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Student Reliance on Faculty Guidance in the Selection of Reading Materials: The Use of Core Collections

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The notion that students read the basic standard works in a given discipline has long been the cornerstone for building college library collections and undergraduate collections in university libraries. The view has been supported by the general belief that the teaching faculty of these institutions have a strong influence over what students read since most such reading is course related. The objective of this paper is to look critically at these two notions by bringing to bear some survey data designed to test them.

Book collections designed to meet the classroom needs of students have been conceptualized in terms of core collections. The concept suffers, however, from having two distinct definitions, one formulated to state what students ought to read and the other to state what students do in fact read. Collection managers have generally viewed the core collection from the perspective of the first definition. They have interpreted the problem as one of building a small collection of books that represent the highest quality of titles on the present state of the art and are written in a style suitable for the undergraduate student: i.e., a collection of books that students ought to be reading because these books are the ones best suited for expanding their mental horizons and improving their scholastic achievement. To create such an "ideal collection," collection managers, and more especially undergraduate librarians, have not only sought the advice of college and university faculty members, but they have turned to the standard tools designed to give guidance in the creation of such a collection, namely, *Books for College Libraries* (2nd ed., 1975) and *Choice*.

Librarians with an orientation toward operations research and library use, on the other hand, have used the second definition. They have defined the problem as one of identifying that core of titles which students use most frequently. The rationale behind this approach is that the library's purpose is to maximize circulation and avoid the purchase of unused or little used titles. This perspective was most forcefully presented a few years ago when Richard Trueswell, himself an operations research engineer, did a use study to show that 20% of the titles in a collection account for 80% of the circulation.¹ Other studies designed to examine this result have produced different ratios of circulation to collection holdings, but the basic concept has remained solid.²

The question of quality of the titles most frequently used by students has never been satisfactorily answered by those conducting use and user studies. While the collection manager may be concerned for the quality of the core collection, this is a non-problem for those using operations research techniques and doing use studies. The failure of those librarians who apply these two criteria for building core collections to see the disparity between the two approaches lies in two implicit assumptions. One, students are guided in the use of library books by their faculty instructors, mainly through recommendations made on reading lists and syllabi, but also through personal contact. This assumption is not unreasonable, since a recent survey of the content of the syllabi used in a large state university showed that about 50% of the courses in the humanities and social sciences required library use beyond the reserve book collection.³ Two, librarians assume that because the teaching faculty guide students to the right books, the most frequently

circulated books will also be those most highly recommended for undergraduate collections by *Books for College Libraries and Choice*.

This paper challenges the implicit assumptions that a use-defined core collection will be roughly equivalent to a quality-defined core collection. It examines the circulation history of a sample of titles currently in circulation and determines whether or not these titles were recommended to the student by the instructor and whether or not they were recommended by the standard selection tools used in building undergraduate collections. While this is a user study, its implications are for collection management. Because of the sampling technique used, the working definition of the core collections in this study will be a collection of frequently circulating titles. When this type of core is referred to in the study, it will be designated as the “high-circulation core,” or some similar term. The other type of core will be labeled the “core of standard works,” or otherwise qualified to convey that notion.

The two assumptions were incorporated into the undergraduate library movement of the 1960s. The undergraduate library was designed to meet the special needs of undergraduate students, among which were duplicate copies of titles frequently used by students for their classroom assignments. Books were selected, however, to reflect the standard works of the field.⁴ College faculty were consulted as to the most important works in their fields of specialization,⁵ and *Books for College Libraries and Choice* became automatic buying guides. There was some consternation in the 1970s when the undergraduate library did not appear to be fulfilling its mission. In a recent postmortem on undergraduate libraries, sluggish collections were mentioned along with other faults,⁶ but no one questioned the relevancy of a collection selected on the basis of critical merit for meeting the actual reading preferences of students. One university library, in an evaluation of its undergraduate library’s failure, did pinpoint the inadequacy of the collection, which had been largely selected by the faculty. Presumably, the faculty had selected the more significant titles in their fields. A major recommendation of the evaluation was to assign selection responsibility to the undergraduate librarians and to the students.⁷

Further evidence that students may not be making heavy use of the core of standard works is found in a recent study by Schmitt and Saunders. This study shows that there is only a minimal correlation between how well a new title was reviewed in *Choice* and its subsequent circulation during the first two years on the shelf. Of 310 titles reviewed by *Choice* and acquired by the Purdue University General Library, 61 were recommended without hesitation for all undergraduate collections. Yet, after an average of two years on the shelf 23% of these 61 titles had not circulated at all, and only 40.8% had circulated three or more times.⁸

