The Gordon Library After 2½ Years

by

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Two and one-half years have passed since that bright day when the doors opened to the George C. Gordon Library. Yet not all immediate reactions to that day were optimistic. Many felt the library was going to be a white elephant with inexcusable expenses and perhaps even of little use. Some faculty and students bemoaned the fact that the departmental “libraries” were no more, and thus, the book and periodical collections in the new building would just draw dust. Few of the faculty and none of the students would hold with such ideas today, for this building more than any other has tied the Institute together. Departmentalization is gone when it comes to library operations. Everyone becomes a part of WPI when he enters the doors of this carpeted interior. Its design, furnishings and decorations have set a new tone for future building on the campus as well as proved that good architecture means a good investment.

Services which were nonexistent before are now taken for granted. There are few days in which the Seminar Room is not in use by student, faculty, and the Worcester Community. It is thought prestigious to hold a meeting in the Archives Room. Much interest is displayed at our exhibits on the third floor. On the other hand, disappointment is seen if the latest hometown newspaper or popular periodical is not on the rack or if a certain record or tape is not available in the Music Room. It is hard sometimes to distinguish between one’s personal and professional attitudes to the library.

What does a library do? What is its function? Whom does it serve? In years past a library was a collection of books and periodicals, neatly housed on shelves with a few tables and chairs for the few people who ventured to read them. That concept has been greatly vitiated. Now one thinks of a library as a learning center where tools of the mind may be stored and utilized. Although hard cover books are still a major part of any library, one cannot ignore micro-form reader-printers, copiers, electronic calculators, music and other audio services, visual presentations through film and displays — individual and group study areas — even lounges in which to relax — all have become library functions. The library is changing and will continue to do so in the many years to come. Yet can we question this, for is not change an inherent component of growth? If we answer this in the affirmative, then we must realize that as the needs of our students, faculty and society modify or enlarge, we must in turn adapt to them. The importance of automation in the library’s operations is just beginning to be studied in a serious manner so that more practical and financially acceptable programs may be designed for improving the dissemination of knowledge.

Recently, the Gordon Library has become the headquarters of the Massachusetts Technical Referral Center, a project supported by both federal and state funds. The Center is to provide the Commonwealth’s business, commerce and industry with useful referrals to appropriate technological information and expertise.

Technical reports which have become a major source of current engineering and technical data and research have often been ignored by most libraries. They are usually shelved in a back room without being cataloged and classified with the hope that no one will request them. Here again we are attempting to find ways to make such material more readily available for use by the undergraduate, graduate student, and faculty.

However fine the collection, a library’s reputation has always been based upon the quality of its staff. Too many times an individual’s contact with the staff is through the untrained clerical help at the Circulation Desk. Here again, I feel WPI has done well. Our staff is young, eager and intelligent so that one is not discouraged from asking for assistance. Part of the responsibilities and reward of a good staff is to feel it is sharing in the education of its patrons. It is most important from a morale point of view that the well-trained professional librarian be accorded the same respect as that which is given the faculty.

Formerly, environment was never really given much thought in library building. A table, chair, and suitable lighting were considered adequate for the “scholar”. This idea, too, has been drastically changed, for libraries generally lead the academic campus in esthetic appearance. Air-conditioning, carpeting, luminous lighting, windows
with extended views, and upholstered furniture reflect some of the comforts of the modern times. Bright colors, textures, and variations of construction are as much a part of the environment as its circulation desk and book shelves. In other words, today’s library is doing its thing in pleasant surroundings with a cheerful, competent staff who cares about its patrons. In recent years the library has been "trying a little harder".

Now one might ask, what are the future plans of the Gordon Library at WPI? I foresee much more cooperation and inter-use of the other academic and special libraries in Worcester. With the Worcester Consortium established and a group called the Worcester Area Co-operating Libraries much can be done to break down the barriers of the staid private college and its aloof view of the outside world. The exchange of students among the various campuses will bring about, at some future time, a library charging card that will be accepted at all institutions within the city. It will be the task of specific libraries to maintain book materials of certain disciplines. Here at WPI the areas on which we shall concentrate will certainly be those of engineering, certain sciences, and the history of science and technology. The various academic libraries taken as a whole will form a sort of unofficial University Library of Worcester.

