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Learning From The Big Guys: Small College Libraries Take Advantage Of Big Brother's Hard Work

by Joan Bartram <bartram@salve.edu>

This paper was drawn from a “Lively Lunch” presentation on Thursday, November 4 and Friday, November 5, 1999 at the 19th Annual Charleston Conference. — KS

In the Spring of 1999 as I reviewed the results of a faculty survey, I paused and thought about several collection analysis tools that I have been using for the last few years: the social-science-based survey method, the Conspectus definitions, and the LC-class breakdowns from the National Shelflist Count. Two unrelated events caused me to reflect on how I have adapted these tools. While reviewing the spring, 1999 survey I realized that 50% of a two-person department was one person and that statistical analysis was not always applicable or necessary on such a small scale.

While reading a listserv message, I came upon a lament from a librarian at an institution smaller than mine concerning the lack of an online conspectus tool she could use. My thoughts were—“how could they afford it?” and “do they really need it?”

My reflections led me to my presentation at a “Lively Lunch” at the 1999 Charleston Conference.

In the library profession those of us in small academic libraries are dependent upon larger institutions to perform the research and development in our field. Research libraries, and I tend to think of all of them as members of ARL and they are not, use statistical techniques developed for large samples as they are for searching for information and solutions on a grand scale.

An inspection of the Carnegie Foundation Web page lists 236 doctorate-granting institutions, 275 masters colleges and universities, and 637 baccalaureate colleges. I did not include the Community colleges and special institutions listed in the same section. This is a demonstration that there are more of us than there are of them, yet they are the people that are in the position to do the work in the field.

As an artist/designer, I define scale as a proportional relationship between two or more objects of differing sizes and within each object the relationship between the parts and the whole. Proportion is just as important in using analytical tools as it is in art. If we are to make the analytical tools “work” in our smaller libraries then we need to adapt them so that the results are realistic and useable. My adaptations, outlined below, amazed me when I reviewed them after eight years of consistent use. I had worked with them for so long that they had separated themselves from their point of origin and morphed into new tools.

I arrived at Salve Regina in the spring of 1991 and my need to learn about my “new” collection was accelerated by the decennial accreditation visit from our regional association a few weeks after I arrived. While I had not been involved in the self-study, I was expected to generate the final set of statistical data to accompany it. Incidentally, I did not inherit one piece of analytical information about the collection.

I began with the appendices of the 1979 edition of Guidelines for Collection Development (Chicago, American Library Asso-

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citation) and worked with the Codes given
to define collection intensity (the Conspec-
tus definitions) and the breakdown of the
National Shelflist Count LC classes given
in Appendix A. I have used the National
Shelflist Count as a framework only to
gather data about my institution's collection
growth. While I have expanded it in
some classes and added new LC numbers
such as ZA, I still rely on my original list.
The initial use of the list involved a student
measuring a shelflist at one hundred cards
per inch (how far we have come from the
days of the ruler). This evolved into the first
scat table in our ILS and the computer
tracking of data since that time.

I was charged at the same time with the
creation of a Collection Development Plan.
I had to find a means of defining collec-
tion development that could be used with a
faculty that had not been heavily involved
in book selection. The intensity level defi-
nitions that I used at the time were—Mini-
mal Level, Basic Level, Initial Study Level
and Advanced Study Level. Research and
comprehensive levels are outside the scale
of institutional programming and budget.

Although I have clung to an older
version of the National Shelflist Count,
I have followed the updates to the conspec-
tus definitions. However, I continue to
use the breakdown of the study levels into
two parts, as it is helpful in building upper and lower division
undergraduate collections.

The use of the survey technique is dear to all
of us trained in a discipline based on social
science methods. I have conducted nu-
merous surveys—usually related to periodical cancella-
tions over the years, all based on
standard approaches and standard library
mythology. In the spring of 1999, I
decided to ask the faculty for information,
as I needed to update our Collection De-
velopment Plan. I thought about this sur-
vey carefully and it was worth it—my fi-
nal response rate was 76%. I sent the
survey out at a time recommended by the
Library Committee—between spring break and the last round of papers.