The declining enthusiasm for undergraduate libraries and the modest correlation of selections from *Choice* with library circulation are portents of a fundamental problem for the collection manager. To clarify the issue, a study designed to examine what undergraduates read and the process of selection was conducted during the 1981-82 academic year in the main library serving the students at Purdue University. The study

sought first to determine the extent to which students rely on their professors for guidance in the selection of reading materials beyond course textbooks and reserve reading assignments. If, in fact, the faculty are giving little or no direction, there is reason to suspect that the students may not be using the standard sources in their fields. The second objective of the study was to analyze a sample of frequently circulated titles, in order to determine whether these were among the best books as defined by *Choice* and *Books for College Libraries*. The study addressed the following questions:

1. Are 50% or more of the titles charged by undergraduate students recommended by their instructors, either directly or through reading lists?
2. Are those titles recommended by instructors more likely to be in the core of frequently circulated titles than they are in the group of low-circulation titles?
3. Are 50% or more of the core titles charged by students either listed in *Books for College Libraries*, reviewed in *Choice*, or highly recommended for college collections in *Choice*?
4. Is the core of titles frequently used by students more likely to be included in *Choice* or *Books for College Libraries*, than are the less frequently circulated titles?
5. Are the titles recommended by the faculty more likely to be included in *Books for College Libraries* and *Choice* than are those selected by the students themselves?

The Purdue University General Library offered favorable conditions in which to test these questions. The General Library is the main library on campus and serves the School of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education. Although there are over 32,000 students on the West Lafayette campus, only around 6,000 are in the School of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education. Classes in this school tend to be small, and most of the students are undergraduates. Thus, the situation in the Purdue General Library presents the paradox that the patrons are more typical of the student population of a small or medium size college or university, but the collections are of the type found in ARL libraries. In other words, these conditions seemed to make faculty guidance of students and development of an active core collection especially important.

COLLECTING THE DATA

A sample of library patrons who charged materials from the circulation desk and the titles they charged were drawn from the universe of Purdue University General Library borrowers during the 1981-82 academic year. Monographs charged during randomly selected one hour intervals were included in the sample, and students who charged books during these hourly units were interviewed. The data were collected during 18 one-hour intervals that were randomly distributed during the period between November 1981 and March 1982, but were partitioned so that 9 hours fell in the last half of the fall semester and 9 hours in the first half of the spring semester. This division between the first and second half of the semester assumes that students use the library for class assignments at the beginning of the semester and for research papers toward the end of the semester, thus affecting their reliance on class reading lists as the semester progressed.

As the patrons were checking out books at the circulation desk, they were asked if they might be interviewed. Each student was asked (1) whether he or she was an undergraduate or graduate student, (2) whether the books being charged were related to their studies in a specific course or were for leisure reading, and (3) whether the titles had been selected from a professor's reading list, personally recommended by their professor, or select by the student. The call number of each title charged was also obtained. Non-students were simply asked for their status at the university and for the call numbers of the titles they were charging.

After the interview, the call number of each title was checked against the shelf list to determine author, title, publisher, date of publication, and date of cataloging. Titles published prior to 1973 were searched in *Books for College Libraries* to determine inclusion or exclusion. If a variant edition of the same title was included, the title was credited with inclusion. Title published after 1963 were searched in *Choice*. Those reviewed were ranked according to the reviewers recommendation as follows:

1. Unqualified recommendation. A worthy addition to any collection. Especially useful to the undergraduate.
2. Recommended with reservations or not recommended. For special collections only.

Following a sufficient lapse of time for the titles to find their way back to the shelves of the library, each title was retrieved and the frequency of circulation as noted in the back of each volume was recorded. This was possible because the General Library Circulation Department had instituted the use of transaction cards in 1961-62. This meant that one could trace the circulation of each title for up to twenty years, depending on how long the title had been in the collection. Only frequencies from 1 to 7 were recorded. Frequencies beyond 7 were recorded as 7 because the handwritten circulation record becomes illegible beyond that point. In case of multiple copies of a single title, the total frequency of circulation for all copies was recorded.

The information of each title was entered on an IBM card, and this individual title was used as a case for statistical analysis using the SPSS programs.