Automation is a realistic goal as well as a practical one under this cooperative scheme. Central purchasing of books as well as central processing can be accomplished. This could lead to a union-catalog of holdings that is a complete listing of book materials for the entire city. You may ask, will this decrease efficiency of the Gordon Library’s operation for WPI students? No, I believe it will be enhanced, for the student body will have at their disposal resources of greater depth and scope than ever before.

Another aspect of change will be the increased use of film loops, short
films explaining a specific function or period in our history. Here again the library will be housing numerous loops and readers — the concept of the picture book. Such loops, if carefully designed, can act as a supplement to classroom teaching.

With the great explosion of the printed word, many feel that a library building will be outgrown before it has been completed. I hope that the Gordon Library will be more than adequate to function into the next century. This can be accomplished through micro-storage of material. Hard cover books and bound periodicals consume space and cause the need for physical expansion. There is no reason that older and seldom used but nonetheless valuable periodicals cannot be placed on some sort of microform, reducing the storage required to the amount of 1/100 to 1/1000 of the existing area. With improved reading equipment and excellent printers for making full-sized copies, the student can read and retain the material needed for research. The library has received from NASA 100,000 technical reports on microfiche, requiring some eight file cabinets to house them. This vast mine of information would require an area 100’ by 10’ of shelving were it not for the microfiche.

Problem solving is also becoming another function that has been transferred to the library due to its long hours of service — averaging fifteen hours a day. The library contains the fantastic electronic calculator for solving mathematical equations and engineering problems. The one calculator which is in the library at present is no longer sufficient, for the demand is so widespread that we are being forced to consider additional ones.

The cultural area of education must be augmented; the music room is serving a viable purpose. It is a pleasure to hear a student comment that he enjoyed and appreciated other music than rock and roll. Yet whether it be classical, jazz, the blues or the now accepted rock and roll as personified by the Beatles, it is most important to expose students to all types.

The displays, both in the vestibule cases as well as those on the third floor walls, attempt to give a wide variance of the visual world. From the photographic exhibit of WPI's George E. Schmidt to the lithographs of Stow Wengroth to the architectural design of Nervi — the student is exposed to an exciting artistic world. Japanese and Chinese porcelains and pottery as compared to fine printing provide still another diverse expression of our heritage.

I feel the Gordon Library continues to progress with the times and within it is serving the needs of its students and faculty. However, this does not mean we can be complacent. The greatest need and present lack of the library is an endowed fund in which money is readily available — where the new and unusual may be explored toward resolving a better education for our young people. With such a fund, apart from day to day operating expenditures, the library could be even a stronger innovator in its teaching role.

Thus, the modern academic library is no longer just a depository for the written word, but encompasses whatever tools and methods are required to be a learning center to stimulate the mind and prepare it for contributing to mankind.

ROTTC at WPI—Very Much Alive

by

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This fall, ROTC at Worcester Tech took on a new look. For the first time in its eighteen-year history, the program became entirely voluntary. Although this caused some drop in enrollment, the size of the WPI Cadet Corps remains quite respectable. Along with this, a few bold innovations in our course curriculum and in our approach to practical leadership development are helping to put new vitality into the program. All things considered, ROTC is very much alive on today's WPI campus, and the outlook for the future is optimistic.

Just what was the impact of the change to voluntary ROTC — in numbers? — in quality? Our major concern, of course, was the incoming freshman class which, as expected, was well over 600 students. During the summer we had written to all these prospective cadets, explaining the purpose of the Reserve Officers Training Corps and how the program could help to prepare them to fulfill their future military obligation as commissioned officers. We knew, however, that the real payoff would be on the strength of our appeal to these young men in our personal contact with them at the start of the school year. This opportunity came in September when all the incoming male freshmen attended a mandatory 30-minute orientation on ROTC. This wasn't much time, we realized, but we were determined to make the best use of it. During this period we briefly exposed the new students to all the members of the military staff (six officers, five NCO's, and three civilians). We told them about the ROTC program in general and how it could benefit them. We discussed Selective Service, how they