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The Conspectus: Time for a Comeback?

by **Paul Streby** (Collection Development Librarian & Webmaster, Frances Willson Thompson Library, University of Michigan-Flint; Phone: 810-762-3413) <pgstreby@umflint.edu>

How's your library's collection? Have you analyzed it lately? Despite advances in, well, pretty much everything in the past few years, you might have had an easier time doing a collection assessment a decade ago. There's better technology at work these days, but the conspectus — one of the main methods used to interpret the data — has lately gone a bit off-course. My aim here is to help nudge it back onto the road.

Back in 1996, when I was the newest librarian at the **University of Michigan-Flint**, I wanted to begin my tenure there with a big, important project. Since my job description included collection development, and our collections had not been systematically evaluated within institutional memory, I recommended using the conspectus produced by **WLN** (formerly the **Western Library Network**) to find the strong and weak spots in our holdings. That seemed both big and important enough to establish me, however briefly, as a shaker-up of things.

Those of you familiar with the conspectus method of collection analysis can skip the next three paragraphs. For those who are not familiar with it, here's a brief explanation of the **WLN** version:

The **WLN Conspectus** is, or was, a collection measurement and analysis instrument that assigns each item in a library's collection to one of 24 discipline-based divisions, which are, in turn, broken down into categories and then, optionally, categories into subjects. Each division gets ratings on its current level of strength, current acquisitions commitment, goal level (what it should be based on the mission of the library), and preservation commitment. The ratings describe the breadth, depth, currency, and accessibility of the collection, and are assigned based on a variety of measures both qualitative, such as shelf-scanning, and quantitative, such as checking holdings against major bibliographies.

Although earlier editions of the **WLN Conspectus** provided numerical standards as quantitative measures for evaluating the depth of collections (e.g., percentage of **H.W. Wilson**-indexed journals held by the library; percentage of domestic publishing output acquired; median age of the collection), the last edition dropped them in favor of less formulaic guidelines and comparisons.

The collection ratings range from 0 to 5. A rating of 0 means that the division is outside the scope of the collection; a rating of 1 represents minimal coverage; 2 represents basic information; 3, study or instructional support; 4, research level; 5, comprehensive collection. Finer gradations can be made at the 1, 2, and 3 levels

(e.g., 2a and 2b). A current collection level rating of, say, 3c in a division is not necessarily better than 3b; if the collection supports only an undergraduate major for the division's discipline, 3b is the appropriate level of strength. A master's program, on the other hand, should be supported by a division rated 3c.¹

Back To Our Story

My colleagues agreed that doing the conspectus was desirable, especially with institutional accreditation coming up in three years. Due to the tightness of our budget, we opted — at my recommendation, and perhaps pennywisely — for the pencil-and-paper method of tallying holdings over the automated analysis package. With the *WLN Collection Assessment Manual* (4th ed.) at hand, tally sheets distributed to librarians (with photocopies kept against loss and coffee spills), we began, um, conspecting.

Although by the time we finished the project I'd had my fill of all things conspectus, it was, I believe, a success.² I'm planning to do it again in the next few years, but this time letting software do some of the grunt work. **OCLC** acquired **WLN** a few years ago and now markets the "**OCLC Conspectus**,"

which uses *WorldCat Collection Analysis*. This program compares collections, performs overlap analysis, and breaks the holdings down by publication date distribution, call number, language, format, or audience. **R.R. Bowker** produces *Ulrich's Serials Analysis System* that analyzes periodicals holdings. The **OCLC** and **Bowker** products are quite affordable and appear easy to use, so my library's next conspectus project should be a snap.

Yet, there's reason to believe that the conspectus is a measurement tool that's past its useful shelf life. It was first employed when paper was king, and may share some of the outmoded traits of the *ancien régime*. **Peter Clayton** and **G.E. Gorman** say that "the whole resource-based approach of Conspectus reflects a pre-digital age," but that with some updating, it could continue to serve libraries in the 21st century if it took better account of electronic resources.³ They are writing about the **RLG Conspectus**, a similar instrument produced by the **Research Libraries Group** and from which the **WLN Conspectus** was adapted, but their basic point is valid for the **WLN** model as well.