RESULTS

The data sample was quite complete and sufficiently random to estimate population parameters. Of the 247 students who charged books during the 18 hours of data collection, 240 agreed to interviews, four refused interviews, and three escaped before the interviewer could corner them.⁹ The call numbers of 639 monographs charged by both students and non-students were recorded. Of the 639 monograph call numbers collected, 623 were later matched with titles. The other 16 call numbers were apparently miscopied and had to be dropped from the sample. Of the 623 titles in the monograph sample, complete data was found on each except for circulation frequency. Because some titles were renewed or not returned, and the author was not willing to disrupt the patron's right to renew books for the purpose of the study, it was not feasible to obtain circulation

statistics on 41 of the 623 titles in the sample. Because the 41 titles represent only 6.6% of the sample, this small deficiency in the data should have no noticeable effect. Of the 623 titles in the sample 598 were charged by either students or faculty members, the balance being accounted for by outside patrons. The analysis begins with an examination of these 598 titles.

Table I (see below) shows the frequency of circulation and patron status for titles checked out by patrons associated with the university. For the purpose of this study the column tagged, "Circulated 6 or More Times," is defined as the core of frequently circulated materials. Only 19% of these core titles were already in the collection when the transaction cards were introduced in 1961-62. Defining one to twenty years as the range for circulation exposure, the sample core had been available for circulation for an average of twelve years.¹⁰ The titles studied in the University of Pittsburgh study had been exposed for circulation for six to seven years, 1969 to 1975. After six or seven years, 23.3% of the titles had circulated six or more times.¹¹ The years of circulation exposure and the methodology for the Purdue study differ from the Pittsburgh study, yet the size and use of the two collections are comparable. Extrapolating from the Pittsburgh study, one might hazard a guess that the core of frequently used titles as defined in the Purdue study represents between 20% and 30% of the total collection.

TABLE I

CIRCULATION HISTORY OF TITLES CHARGED BY STATUS OF PATRON

Patron Status	At Time Sample Titles Were Charged They Had:								Row Totals	
	Never Previously Circulated		Circulated Once		Circulated 2-5 Times		Circulated 6 Or More Times			
	No.	Row %	No.	Row%	No.	Row%	No.	Row%	No.	Column %
Faculty	18	26.9	11	16.4	20	29.9	18	26.9	67	12.0
Graduate Students	7	5.3	11	8.4	36	27.5	77	58.8	131	23.3
Undergraduate Students	22	6.0	19	5.2	70	19.2	253	69.5	364	64.7
Column Totals	47	8.4	41	7.3	126	22.4	348	61.9	562	100.0

Missing Cases = 36

As Table I shows, undergraduates rely heavily on titles from the core of frequently circulated titles, while faculty are more likely to use titles that have never before circulated. Nearly 70% of all undergraduate charges were for titles that had already circulated six or more times while only 26.9% of faculty charges had circulated that often. One might attribute this to the fact that a faculty member is more interested in recently acquired titles; yet an examination of the average years of circulation exposure is not greatly different for the two groups, faculty selections having been available on the average for 10 years and undergraduate selections for 12 years. What is surprising is the fact that the graduate student pattern is similar to that of undergraduates rather than to

that of faculty members. A graduate student is far more likely to select a title with a long circulation history than one which has never circulated.

Students, for the most part, do not rely on faculty recommendations or reading lists to select the titles they read. As Table II (see below) indicates, only 15.9% of the titles selected by undergraduates were based on the recommendations of their instructors, and only 16.6% were among the core titles circulated six or more times to undergraduates. A glance at the row percentages in Table II shows that the titles recommended by instructors were no more likely to be among the core of frequently circulating titles than in the group of low-circulation titles.¹² From these figures one might object that the outside course-related reading of students is limited to the reserve book collection. Data from the interviews show, however, that 86.6% of the titles were selected for subject matter relating to a specific course, 1.8% were selected for research in one's major with no specific course in mind, and that only 11.6% were selected for leisure reading. Since the teaching faculty apparently gives little or no effective guidance to undergraduate students in the selection of books to be read in conjunction with classroom topics, it is reasonable to doubt whether any considerable portion of the best and most critically acclaimed works are being read by undergraduates.

