Solving Space and Performance Problems in a Public Library

The Orange (New Jersey) Public Library was founded in 1884, and its present building was erected in 1900. It owns 100,000 adult volumes representing 80,000 titles and adds 5,000 volumes each year. The total adult circulation was 140,000 in 1974.

What is described here are systems of performance and nongrowth developed in a public library serving a heterogeneous community of 33,000 people. Orange has one of the highest tax rates in the state of New Jersey and a fairly low family income level. Nine dollars were spent per capita for all operations in 1974. The library participates in a well-developed (daily truck delivery) network of interlibrary loans with neighboring public libraries. The network extends through the great Newark Public Library to the State Library and two major university libraries. In 1974 (all statistics in this paper are for 1974) 750 items were borrowed from other libraries. Most were borrowed from neighboring public libraries, with only a very small number coming from the State Library and the university libraries.

A one-day (statistically invalid) survey done with the assistance of the Rutgers University Bureau of Library Research indicated that 431 people visited the library. Eighty percent of them reported they were "satisfied"; 44 percent were "students"; and 25 percent indicated they were not card-carrying users.

The staff at the library feels that about half the loans it initiates are for college students who cannot or do not choose to get their books from their college libraries.

Growing Libraries: Who Needs Them?

A Statistical Basis for the No-Growth Collection

The term "no-growth collection," as I use it here, needs to be clarified at the outset. Let me first say what it is not: it is not a library collection where new-book purchases cease, and it is not a library where purchases of necessary duplicates are suspended. However, it is a library where the total number of monographs is held at a no-growth value close to, if not at, the holdings capacity of the library itself.

The no-growth collection attempts, as a matter of policy, to satisfy a stated percentage of total circulation demand, with the understanding that the remaining percentage of nonsatisfied demand will be met through another library or through a cooperative storage facility that houses only lesser used materials.

I should note that my research is directed to inanimate objects in the library, namely the collections, and that my view regarding library personnel is one of great esteem. I have always found librarians to be extremely helpful in solving the complex problems involved in my research. These comments are meant to emphasize that the author is critical only of the holdings that serve the user, not the people.

Perhaps I should also note that, if the primary function of a library is to support research into the farthest depths of obscurity (which may be important), then the question of size becomes irrelevant.

It is commonly said that a good library has the material that will

The Optimum Size for Periodical Collections in Liberal Arts College Libraries

A typical attitude toward periodical collections in the liberal arts library is that bigger is better. This attitude is found not only among librarians, but among faculty members, accrediting organizations, and even college administrators. But surely bigger is better only up to a point, and there must be an optimum size for the periodical collection of a given college library. The college library successful in conducting its periodical acquisition and retention procedures in an informed and rational manner could presumably approximate this optimum.

Many considerations enter into decisions to acquire or dispose of individual periodical titles. A basic assumption made in the following discussion is that such decisions should be based on the extent to which the periodical is read by the library's users. The acceptance of this assumption also implies the proposition that the policies of a liberal arts college library should be designed to provide students and faculty with prompt access to the periodical literature they request, with no financial penalties for requesting periodicals not in its holdings. Prompt access means on-site availability of heavily used journals and efficient interlibrary availability of missing issues—or pages—of heavily used periodicals and of titles so costly or so infrequently consulted that holding them would be excessively expensive per use. The

No-Growth Libraries and Citation Analysis; Or Pulling Weeds with Journal Citation Reports

Weeding is an old-fashioned term in library management, but there is still no process so painful to librarians. I have known several who could fire people more easily than they could discard books or journals.

Weeding a library is like examining an investment portfolio. Investment advisors know that people don't like to liquidate bad investments. How painful it is to realize that the hard-earned money you invested has not worked for you! Investment involves risk—and so does book and journal selection. Both types of risk-taking involve some speculation, a certain amount of guesswork, and a bit of hard information.

