January 2000

The Present: A Postscript

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Expansion of Programs

Recent decades have seen major changes in Penn’s academic programs and in the issues the programs seek to address. The social sciences have expanded in such areas as applied social research, business, communications, criminology and urban studies; and the humanities have experienced the reshaping of traditional disciplines and the rise of cultural and gender studies. The biological, medical and physical sciences have experienced the rapid development of new disciplines and subdisciplines. Interdisciplinary study and research has become one of Penn’s distinguishing features. New approaches to teaching and learning have engendered new needs and new directions for information management.

Information has Changed

The nature of information has changed along with the academic programs. The focused print and manuscript collections, described and illustrated in the preceding essays, have been joined by resources on film, fiche, cassette, disk and in a variety of digital formats. Information may be textual, aural, visual, or numeric, and will be used in different ways by faculty and students in different disciplines. The Library now seeks to acquire the information needed in whatever format it is available in and useful, and to create flexible and adaptable ways of organizing that information.

The Digital Library is Penn’s principal response to the changing world of information. Through it the Library seeks to broker, filter and organize information resources in all the formats which Penn’s faculty and students require. The Digital Library draws together the Library’s online catalog to its print resources, networked journal indexes, over 2,300 full-text journals, literary databases, encyclopedias, newspaper archives, scanned manuscripts and other images, and numeric information bases. The librarians whose essays make up this volume are among the creators of the Digital Library and thus in new ways continue the work of their predecessors.

The Digital Library, however, does not supplant the need to maintain information and collections in traditional formats.
Print publishing increases every year, and the Library continues to acquire books and journals in large numbers, along with microfilm, audio disks and manuscripts. We are also developing a film collection, on video cassette at present and most likely DVD in the near future. In recent years the Library has been enriched by new collections such as the Robert and Molly Freedman Jewish Music Archive and the Thorsten Sellin Criminology Collection. Both collections make Penn a leading institution in their fields.

Continuity of Values

Although academic programs have undergone changes in the last quarter century and the resources needed to support them now are more varied in format than they were, the criteria for collection development, which Rudolf Hirsch and his colleagues on the faculty established and implemented, have continued to guide the work of Penn’s bibliographers and curators to the present day.

Hirsch himself found a worthy colleague and successor in Bernard J. Ford, who came to the Library on exchange from the University of London in 1953/54, and whom he and Kenneth M. Setton, the Director of Libraries, induced to join the permanent staff in 1956. Ford held a number of positions in the Library until his retirement as Associate Director in 1990, but for much of his long tenure he served as the principal selector of new books and journals in the humanities and social sciences in English, French, Italian and Spanish, complementing Hirsch’s work in German and in the antiquarian field. No one who knew him can forget the diligence and excellence of judgment Ford brought to bear on the bibliographical tools of his trade over a span of three decades.

Following the years in which Hirsch and Ford worked in tandem, other librarians began to assume collection management responsibilities in response to the University’s expanding programs. The staff involved in building up and maintaining the Library’s collections now numbers nearly thirty librarians with varying ranges of responsibilities. The Library’s new Humanities and Social Sciences Bibliographers manage resources in many subjects; other librarians, often in departmental libraries, have more narrowly focused responsibilities. All have subject expertise and specialized skills and a commitment to the work of Penn’s faculty and students. Carefully crafted policy statements,
developed by bibliographers and faculty working together, ensure that the Library’s collection development program matches the University’s academic programs. Throughout these years of expansion and change the needs of Penn’s faculty and students for research and teaching resources remain the focus of the Library’s collection development effort, and the standards of selectivity and excellence which Hirsch, Ford, and others set forth continue to be the touchstone by which we seek to be judged.