

1-1-1983

# An Assessment of Choice as a Tool for Selection

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Schmitt, John P. and Saunders, E. Stewart, "An Assessment of Choice as a Tool for Selection" (1983). *Libraries Research Publications*. Paper 20.

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Samuel Johnson noted in 1759 that "a corrupt age has many laws; I know not whether it is equally true, that an ignorant age has many books."<sup>1</sup> To remedy this situation, book reviewing was established as a service which makes material acquisition more an objective judgment than an intuitive hunch. Two prospects librarians dread are: (1) being told they do not have "the definitive work" in a field and; (2) having a full range of "definitive works" which never circulate. Book reviewing is designed to prevent the first prospect, but little has been done to study the second. This study was designed to examine the relationship between two factors - the strength of a reviewer's recommendation and the subsequent use of that title in a large university library. Is there agreement between the reviewer and the student reader on what constitutes an indispensable volume?

The review medium selected for the study was *Choice*, while the library where the materials' use was examined was Purdue University's General Library, which serves the School of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education. *Choice* has established a unique niche in its service to academic libraries by publishing concise reviews of more than 6,000 books per year. The reviewers are by and large faculty members engaged in undergraduate instruction who demonstrate an in-depth understanding of a special subject area.

The established criterion for inclusion in *Choice* is "potential use by undergraduates."<sup>2</sup> To be sure, *Choice* makes no claim as an automatic buying guide for college libraries, but states as its purpose "to assist the college librarian and his faculty in the selection of current books ... (including) those subject areas which form the basis of the liberal arts curriculum."<sup>3</sup>

Part of this assistance to college librarians is the assessment of a title in terms of the audience it is most likely to appeal to. Frequently the recommendation is by class rank or status: lower division readership, graduate students and advanced undergraduates, faculty and professional audience only, etc. Occasionally the recommendation will be sized for an institution: two-year and community college readership, larger research collections, special subject collections, all academic libraries, etc. The intention is that the review's recommendation can thus be scaled to a particular clientele. The question is raised: how accurate are these recommendations when the circulation records are examined?

It has been shown that *Choice*, by way of comparison with *Library Journal*, is likely to review more university press titles, more publications from the social sciences and humanities (excluding fiction), and is more likely to compare a book to an earlier title or at least discuss its place in the subject literature.<sup>4</sup> Daniel Ream demonstrated that *Choice* reviewed more titles than three other major review media in 1975, although the ACRL publication took the longest to review new books, a fact that could be attributed to a policy of not reviewing from galley proofs.<sup>5</sup> The scope of reviews to appear in *Choice* is hinted at in the *Bowker Annual* where the figures for 1979 indicate that approximately 16 percent of all new titles (excluding juvenile books) published that year were reviewed by this periodical.<sup>6</sup> Richard Werking and Charles Getchell have suggested that *Choice* is a reliable gauge of academic publishing activity by subject area and thus could be manipulated to serve as a book fund allocation device.<sup>7</sup> These studies have demonstrated the unique role *Choice* has played in assisting academic library collection development, but do not address the question of how patrons make use of the titles recommended.

## EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

In order to examine the relationship between the strength of the reviews in *Choice* and the subsequent circulation of the titles reviewed, the authors drew a sample of reviews from *Choice*, ranked the reviews according to the reviewer's opinion of the book, determined the frequency of circulation of each title reviewed, and correlated the frequency with the strength of the review. The Purdue General Library provided favorable conditions for the study in that the collections are sufficiently large to contain most of the titles reviewed by *Choice* and in that undergraduates account for about 70 percent of the circulation. Because the holdings of the Purdue General Library are primarily in the areas of the humanities and social sciences, the authors limited their sample of reviews to these areas.

The sampling procedure was designed to meet three objectives:

1. To offer a representative sample of titles reviewed in *Choice*.
2. To offer a stratified sample of the humanities and the social sciences.
3. To offer a sample of titles which were available for circulation in the Purdue General Library for at least two years but no more than three and one-half years.

The objectives were met by selecting a sample of titles which:

1. were reviewed in issues of *Choice* between November 1978 and April 1979;
2. provided a balanced representation of titles in History, Philosophy, English and American Literature, Political Science, Sociology, and Education;
3. were cataloged by the Purdue Libraries between Spring 1978 and Summer 1979.

Reprints, serials, and works which became part of a reference collection or reserve book collection were eliminated from the sample.

The necessity to meet all three objectives thus required a stratified cluster sample rather than a random sample, but the statistical procedures to be used were considered sufficiently robust to accommodate this sampling design. One cause for concern arose from the fact that the titles selected from each strata of the cluster were not randomly selected but were subject to the chance that they were purchased by Purdue Libraries and cataloged within a certain range of dates. Fortunately, 66 percent of the strata was included in the sample, thus minimizing the possibility of distortion due to sampling procedures.