The purpose of the survey was to dis-
cover how faculty members were asking
students to use the library in their classes.
We also asked which classes and/or de-
partments did not use the library. (Radical
departure from the myth that all
classes in all departments require our
services.) In order to make the survey easy to
complete, the faculty were asked simply to
check off items. They were not asked to
make lists or to prepare written responses.

In order to link the collection depth
indicators with each department, the defi-
nitions for Basic Information level, Study
level and Advanced Study level were in-
cluded in the survey. The out-of-scope
definition appeared as NLR—not library
related. With the help of a work study
student and a slow weekend at the Refer-
ence Desk, lists of courses from four years
worth of registration booklets were
compiled into departmental tables and
faculty simply had to check off the
appropriate level for the classes they were
still teaching. They also crossed off
courses no longer offered or commented on
changes in the courses.

The results were tabulated and analyzed.
We queried 114 fulltime faculty and
observation of the results was all that was
required. Analysis would have produced ab-
surd results. The tables have served as
a basis for departmental meetings and revised
collection development strategies.

Title-by-title analysis of a collection
cannot be ignored, even in a library with
less than one hundred thousand
monographs. Books for College Libraries
comes in play in any discussion of this type, so
this is the final collection analysis tool that
I would like to discuss.

I go back to the original editions of
this set in the go go days when we
all thought we could buy every-
thing and we believed that if we
bought they would come—eventually.

About the time I heard Evan Farber talk
about “books not for college libraries” in
Charleston several years ago, I began to
grapple with a woefully inadequate hu-
manities collection. In fact, the collection
was so inadequate that I needed to find a
list smaller than BCL3 just to begin. I fi-
nally thought of the booklist in the back
of Harold Bloom's Western Canon.
Without going into the politics of the list he
did include everybody who was anybody.
To verify, and sanctify his choices, I
checked the author's name against the EN-
DEX of BCL3.

In this day and age, I have no need to
consider purchasing all of the titles rec-
ommended in this set whether or not they
are not for a college library. An early
collection decision was to set 1990 as the
date for retrospective purchasing in all
fields except the humanities. I believe
that a library is an accumulative institu-
tion, and there is no need to recreate the
past when you can begin building for the
future. This has enhanced our current col-
collection because as a member of consor-
tium (Higher Education Library Infor-
mation Network, that includes seven
academic libraries here in Rhode Island,
excluding Brown) we can draw from the
other libraries for older materials while
making our newer materials available to
them. This is not a decision possible in a
research library, but it is one that works
well below that level.

In conclusion, as I began reviewing my
adaptations I found that they worked well
for me because I began with good ana-
lytical tools that survived the test of time
before I began tinkering with them. As I
mentioned above, I was astounded at how
far my adaptations have moved away from
the source document; however, I do not
feel that I have compromised their use or
my results. To demonstrate this as a form
teaching transfer and practical sur-
vival, I would like to close with the fol-
lowing story.

My sewing machine was very
important to me earlier in my life—it was a top-
of-the-line Singer that was typically pur-
chased for the upper-middle-class bride
by her grandmothers several decades
ago—and I used it a lot and it often
needed to be repaired. Newport is on an
island so I would have to take it off
the island to Fall River—a city known to you
perhaps only as the home of Lizzie
Borden, but actually the heart of the Por-
tuguese Azorian community in southeast-
ern New England. When I would go to
the Singer store, there were three dis-
tinct departments—the top-of-the-
line new models, the rebuilt
machines, and the thread sewing
machines and their accessories—mainly belts. I asked
the salesmen—“Why do you still sell
treadle sewing machines? Do they go to
collectors?” “No,” he said, “they go to the
Azeres. They don’t use electric machines
there. Their power plants are not well
enough regulated and the motors burn out.”

I am the small college librarian who
has adapted and re-adapted the methods
of the “big brother” to meet my needs for
the same reason that women in the Azeres
still use treadle sewing machines—be-
cause they are the appropriate technol-
ogy to get the job done.

To all those Collection Development Li-
brarians in research libraries. Keep up the
good work! I don’t know what I’m going
to need to measure next. For additional
information about the survey, please check
the Collection Development Web Page at
<http://www.salve.edu/library/>.