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The History of the Engineering Libraries Division, Part 2: 1960-2017

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Paper Authors

Michael J. White *Queen's University*[author page](#)[Download Paper](#) | [Permalink](#)

Abstract

This paper is the second part of a two-part history of librarians in the American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE). Part 1 covered the period from the founding of ASEE in 1893 through 1960.¹ By the end of the 1950s, ASEE's membership had grown to over 8,700 including approximately 50 librarians. In 1961, ASEE hired a professional executive director and established a permanent headquarters in Washington, D.C. The Engineering School Libraries Committee (ESLC) continued to organize programs at ASEE annual conferences. However, there was a shift in focus from library collections, formats and the role of librarians in engineering education to computer technology and information systems. In late 1966, ESLC petitioned the ASEE Council to grant it division status, arguing that it would recognize "the important position of engineering libraries" and "enable more engineering librarians to attend regional and annual meetings." ESLC also noted that the rapid development of computer technology and online searching "make it essential that the ELSC be able to work with the various ASEE divisions on an equal basis." The ASEE Council agreed, and in 1967 ELSC became the Engineering Libraries Division (ELD). ELD membership jumped from 55 in 1965 to 142 in 1970 and continued to rise over the next decade. In the early 1970s, financial and copyright issues began to emerge as significant problems for engineering libraries. Although librarians had always struggled to provide adequate services with

inadequate resources, during the 1970s administrators increasingly demanded proof of library productivity and efficiency. The long-simmering debate between departmental and centralized libraries began to shift in favor of the latter as universities sought to cut costs and reduce duplication. The 1980s was a time of rapid technological change for engineering libraries. In quick succession, online library catalogs replaced card catalogs, CD-ROM and online databases replaced print indexes and electronic publishing emerged as a viable alternative to print journals and books. ELD developed fruitful partnerships with the Computers in Education Division and Information Systems Committee. ELD also attempted, with limited success, to reassert the role of librarians in teaching and accreditation. Financial constraints continued to plague engineering library development in the 1990s. ELD's membership stabilized at about 150 through the 1980s and early 1990s, but then increased rapidly, peaking at 254 in 2010. The emergence of the internet in the mid-1990s created new opportunities for engineering librarians to connect with users and provide access to licensed and open access resources such as patents, theses, data, and technical reports. The transition from print to electronic publishing accelerated in the early 2000s, which coupled with space needs, financial pressures and changing user preferences, forced many engineering libraries to downsize or merge. Despite these challenges, engineering librarians continue to be a dynamic, resourceful and relevant community within ASEE.

1. White, M. J., "The History of the Engineering Libraries Division, Part 1 - 1893 to 1960," in 2016 ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition, New Orleans, Louisiana.
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