I'm proud to say that I anticipated this concern back in the late 1990s and included e-journals in my tallies of our periodicals, if not before it was cool, at least before it was standard procedure.

E-journals and other e-gizmos

The 5th edition of the **WLN Conspectus** manual came out in 1997 — midway through

our project and too late for us to use — but which does indeed take account of digital resources:

Electronic resources are equivalent to print materials at any level as long as the policies and procedures for their use permit at least an equivalent information-gathering experience. Electronic journals...are at least equivalent to print journals if: access to the electronic resource is at least equivalent to access to the print product (including graphics, charts, and other features); there is access to a sufficient number of terminals and lines; and the information comes at no additional cost to the patron.⁴

Although the reference to "sufficient ... terminals and lines" already seems a bit quaint, the principles are sound. A sixth edition of the manual, if it's ever published, could note the growing parity between print and electronic resources, and treat them as presumptively equal, provided they meet basic standards for accessibility. Print isn't going away, by any means, but treating it as the standard seems less and less justifiable.

But are print and electronic formats equal? The fickleness of title lists in aggregator databases presents the problem of here-today, gone-tomorrow. Some databases (I won't name them, but you know who they are) add and drop journals without much — or any — fanfare. But a library heavy in e-journals could simply acknowledge in its conspectus report that electronic access is still more fleeting than physical ownership, and that a dose of caution is in order in reading the findings. In any case, hard copy has its own weaknesses compared to online journals, which rarely get stolen, defaced, or have their nudie pictures razored out.

Another issue is the availability of all the free scholarly materials on the Web. **OAIster**, the **Energy Citations Database**, and **Scirus** are just three of the high-quality, free databases on **UM-Flint's** Website that provide access to full-text academic materials. Should we get credit for having links to these? Should a collection get a lower rating if the library's Website or catalog doesn't link to them, even though savvy researchers could find them independently?

There's no answer that's going to satisfy everybody. Nevertheless, I think actually providing access — in the form of systematically organized hyperlinks — to a free e-resource is a minimum requirement for it to count as part of a collection. (Refraining from standing in users' way isn't good enough.) **UM-Flint** still doesn't have more than a handful of its online resources in its catalog, but we use **Serials Solutions** to manage the periodicals lists on our Website, and we are getting up and running with **SFX**. It would seem reasonable for us to count as holdings the online titles in, say, the Directory of Open Access Journals, which are included in our **Serials Solutions** lists, or at least the ones that are fully searchable in DOAJ (that is, about a fifth of the total).

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The "invisible Web" presents special difficulties. For example, if a library has hyperlinks to ten gray lit Websites, exactly what percentage is that of Who-Knows-How-Many? The best solution here is to rely on librarians' careful searching of invisible Web directories, their professional judgment, and consultation with experts whenever necessary. A more qualitative analysis may be called for here.

Numerical Standards For Print and Other 20th Century Concepts

One problem we ran into with the 4th (1992) edition of the **WLN Conspectus** was the overgenerality of its numerical standards. For example, it indicated that for a current collection level rating of 3a (lower division undergraduate level), a division should contain between 8,000 and 12,000 monographs, but that "will vary according to publishing output."⁵

"Will vary?" Is that a way of dodging the hard questions, like the "results may vary" caveat that appears in ads for the latest fad diet? When I looked at some publishing stats in *The Bowker Annual Library and Book Trade Almanac*, I began to wonder. In 2002, to use a recent example, there were 458 academic titles published in "chemistry," and 12,645 published in "literature and language."⁶ That's a heckuva lot of "will vary."