Just like frustrated tycoons, many librarians cannot face the fact that some of their guesses go wrong. They continue to throw good money after bad, hoping like so many optimistic stockbrokers that their bad decisions will somehow be undone. After paying for an unused journal for ten years, they rationalize that *maybe* someone will finally use it in the eleventh or twelfth year. It is difficult to buck the momentum inevitably gathered by a long-term subscription; it is so much easier to continue doing what has been done before.

William L. Corya
and
Michael K. Buckland

Automation and Collection Control

Although the main theme of this conference is strategies for stemming library growth, this paper will attempt to show how automation impacts library growth both positively and negatively. The effect of automation on libraries as they increase in size will also be discussed.

Our basic premise is that automation of library processes and access to computer-based files tend mainly to encourage library growth, but the byproducts of such processing and computer-based access tend to stem or control growth if used systematically. Is it not true that the main reason for applying computers to library problems is to cope with growth, not curb it? Most automation projects are developed on the grounds that future growth can be handled with little or no increase in expenditure and that new and improved service can be offered as more materials become available. This seems only to encourage library growth because of the promise that, no matter how large files and materials inventories grow, computers will be able to cope with the size of the materials collection and the files associated with it. Computers, when applied to library processing jobs, simply make it too easy to grow—and appear to contribute almost nothing toward controlling library growth. Therefore, in light of this unexpected dilemma, the remainder of this paper will examine two basic areas of automation as applied to libraries: the technical processing (or computer-based access) applications and the “control” ap-

MODERATED BY *Dan Martin*

PRESIDENT OF THE ASSOCIATED COLLEGES
OF THE MIDWEST

PANELISTS: *CRAIG BAZZANI, RAY HEFFNER,*
JOSEPH SEMROW, AND ALPHONSE TREZZA

Opportunities and obstacles along the road to the no-growth, high-performance library

A PANEL DISCUSSION

MODERATOR: I am deliberately billed on your program as moderator rather than chairman because you have before you an uncommonly obstreperous panel, and I will do my best to moderate what I hope will be their altogether intemperate views.

The gladiators here before you are to my right Craig Bazzani, who is chief of the Higher Education Unit in the Illinois Bureau of the Budget in Springfield, and at his right Joseph Semrow, executive director of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. To my left is Al Trezza who is now executive director of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, but is known to most of us as the state librarian of Illinois; and at his left is Ray Heffner, who is currently professor of English at the University of Iowa. Ray is here as a humanistic scholar, but his previous experience as academic vice-president at Iowa and similarly at Indiana, and as president of Brown University gives him an administrative point of view as well.

After opening remarks from the panelists, each will have an opportunity to rebut one another and then we'll turn to rebuttal, cries of outrage, and other indications of horror from the floor.

Daniel Gore

*"All the rivers run into the sea;
yet the sea is not full."*

—ECCLESIASTES 1:7

Farewell to Alexandria: The Theory of the No-Growth, High-Performance Library

When Abraham Lincoln was asked how long a man's legs should be, he replied "Long enough to reach the ground." One feels comfortable with such an answer: it makes sense, it conforms to reality, it doesn't strain the imagination.

When one asks a librarian how large a library should be, the invariable answer is "Larger. And with provision for further expansion fifteen years hence." One used to feel comfortable with that answer too, because it made sense of a sort (at least to academicians, who intuitively know there is no such thing as enough books). It certainly conformed to the only reality we have known since the foundation of the Alexandrian Library 2,300 years ago. Libraries have always grown until fire, flood, or fighting put an end to them.

But lately the answer has begun to weigh upon the imagination—at least of those who pause to reflect upon the consequences of the observed geometric growth rate of academic libraries in the twentieth century.

For several decades now, academic library collections have been doubling every fifteen years or so. University libraries that held several hundred thousand volumes in the 1930s hold several million today. At that rate, many of them would become, in just fifty more years, about the size of the Library of Congress—a library of such gargantuan dimensions that it calls upon the resources of a whole nation to sustain it.