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The Library Reserve System— Another Look

In a detailed study of reserve book circulations at the University of Nebraska, the authors found that the percentage of titles never circulated rises rather sharply for course lists longer than twenty titles. On the average, of lists with 1-20 titles, 33 percent never circulated; of lists with 21 or more titles, 42 percent never circulated. Conclusions and corrective actions are discussed.

THE RATIONALE most often used in justifying the existence of a collection of materials on limited circulation, i.e., closed reserve, is that a professor needs to refer his students to specific books for a particular course that he is teaching in a place convenient for use by his students. It is further assumed that these books, having been placed on reserve, are used.

In practice, however, this is not necessarily the case. During the academic year 1968-69, a study was made which measured the use of the central reserve system on the city campus of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. The statistical data gathered were of such impact that they necessitated a thorough reexamination of Nebraska's entire reserve program.

The forces leading to this survey were many. There was an increasing awareness on the part of librarians that many of the titles on central reserve were not being used. In addition, the mammoth task of updating reserve lists and proc-

essing new titles at the beginning of each semester had librarians asking if there was not a better way to handle reserves. Also, with two major expansions forthcoming in library facilities, the need for a system which could be adapted to any part of the library reserve program was recognized. This was particularly true for the new Undergraduate Library which opened for public use in March 1970. As one of its functions, the Undergraduate Library maintains and services a reserve collection for courses numbered below 200.¹ This collection duplicates materials already available at the central reserve desk in the main library. Concurrently, there was a general questioning of the need for, and the place of, a reserve book system in the teaching program of the university, a discussion which centered at administrative as well as faculty levels.

Some background information might be helpful in explaining the statistical information which follows. The library at the University of Nebraska is orga-

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¹ At the University of Nebraska courses numbered in the 000-199 series are generally lower division classes, while 200-300 courses are largely at the senior and graduate levels.

nized in the traditional divisional subject areas: humanities, social studies, and sciences. Education, although a part of the social studies division is treated as a separate entity because of the large number of titles on reserve. Structurally, with the exception of the bulk of the science materials, the collections are located in the Don L. Love Memorial Library. Within Love Memorial Library the collections are housed either in the College Library, a collection of basic books essential to the needs of the undergraduate student, or the central book stacks, which predominately contain research materials. Science books are housed in branch libraries for specific disciplines: chemistry, physics, mathematics, architecture, geology, and the life sciences. In addition, there are two major branch libraries, the Law Library and the C.Y. Thompson Library. The latter is located on the East Campus of the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and serves primarily the colleges of Agriculture and Home Economics. The librarian of the C.Y. Thompson Library is also responsible for the College of Dentistry Library on the East Campus.

The reserve book system in use in Love Library is a closed operation with all material in a centralized location. Materials may circulate for two hours, overnight, or one week. Faculty may request as many titles for reserve as they feel are necessary for their courses. However, each list is examined by the professional librarian responsible for a particular discipline before the titles are processed for reserve. This examination includes a title by title evaluation as well as a verification of information such as author, title, call number, and location in conformity with the request. The librarian then determines, working with the faculty member involved, the length of the loan period, the number of copies needed, and if special handling is required. In the case of faculty requests which

present an extraordinarily long list of titles, the librarian also checks to see if all the titles are necessary for closed reserve or if better arrangements could be made to utilize the material.

The method used in this study was a one-year (two-semester) analysis of each title on reserve. As each book was placed on reserve two records were prepared as part of the normal routine—a 3 x 5 course card and an individual charge-out slip for each book. The course card information included author, title, call number, number of copies, course number, name of professor, length of reserve, and number of previous semesters on reserve. The charge-out record contained author, title, call number, copy number if applicable, and spaces for charge-outs. At the end of each semester, data were tabulated from each charge-out record and matched to the course card. The sample included only material available for circulation at the central reserve desk in Love Library.

The decision to provide information for each title rather than a sampling of titles was made for a variety of reasons. It was felt that to effectively study and evaluate the reserve program as much information as possible was needed. In addition, the desire to provide faculty members with a record of transactions for their particular titles so that they might become aware of actual reserve usage, and thus share in the evaluation, was also recognized. Potential automation of reserves, the formation of a single system-wide reserve program, and an attempt to identify a core collection of reserve books, were other factors involved in the comprehensive title-by-title approach to this study.

Table 1 shows the number of titles available, the number of copies available, and the number of checkouts per semester. These are broken down by subject divisions.

In tabulating the results of Table 2 we

TABLE 1

First Semester			
Subject Divisions	Titles	Copies	Checkouts
Humanities	861	1,362	4,746
Sciences	70	105	492
Social Studies	1,328	2,990	11,122
Education	1,327	3,302	6,772
	3,586	7,759	23,132
Second Semester			
Subject Divisions	Titles	Copies	Checkouts
Humanities	567	927	3,829
Sciences	175	256	1,348
Social Studies	1,042	2,547	10,700
Education	1,412	3,197	9,032
	3,196	6,927	24,909

were surprised by the uniformity of the figures across the broad spectrum of knowledge as well as at all course levels. The consistency throughout the subject disciplines was particularly interesting because we had anticipated being able to identify specific departments who were not utilizing the program effectively. There were, however, some 390 fewer titles for the second semester. This decrease is reflected in the number of titles which did not circulate. The drop in the number of noncirculating titles was the result of a strong letter from the library staff to each faculty member who had had books on reserve for the fall semester of 1968. This letter, accompanied by checkout statistics, outlined the existing problems and asked each professor voluntarily to reduce his reserve list. In addition, a letter was sent from the office of the director of libraries to all deans, directors, and department chairmen asking them to reevaluate that part of their teaching program which required reserve material in the library.