TABLE II

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT USE OF FACULTY RECOMMENDATIONS TO
SELECT READING MATERIALS BY HIGH-CIRCULATION AND
LOW-CIRCULATION STATUS

Selection Procedure	At Time Sample Titles were Charged They Had:						Row Totals	
	Circulated Less Than 6 Times			Circulated 6 or More Times				
	No.	Column%	Row%	No.	Column%	Row%	No.	Column%
Titles Base on Faculty Recommendations	16	14.4	27.6	42	16.6	72.4	58	15.9
Titles <u>Not</u> Based on Faculty Recommendations	95	85.6	31.0	211	83.4	69.0	306	84.1
Column Totals	111	100.0	30.4	253	100.0	69.6	364	100.0

This doubt is given a high degree of support when the titles selected by undergraduates are checked against two standard sources for building core collections for undergraduates, i.e., *Books for College Libraries* and *Choice*. From the sample data shown in Table III, one sees that 24.2% of the titles charged by undergraduates and published before 1973 were included in *Books for College Libraries*; that only around 30% of the titles charged by undergraduates and published after 1963 were even reviewed in *Choice*; and that, of the 30% reviewed, only 35% of those were given top recommendations. Furthermore, the 26 titles that were given an unqualified recommendation by *Choice* represent only 10.5% of the 246 titles published after 1963. Focusing on the titles that were circulated six or more times, i.e., the high-circulation

core, Table III shows that the percentages of standard works from *Books for College Libraries* and from *Choice* are somewhat higher for this group than for the low-circulation group and that the differences are significant as measured by chi square, but they are not high enough to generate any confidence in the belief that the core of frequently circulation titles used by undergraduates is roughly equal to the most highly recommended works of the humanities and social sciences.¹²

TABLE III

CRITICAL ACCLAIM OF TITLES USED BY UNDERGRADUATES BY HIGH-CIRCULATION AND LOW-CIRCULATION STATUS

Circulation Status	Titles Published Before 1973		Titles Published After 1963		Titles Published After 1963 and Reviewed in <i>Choice</i>	
	Included in <i>Books for College Libraries</i>	Excluded from <i>Books for College Libraries</i>	Reviewed in <i>Choice</i>	Not Reviewed in <i>Choice</i>	Unqualified Recommendation	Qualified or Non Recommendation
	No. Row%	No. Row%	No. Row%	No. Row%	No. Row%	No. Row%
Circulated Less Than 6 Times	7 13.0	47 87.0	19 21.6	69 78.4	7 36.8	12 63.2
Circulated 6 or More Times	54 27.3	144 72.5	55 34.8	103 65.2	19 34.5	36 65.5
Column Totals	61 24.2	191 75.8	74 30.1	172 69.9	26 35.1	48 64.9
	N = 252 Chi Square = 3.99 1 d.f. P = .046		N = 246 Chi Square = 4.09 1 d.f. P = .043		N = 74 Chi Square = 0 1 d.f.	

A clear interpretation of the data in Table III is hindered by two things. First, the titles reviewed in *Choice* are primarily in the humanities and social sciences, while the majority of Purdue students do not major in these disciplines; this raises the possibility of a mismatch between the sample and the source of reviews. A check of the sample resolved this problem, for it showed that 95.4% of the titles checked out were on subjects usually classified within either the humanities or social sciences. Second, interpretation may be different in light of the fact that the core of frequently circulating titles is probably larger than the core of highly esteemed titles reviewed in *Choice*, raising the possibility that most of the titles receiving top reviews in *Choice* were actually a part of the larger core of frequently circulating titles. The problem cannot be completely disregarded. The study by Schmitt and Saunders speculates that around 50% of the titles receiving unqualified recommendations in *Choice* may eventually form part of the high-circulation core as defined in this study.¹³ Thus, the 10.4% of the high frequency core titles in this study that received top acclaim in *Choice* may actually be about 50% of the

titles so recommended in that journal. Further research would clarify this point, but this would not discount the fact that such standard works are but a small fraction of the titles most frequently used by undergraduates and that a full 50% of these standard works may be receiving only minimal use.

Although the teaching faculty have little influence on undergraduate reading choices and undergraduates are not particularly inclined to select titles for their critical merit, the data do indicate that the minority of students who do use faculty guidance in selecting materials has a slightly better chance of reading books of a higher caliber. The data in Table IV show that undergraduates who based their selections of faculty recommendations were almost twice as likely to read a book included in *Books for College Libraries* as were those students who selected titles by themselves. The same was not true, however, regarding books reviewed in *Choice*. Accepting faculty guidance did not increase one's chances of finding material reviewed in or highly rated by a source.