The review for each of the titles selected from *Choice* was ranked according to the strength of the recommendation insofar as it predicted widespread appeal to undergraduates. Titles recommended for an elite or special audience were given a

middle ranking. Titles with mediocre or negative reviews were ranked at the bottom as least likely to circulate. The rankings were:

- 5-Highly recommended for a broad audience. An indispensable volume for all collections; Even the smallest libraries will want to acquire this.
- 4-Generally recommended for most levels. A good piece but not necessarily indispensable for everyone; nevertheless, recommended without hesitation.
- 3-Recommended with limitation. The book is aimed at a specialized audience or a special collection.
- 2-Reserved recommendation. Some doubts are expressed about the quality, format, or organization of the work. Of interest primarily to large research libraries with substantial holdings in the area.
- 1-Not recommended.

The circulation record for each title selected was examined in the summer of 1981, thus guaranteeing a 2 to 3.5-year test period for each title. Other studies have shown that the circulation record of a title during its first two years on the shelf are a good predictor of future circulation.<sup>8</sup>

The number of three-week (student) and two-month (faculty) circulations was recorded for each title. This distinction between users is accurate except in rare instances when a faculty member requests a shorter loan period. SPSS programs were used to calculate the relevant statistical tests.

## RESULTS

The circulation pattern of the 310 titles selected for the sample indicates that they are quite typical in their frequency of use. Ninety-four titles (30.3 percent) did not circulate at all during the test period while 114 titles (36.8 percent) circulated one to two times and 102 titles (33 percent) circulated three or more times. A disproportionate number of reviews fell in the highly recommended or generally recommended categories of ranks 5 and 4. This corresponds with Macleod's findings that few book reviews - about 18 percent- tend not to be positive.<sup>9</sup> A good 188 titles (60.7 percent) were given the green light for college audiences, that is, ranks 5 and 4, while only 122 titles (39.3 percent) were considered either too specialized or inappropriate for inclusion in a college collection. This imbalance in the distribution of rankings may result from an attempt on the part of the editors of *Choice* to screen for review those titles most suitable for inclusion in a college collection.

A cross-tabulation of circulation with the evaluations of reviewers reveals that the titles with the highest recommendation for undergraduates do indeed circulate more frequently than do those rated for more specialized audiences. Table 1 shows that only 23 percent of the titles ranked at the top (rank 5) and only 26 percent ranked next (rank 4) had never circulated. On the other hand 41 percent of the more specialized titles (rank 3) and 39.5 percent of the less worthy volumes (rank 2) had never circulated. It is interesting to note that those titles which were not recommended at all (rank 1) fared better than the more specialized works of rank 3. This may indicate that the discriminating factor for the undergraduate is level of

presentation rather than the quality of the book. The difference between rank 1 and rank 3 is not, however, statistically significant. The Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient between circulation and strength of recommendation is  $R_s = .137$  ( $p = .008$ ) for 310 titles. When the 14.6 percent of known faculty circulations is removed from the sample, the correlation does not change appreciably.

A separation of the humanities titles from the social science titles gives a different picture. Figures 1 and 2 indicate a stronger relationship between circulation and evaluation for titles in the social sciences and no relationship at all for titles in the humanities. The Spearman rank-order correlation for titles in the social sciences was  $R_s = .233$  ( $p = .002$ ), but the same test applied to the titles in the humanities was  $R_s = .043$  ( $p = .3$ ).

### CONCLUSION

The reviews appear helpful in identifying the most worthy titles as those most likely to be used repeatedly. No selector would want to ignore recommended titles of which 41 percent are likely to circulate three or more times in two years. Similarly those titles appealing primarily to a more elite audience of specialists ought to be scrutinized if the selector is concerned about maximum use. The question of the level on which the book is written is an important one, to judge from the statistics of use. Evidently undergraduates can decipher (and reject) a title because of its specialized appeal more readily than they can determine whether a book is poorly organized or argued.

It is clear, however, from the low value of the Spearman rank-order correlation that a book's critical acclaim is not as fully reflected in its frequency of circulation as a library selector might wish. For titles in the humanities, moreover, the reviewer's recommendation is of marginal value if, in fact, one's goal is to maximize circulation.

This leads to the question as to whether maximum use is as significant or the same as optimum use. Should the librarian be concerned about circulation in a subject such as African history, if courses in this area are offered only one semester in four? Inversely, should the selector be persuaded by the evidence of an entire class being assigned a term paper on the history of the Olympic Games? The title on African history may have no acceptable substitute, whereas the volume on the Olympic Games may be only one of many alternatives. Circulation is an easy gauge with which librarians can take the measure of a collection, but it records only use, not usefulness.