The total number of books which did not circulate during the year seems to indicate that there is a correlation between the number of titles on a reserve list and the number of times that a

title circulates. The following table shows that the percentage of titles never circulated rises rather sharply for lists longer than twenty titles. On the average, of lists with 1-20 titles, 33 percent never circulated. However, of lists with 21 or more titles, 42 percent never circulated.

As a result of these statistics it was decided to restrict future reserve lists to twenty titles per course. This restriction to twenty or fewer titles per course should place on reserve only those titles which are in high demand by the students enrolled in those particular courses and should eliminate from reserve those books which are not being used.

It is presumed that all books recommended for reserve are selected for their importance in the subject under study. These books are thereby removed from the open-shelf collections in the several large reading rooms and also from the book stacks. Had those volumes which were unread in the closed reserve collection remained in the open collections they might have attracted other readers several times over. Books on open shelves attract readers who are browsing as well as readers who want a specific book at a specific time. To be

TABLE 2
CIRCULATION BY LEVEL OF INSTRUCTION AND SUBJECT DIVISION

First Semester									
Circulation									
Titles	Never	%	1-3	%	4-8	%	9 or more	%	
000-199									
Humanities	433	201	47	88	20	44	10	100	23
Sciences	63	24	38	19	30	8	13	12	19
Social Studies	374	144	39	66	18	39	10	125	33
Education	619	276	44	165	27	87	14	91	15
	1,489	645	44	338	23	178	11	328	22
200-299									
Humanities	238	95	40	86	36	32	13	25	11
Sciences	7	2	29	3	43	1	14	1	14
Social Studies	515	218	42	117	23	74	14	106	21
Education	307	110	36	114	37	33	11	50	16
	1,067	425	40	320	30	140	13	182	17
300-399									
Humanities	190	73	39	74	39	31	16	12	6
Sciences	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Social Studies	439	182	41	118	27	66	15	73	17
Education	401	195	49	126	31	39	10	41	10
	1,030	450	44	318	31	136	13	126	12
TOTALS	3,586	1,520	42	976	27	454	13	636	18
Second Semester									
Circulation									
Titles	Never	%	1-3	%	4-8	%	9 or more	%	
000-199									
Humanities	323	121	38	79	24	32	10	91	28
Sciences	168	39	23	59	35	29	17	41	25
Social Studies	206	36	18	38	18	33	16	99	48
Education	567	203	36	145	26	81	14	138	14
	1,264	399	32	321	25	175	14	369	29
200-299									
Humanities	107	33	31	44	41	16	15	14	13
Sciences	7	7	100	—	—	—	—	—	—
Social Studies	513	161	31	154	30	82	16	116	23
Education	490	190	39	157	32	63	13	80	16
	1,117	391	35	355	32	161	14	210	19
300-399									
Humanities	137	26	19	55	40	32	23	24	18
Sciences	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Social Studies	323	169	52	98	31	36	11	20	6
Education	355	149	41	109	31	49	14	48	14
	815	344	43	262	32	117	14	92	11
TOTALS	3,196	1,134	36	938	29	453	14	671	21

TABLE 3

Number of Titles Per List	Courses	Titles	No Circulation	Percent Not Circulating
000-199				%
1-20	231	1,297	429	33
21--	37	1,456	615	42
200-299				
1-20	89	620	225	36
21--	35	1,564	591	37
300-399				
1-20	72	560	196	30
21--	28	1,285	598	47

effective in a closed collection each book must be in frequent and specific demand. According to the figures in Table 2, only 18 percent of all titles in the first semester and 22 percent in the second semester circulated nine or more times. These are the titles which rightfully belong on reserve. By restricting the circulation of the other less-heavily used titles, the instructor had made it more difficult for students other than those in his classes to locate and use these books. In addition, the instructor may also have adversely affected the reading of these books by his own students.

The tentative conclusion reached, as a result of the study, is that there is a rather substantial gap between the teaching methods of the professor and what the student reveals to be his study habits. One can only wonder if the findings of this Nebraska study are unique, or if they are true generally for all colleges and universities? If the answer is yes, is it not time for the teaching faculty and librarians to take another critical look at the reserve book program? Such a reexamination, of course, requires close cooperation. The individual instructor may have to re-evaluate his teaching methods, but the librarian can assist by providing infor-

mation on the effectiveness of the reading assignments given by the professor to his students.

The vast field of paperback books has yet to be effectively utilized as an alternative to the library reserve book program. Many thousands of basic books in all areas of knowledge are available in paperback editions. Many of these cost under three dollars each and the student community could probably afford (and should own) copies of those books which are particularly relevant to their needs and interests. The substituting of student-owned paperbacks for clothbound editions on reserve in the library would mean that libraries could use book money more effectively in collection building, as well as free a great many hours of library staff time for other educational duties.

It is futile to hope that the reserve system can ever be fully abolished. Traditions and patterns of library service are sometimes too deeply ingrained to undergo change. However, continual review and modification of library programs are essential as safeguards against abuses. Above all, the reserve book system should not be permitted to become the end of the student's library experience.