TABLE IV
CRITICAL ACCLAIM OF TITLES USED BY UNDERGRADUATES
BY SELECTION PROCEDURE

Selection Procedure	Titles Published Before 1973		Titles Published After 1963		Titles Published After 1963 and Reviewed in <i>Choice</i>	
	Included in <i>Books for College Libraries</i>	Excluded from <i>Books for College Libraries</i>	Reviewed in <i>Choice</i>	Not Reviewed in <i>Choice</i>	Unqualified Recommendation	Qualified or Non Recommendation
	No. Row%	No. Row%	No. Row%	No. Row%	No. Row%	No. Row%
Titles Based on Faculty Recommendation	18 37.5	30 62.5	11 31.4	24 68.6	4 36.4	7 63.6
Titles Not Based on Faculty Recommendation	43 20.1	171 79.9	68 29.8	160 70.2	24 35.3	44 64.7
	N = 262 Chi Square = 5.71 1 d.f. P = .017		N = 263 Chi Square = 0 1 d.f. P = .043		N = 79 Chi Square = 0 1 d.f.	

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study tend to discount the notion that undergraduate students rely on the basic, standard works for course assignments involving library materials. The fundamental proposition that the core of titles that students do read is somehow roughly equivalent to the core of standard works they ought to be reading falls apart. Apparently, students either receive only minimal guidance from their classroom instructors or else ignore such advice when given. But even an increase in student reliance on faculty guidance would not bring about a major change in the composition of core collections since, as Table IV seems to indicate, the faculty are not particularly apt at directing students to the more recent important works reviewed favorable in *Choice*.

The librarian responsible for anticipating the needs of undergraduates is thus caught in a quandary. The traditional methods of selecting from *Choice*, *Books for College Libraries*, and suggestions from the faculty cannot be abandoned for want of a better method. On the other hand, the core of high-circulation titles, making up 20% to 30% of the collection, needs special attention in terms of determining its composition, duplicating titles and replacing lost and damaged items. Yet this study shows that up to 70% of these titles may not even be reviewed in *Choice*. The problem is even more serious for smaller, liberal arts colleges, where there may be a stronger tradition of faculty involvement in undergraduate education and guidance of course-related reading, because the faculty may not be directing students to the more favorable reviewed titles in this journal.

This study clearly identifies a serious problem even though further research is needed in order to determine how to select the core of books students actually need. In the face of diminishing economic resources, this issue surely must have a higher priority for library research.

NOTES

1. Richard W. Trueswell, "Some Behavioral Patterns of Library Users: the 80/20 Rule," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, 43 (Jan 1969):458-61.
2. Allen Kent et al., *Use of Library Materials: The University of Pittsburgh Study* (New York: M. Dekker, 1979), pp. 9-20.
3. Linda K. Rambler, "Syllabus Study: Key to a Responsive Academic Library," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 8 (July 1982):158-9.
4. Irene A. Braden, *The Undergraduate Library*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 1970), p. 141.
5. Ibid.
6. Roland Person, "Undergraduate Libraries: Nearly Extinct or Continuing Examples of Evolution?" *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 8 (March 1982):4-13.

7. James G. Neal, "The Collection Analysis Project and the Undergraduate Library: the Notre Dame Experience," *UGLI Newsletter* 20 (December 1981):7-12.
8. John Schmitt and Stewart Saunders, "A Statistical Assessment of the Reliability of Choice as a Tool for Selection," (unpublished, 1982).
9. Because of the methodology it was not possible to derive a numerical value of the reliability of the survey interview. The author, however, personally conducted all interviews, and from the responses of the interviewees is certain that the interview questions were well understood and that responses were consistent.
10. Because the sampling procedure was designed to yield both a random sample of users and a random sample of titles circulated, it was not possible to control the sample for the length of time the titles had been on the shelves. A sample of titles controlled for length of time on the shelves would have given amore precise definition of a high-circulation core and a better estimate of the high-circulation core as a percentage of the total collection. In order to estimate the high-circulation core as a percentage of total collection it was necessary, therefore, to extrapolate from an average value of the length of time on the shelf.
11. Kent, *Use of Library Materials*, p. 17.
12. Given the large differences between the sample results and the value of 50% stated in the null hypotheses, it was not necessary to test the sample result.
13. Schmitt and Saunders, "Statistical Assessment." This estimate is based on the evidence that average circulation of a cohort of titles declines with time. The titles from *Choice* which had not circulated at all or only once in the first two years are very unlikely to ever attain a status of repeated circulation, while a good percentage of those with three or more circulations in the first two years will attain such a status. For a further explanation, see the chapter on Markov Processes in Phillip M. Morse's *Library Effectiveness: A Systems Approach*, Cambridge:MIT Press, 1968.