

Library needs new direction

Critical decisions that shape the University's library policies continue to be made with limited concern for users' needs and little effort to elicit students' comments.

Faced with a budget crunch and his own desire to bring "academic" librarianship to the University, head librarian William Axford has allowed service to decline markedly.

And the dynamic of his professional philosophy portends continual erosion of the "service" side of an institution that represents the heart of student and faculty scholarship.

Details of Axford's performance (presently under routine review by a faculty committee) and other library developments are discussed elsewhere on this page.

OURS

Axford hasn't allowed these developments to occur because he is an incompetent or vindictive person or because he lacks mental acuity and energy. On the contrary, the University librarian comes across as an articulate man with a strong sense of elite professionalism.

These qualities have undoubtedly endeared him to his boss, University Pres. William Boyd, often who shares only a casual concern for students.

But students are, nonetheless, here to eke out an education by wit, wit and/or true grit. And a library that often appears to be in full retreat from students does not ease our mutual concerns.

We believe the following decisions would improve the situation considerably:

- Inclusion of graduate and undergraduate student representatives on committees considering such moves as elimination of branch libraries, reorganizing or consolidation of reference and other services, and decisions on technology used by the library's public;

- Change of criteria for librarians' promotion and tenure that of "administrative" personnel in Oregon Hall and elsewhere who have faculty status but not the requirement of published work;

- Discontinuance of the present microcatalog system or, at least, maintenance of the traditional card catalog until such time as full conversion to an "on-line" computer system can be made;

- Postponing expansion of the library's instructional program until extra staff positions are allocated specifically for it.

Library philosophy under review

Today marks the final day for public comment on the job performance of William Axford, the University librarian who has made his presence felt — in both style and policy — since taking up his duties here in 1973.

The comments — solicited from faculty and staff, but accepted from students as well — are being compiled by a committee headed by math Prof. Charles Wright. Wright's committee, which includes four senior librarians, will prepare a report for Provost Paul Olum, who then will convey the report's conclusions and recommendations to Axford.

In themselves, the committee investigation and report represent a routine process required for all upper-level administrators every six years. Axford's review, however, comes at a time when the University library is steeped in debate over institutional directions as manifest by budget decisions and influenced by funding pressures and demands from students and faculty for sustained service.

At issue are such possible developments as:

- Closure of one or more of the library's campus branches, specifically the Bureau of Governmental Research library in Hendricks Hall;

- Creation of an off-campus central depository for "outdated" materials;

- Complete conversion to a microcatalog system in which the highly criticized microfiche system would replace the traditional card catalog;

- The probability of reduced services to library users or radically changed methods of delivering those services as a result of additional teaching and research demands placed on a static or dwindling library staff.

(Total library personnel declined from 189 full-time equivalent workers in 1974-75 to 182 FTE last year, including the loss of five FTE librarian positions. Axford says he doesn't expect a reversal of the trend in the near future.)

Most of these developments or potential developments can be reduced to a single issue: the confrontation of professional philosophies in which Axford and many of his senior staff champion "academic" librarianship while traditional "service-oriented" librarianship is supported by library users — faculty and students — and,

ironically, many younger librarians.

Of course, as in many such factional discussions in any profession, both sides consider the crucial elements — academicism and service — as being complementary, not opposing values. But the relative weight given each value, especially in the context of the chronically tight-budget situation facing the library, often result in mutually exclusive options with visibly different effects.

Nowhere does the debate become more sensitive than among the library staff itself. Few librarians, tenured or not, would divulge to the Emerald any but the most basic facts of library operation or discuss potentially controversial issues without guarantees of confidentiality.

That timorous sensitivity is reflected in a message from Wright in a Feb. 13 library staff bulletin regarding his committee's activity.

"Some library faculty and staff members, concerned about straining working relations, apparently feel uncomfortable about librarians on our committee reading their replies (about Axford's job performance)," Wright's message said.

His committee needs its librarian members for "technical expertise," Wright wrote, but proposed that letter writers indicate if their comments were for the full committee, non-librarian members only or the chair alone.

Administrative evaluation of their jobs on the basis of academic criteria — primarily the "publish or perish" standard being applied ever more rigorously nationwide — probably remains the issue that rankles "service-oriented" staffers most.

University librarians have had full faculty status since 1936. Their gaining tenure remained perfunctory until the increasingly ferocious competition for ever-fewer posts in the traditional academic disciplines began affecting the library, a situation that coincided with, and was reinforced by, Axford's arrival.

As Axford himself portrays the situation: "You're not going to find anyone promoted or receiving tenure that has an absolute zero in scholarship." He adds that advancement might still come for librarians "with a minimal publication record" and a strong teaching and service history.

