Fondren library falls short

By RICHARD BEST

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The planned expansion of the Fondren Library at Rice is good news. We are thankful. Libraries are integral to the business side of academic life and along with general university expansion, the addition of books, journals, film and assorted research aids is vitally necessary if this institution is to grow in accord with the Trustees' Ten Year Plan. Anyone who has seen the make-shift shelving now in use or tried to work in the stuffy over-crowded microfilm rooms will recognize the need for expansion of the physical plant and appreciate expanded microfilm and reserve services.

Nevertheless there are those of us who are skeptical about our library's future. As bad as space limitations are, many critics allege that the primary need is for expanded collections in all areas. The Rice Library is, like the school itself, young, having developed ex nihilo. Again like the entire institution it must move twice as fast to catch up.

Gaps Exist

Book acquisitions have not been carefully conducted in the past, thus many good-sized gaps presently exist in various disciplines. In this writer's area (history) some sections are well-stocked, at least as basic sources are concerned, while others are virgin territory.

Yet, unfortunately, it is not unknown to find basic volumes mentioned in all basic texts not available. For instance, though holdings in American Civil War history are among our best, more than one work by Bruce Catton has never been ordered. Perhaps inevitably some books that are of a series are not listed in the catalog under either title or author. One book, at least, has two different call numbers. Several faculty members assure me that this type of situation also exists in their disciplines.

Chaotic System

The constant discovery of unpardonable gaps and general inadequacy can surely be explained by an acquisitions system that borders on the chaotic. Ordering is left up to the several academic departments of the University, or rather to the several faculty members of these departments. Not surprisingly, some faculty members order books only for their personal research and others seem to order nothing at all. Anyone who has surveyed the initials at the bottom of order cards will soon observe how few professors endeavor to maintain the library's collections in their disciplines.

Inconvenience

This situation means that current works are not necessarily purchased and that future students will have to see that they are ordered with resultant delays and extra charge for out-of-print works, or, as is more likely, he can do without. Even in cases when one is relatively certain that the books in question will be around for some time, unnecessary inconvenience can result.

The fact that as of December 7 no order of Schlesinger's "A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House" had appeared indicates that someone is not conscientiously ordering or, more regretfully, that no one is interested. We should be able to assume that this kind of book will automatically — and promptly — appear on the shelves.

Bizarre Example

Another bizarre example of library policy is the note on the card in the middle of tray #1682 under the heading "Texas Observer." "Library receives current numbers only; back issues are discarded after 3 mos." The next card, strangely enough, is an order card for three reels of microfilm of "The Texas Observer," for January 10, 1955 to December 27, 1963. Cost: $83.43. Note that even this inconvenient microfilm will not go up to the present.

Examples of this sort of thing occur in any library, perhaps, but they do so here with aggravating regularity. This writer is willing to bet anyone a pitcher at Kay's that of the works reviewed in any given issue of the "New York Review of Books" 50 percent or more will not have been ordered a month later.

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There are several ways this situation could be improved. Each department could give some graduate assistants the responsibility of ordering works reviewed in major journals (as the English Department has done to a limited extent). Standing orders might be placed with scholarly publishing houses for all their publications. There are, after all, few works put out by the Oxford University Press that the Rice library will not need eventually. Perhaps the library might even add an acquisitions staff that would take the burden of ordering off the departments.

The need and practicality of such a system is blatantly obvious and has been so for some time. We are hardly the first to appreciate the current state of affairs. When one seeks to discover why nothing has been done before, bafflement results. Absence of foresight by library planners, lack of concern by the faculty for the needs of the University, and student apathy are part of the answer. But ultimately one feels that this is a primary responsibility of the administration which has not been met. One's confidence is shaken in men who beat the bushes in search of funds for bricks and mortar, but, incredibly, give no concern to what goes inside.