The librarian selecting strictly on the basis of probable popularity runs the risk of developing a collection which could be categorized as "lightweight" academically. Similarly, collections based exclusively on *Choice* may build a collection of worthy titles which may or may not address the needs of a particular institution's undergraduates. As stated earlier, *Choice* does not recommend this latter strategy, either. Some local factors which ought to influence patterns of collection development could include the size of a department, class enrollment, frequency of a course offering, term paper assignments, past library use, and the likelihood of cross-disciplinary interest.

This study does not dispute the point that college librarians may very well want to acquire those titles garnering critical acclaim, regardless of the subsequent circulation record. Nor should librarians feel they are alone with their worthy, uncirculating

volumes. The publishing industry itself expects to lose money on 80 percent of the books it publishes; the problem occurs in recognizing which 80 percent.<sup>10</sup> Finally, no one doubts that undergraduates don't read *Choice*. But as Evan Farber has pointed out, perhaps it is our responsibility to further educate library users in the value of knowing "how to select books before reading them, not just how to use the card catalog."<sup>11</sup>

**TABLE 1**

FREQUENCY OF CIRCULATION BY REVIEWERS' RANKING

Rank

Frequency of Circulation	Rank 1		Rank 2		Rank 3		Rank 4		Rank5		Row Totals	
		Column %		Column %		Column %		Column %		Column %		Column %
	No.		No.		No.		No.		No.		No.	
0 circulations	7	30.4	15	39.5	25	41	33	26	14	23	94	30.3
1-2 circulations	11	47.8	10	26.3	22	36	49	38.5	22	36	114	36.8
3 or more circulations	5	21.7	13	34.2	14	23	45	35.5	25	41	102	33.0
Total	No.	Row %	No.	Row %								
	23	7.4	38	12.3	61	19.7	127	41	61	19.7	310	

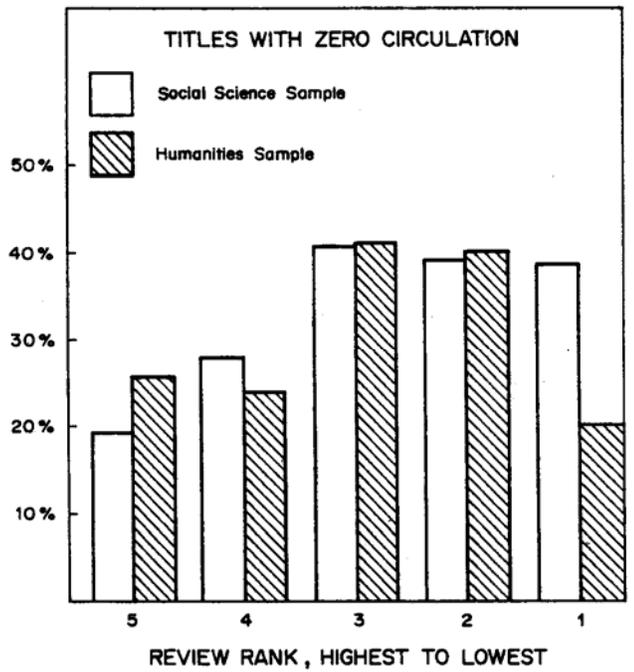


FIGURE 1

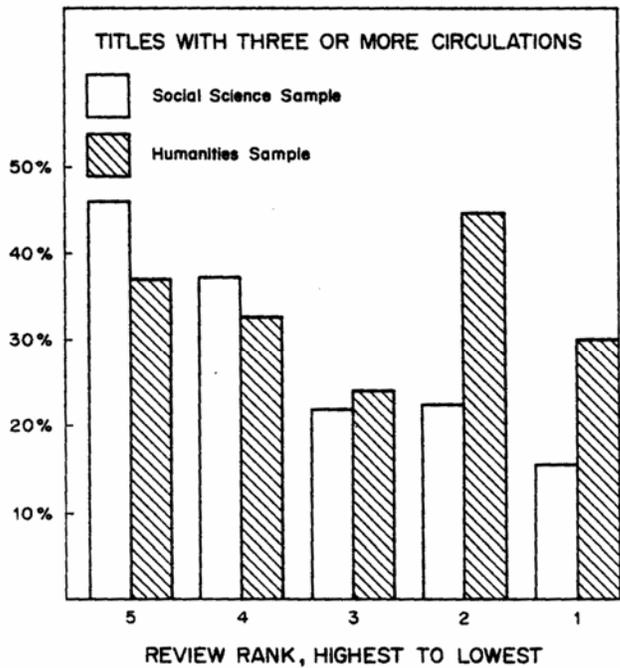


FIGURE 2

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