One junior librarian, however, ex-

presses the attitude of many of his peers, when he says of academic faculty status, "I don't really care to have their titles and be judged by their standards. We were trained for service."

"You can't publish and research when you've got 40 hours a week at a service position," one said.

Added emphasis on research and teaching has inevitably required the reallocating and, ultimately, diminution of personnel in technical (primarily acquiring and cataloging materials) and public (such as reference assistance and teaching) services.

In a memo to Axford a year ago, for instance, librarian Guido Palandri argued that the teaching of Library 127 "is robbing the Catalog Department of the equivalent of at least .5 FTE."

Catalog department personnel say that they are annually falling behind by between 2,000 and 3,000 items of the nearly 45,000 items they receive each year. Axford, however, disputes that the backlog is growing and concludes that he doesn't "think it's too much of a problem."

Axford has attempted to offset these staff pressures by increasing reliance on technology, centralization of services and curtailment of others he believes unnecessary or of lower priority.

But Axford now may be treating his relationship with faculty members gingerly after his announced support more than a year ago of a statewide central depository near Corvallis provoked broad opposition — more than 25 letters to the Library Committee and top administrators — from professors.

The latter expressed concern about research difficulties imposed by thinning out titles on the shelves — one said more than 50 percent of his information came from "browsing" — and cataloging uncertainties and access with a distant facility.

The central book depository has since been taken up by a committee headed by history Prof. Paul Holbo.

Another committee, headed by librarian Holway Jones, will present its findings to Axford next week on another of the head librarian's proposals: closing of the Bureau of Governmental Research branch in Hendricks Hall.

Microcatalog system suffers from maxi-contempt

A survey of the library's microcatalog system has revealed that a broad dislike and non-use of the system, introduced under the auspices of chief Librarian William Axford. But little relief is foreseen in the near future.

An interpretative report of the survey, conducted and written up by librarian Jim Dwyer, is scheduled for publication in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*.

Based on questionnaires placed throughout the main library during fall term 1976 and winter and spring terms 1977, the survey report describes the responses of 790 students and faculty members using the microcatalog system.

The system uses microfiche cards — photographically miniaturized, plastic negatives of library catalog information, which students read by projecting enlargements on reader machines. An unchangeable "basic" collection reproduces the million-plus entries in the school's card catalog as it existed in 1975; accompanying it are two computerized supplements: one that annually compiles all changes in the basic catalog since 1975 and another that periodically updates the other supplement throughout the year.

The survey included these results:

- Nearly 20 percent of respondents reported physical difficulties in using the microfiche, including eyestrain, headaches, nausea and pains in the neck, back, etc."

- During the course of the survey year, those finding the basic catalog unacceptable — due to illegibility, misfilings and inaccuracies — rose from 14 to 36 percent. Faculty members and graduate students, who were found to use catalogs more due to greater research needs, were more critical of the catalogs than undergraduates.

- "The level of non-use of the supplements was stunning," although these received more favorable evaluations by those who did use them. "Even among frequent microcatalog users nearly a quarter were still unaware of the supplements or had not used them by the final round," the report says.

- Complaints increased markedly at the architecture and allied arts branch after the card catalog was removed and students were forced to rely on the microcatalog system.

Users were "vocal" in their response to the multiple-file system (one basic plus two supplements), requiring a three-part search to approach completeness:

"Too many places to look which is frustrating and time consuming," one survey respondent said.

"Some technologies complicate life rather than simplify it...the new or transfer student is put off from doing research."

Many science students and faculty members labeled the system "inappropriate application of technology."

Although the second supplement is supposed to be updated every month, one librarian estimated that updates arrive only every two months, which means that materials are on hand at the libraries for weeks before they become available.

In addition, destruction, misfiling and loss of microfiche cards remain hard to forestall.

"People wander off and use them as bookmarks. It's equivalent to walking off with a tray of cards," one librarian, who asked not to be identified, commented. "There's no quick way to get duplicates for lost cards, which seem to take forever to get replaced."

Instructional displays explaining use of the "reader" machines and microfiche don't seem to have cleared up the problem, either.

Librarians say students try one or another of the microfiche files, but give up before finding a listing that exists in a different file. Or they will find a listing in the basic catalog, but be unable to find the book, not realizing that the catalog number has been changed and is listed in a supplement.

Axford himself observes that "we haven't done a good enough job telling the people it works best if they work from the small part (the supplements) to the big part (the basic catalog)."

But he defends the change to microfiche as a transitional step to final "on-line" access to a central computerized system, with information continually updated and almost immediately available to students.

Installation of such a system at the University, however, remains problematical. The Library of Congress plans to inaugurate such a system in 1981, but Axford estimates the technology for similar systems appropriate for colleges may lie five years or more in the future.

Matching the availability of funding and supportive officials with the development of technology remains an even more speculative exercise.