It turned out, though, that there was a relatively simple and objective way to translate that into workable numbers. I compiled five years of publishing statistics from the *Bowker Annual* table "North American Academic Books," divided the total number of titles in each subject by the total number of titles in all subjects, multiplied by 24 (i.e., the number of divisions in the conspectus) and called the product **P**. Multiply **P** by the 4th edition **WLN** numerical standards, and you have some parameters that take account of the greater or lesser importance of monographs in the various fields of learning.

For example, from 1991 to 1995 (i.e., the most recent stats I had), there were 307,431 academic books published or otherwise made available in the United States, of which 16,082 were sociology titles. Thus, we get the following equation: $P = (24 \times 16,082) \div 307,431 = 1.255$. Multiply **P** by the **WLN** parameters, and instead of 8,000-12,000 books being adequate for a 3a/lower division undergrad sociology collection, you would want between 10,040 and 15,060 monographs in sociology.

My system wasn't perfect. The subjects used in the *Bowker Annual* don't match up perfectly with the 24 divisions in the **WLN Conspectus**. For instance, unlike the **WLN Conspectus**, the *Bowker Annual* combines math and computer science into a single category, so I had to estimate publishing output for each subject separately using other data in that venerable annual.

Also, publishing output can vary wildly over time; the number of computer science titles has increased dramatically since 1900. Arguably, five years of publishing data is not enough; perhaps ten years or even more would be better.

against the grain people profile

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BORN & LIVED: Flint, Michigan.

FAMILY: Married to Kim with two boys: Ronan (3) and Jude (baby).

EDUCATION: AB (Political Science), **UM-Flint**; MA (Government), **University of Virginia**; MILS, **University of Michigan**.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Reference librarian at **Baker College of Flint**, 1995-96; reference, collection development, and Webmaster at **University of Michigan-Flint**, 1996 to present.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Read, write, go for walks, play with my sons, and watch movies with my wife and a big bowl of popcorn.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Collections of horror stories (**Thomas Ligotti** is a favorite author). A fantasy of mine is to turn **Flannery O'Connors'** *The Violent Bear It Away* into a movie.

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: Lights turned on when there's sufficient daylight.

PHILOSOPHY: The Nicene Creed.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Getting my library's Website where it is.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Get some things published, both fiction and non-fiction.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Seamless resource integration shall be the girdle of libraries, the electronic shall dwell with the print, and librarians shall lead them.

But as the conspectus project grew, I became a firm(er) believer in the maxim that the perfect is the enemy of the good, and that my method seemed good.

Good Enough For Government Work?

Maybe not. Some people think numerical formulas create an illusion of precision where none is now possible (and arguably, never was). The 5th (1997) edition of the **WLN Conspectus** "departs from any formula approach that uses numbers of monographs and journals to determine collection depth indicators." Numerical formulas are problematic because of each discipline having its own "publishing culture," the blurred line between ownership and access of online journals, and the inappropriateness of measuring collections around the world by North American Anglophonic publication standards. Now, "the use of comparisons in determining collection depth indicators is encouraged."⁷

I think these are valid concerns, but that they make a case not for jettisoning numerical formulas, but for adapting them to local conditions and particular disciplines. Comparing collections is indispensable, but without some basic numerical guidelines, you risk making subjective judgments based on

cherry-picked data or methods of interpretation.

I noted above how to solve the problems of electronic resources and differences among disciplines in their publishing output. The geographical question is a little trickier. Obviously, North American publishing stats are of less interest to libraries in Singapore or Algeria than they are in Michigan or Manitoba. The important thing here is that libraries obtain an appropriate portion of the monographs published in the market(s) from which they purchase. Foreign publishing statistics could be used for libraries that because of their size or location must purchase foreign materials (e.g., the **National Library of Andorra**⁸) or do so to support masters' and doctoral research collections.

Where to get foreign publishing statistics? For periodicals, there is *Ulrich's Periodicals Directory*. If you want to know what magazines and journals are coming out of Taiwan, Tonga, or Tuvalu, that's the place to go.

For monographs, there are: *Global Books In Print* (English-language titles) and *Spanish Books In Print*, both from **Bowker**; *Indian BIP*, *Arabic BIP*, and *African BIP* from various publishers; publication yearbooks for Japan and Korea; and probably some other major markets covered. There doesn't seem to be a near-

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equivalent to *BIP* for Chinese-language books,⁹ but some resourceful librarians could probably put together some publishing figures. (The *Bowker Annual* compiles its lists of academic monographs from vendor approval plan lists.) Undoubtedly, work would need to be done in this area (thankfully, though, not by me, since my library collects little foreign-language material).

Inputs and Outputs and Outcomes — Oh My!

As important as collection analysis is, a conspectus project is only one element of seeing how your library is doing. Especially in academia, institutional and departmental success is increasingly measured by examining and externally comparing inputs, outputs, and outcomes. Collection strength is, by-and-large, an input, which the Association of College and Research Libraries defines, vis-à-vis libraries, as “the raw materials of a library program — the money, space, collection, equipment, and staff, out of which a program can arise.” Outputs (which “serve to quantify the work done, i.e. number of books circulated, number of reference questions answered”) and outcomes (“the ways in which library users are changed as a result of their contact with the library’s resources and programs”) are also important,¹⁰ the latter arguably more so. It’s not enough to conclude, however correctly, that a library has an excellent collection. If the information it contains is not finding its way into the brains of its users, the library is failing in a vital respect.

The 5th edition of the *WLN* conspectus manual made a stab in this general direction by urging “client-centered” — i.e., output — measures in addition to the older “collection-centered” — or input — measures. Client-centered quantitative techniques examine user behaviors (e.g., circulation and interlibrary loan figures), whereas the qualitative techniques gauge user and community attitudes and satisfaction, community analysis, and patron needs assessment.¹¹

Future conspectus projects must provide data to help see how collections actually affect client populations, be they college students or the general public. User outcomes then must influence collection development. The people who do the conspectus might not be the same people who examine user outcomes, but the two groups mustn’t compartmentalize their work. Rather, they should create a collaborative “feedback loop” in which subsequent conspectus work examines whether the collection has been properly developed in response to these user outcomes. Your library school collection development professor was right: There’s no “I” in “conspectus.”

Collection Analysis Is No Less Important Today Than Yesterday, and Other Banalities

Budgetary pressures, accreditation re-

quirements, and changes in the format and technology of information all indicate the importance of knowing — and being able to show with data — how your library’s collection is shaping up. Using nothing but anecdotal evidence is cheating — you’ve got to be systematic and objective.

Although the conspectus method has not kept up with changes in the field, there’s no reason it couldn’t. I’m hardly the most innovative sort, yet I managed to adapt the instrument to fit the needs of my library. In the absence of an authoritative update to the *WLN* conspectus manual (did you hear that, *OCLC*?), there’s no reason others more clever than me couldn’t make their own adaptations of the method.

So, as I asked before, how’s your library’s collection? 🐾

Endnotes

1. For a historical overview of the conspectus method, see Mary C. Bushing’s 2001 paper “The Evolution of Conspectus Practice in Libraries: The Beginnings and the Present Applications” at www.caslin.cz:7777/caslin01/sbornik/conspectus.html.
2. My director recently wrote about some of the benefits of our conspectus project: Houbek, Robert L., Jr. “Linking Students with Collections; or Getting Ready to Meet the Accreditation Train.” *Against the Grain*, v. 16 no. 4, September 2004, pp. 30-34. For more information about UM-Flint’s conspectus, visit lib.umflint.edu/conspectus.
3. “Updating Conspectus for a Digital Age,” *Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services*, v. 26 no. 3, 2002, pp. 252-258, at 254.
4. Bushing, Mary, Burns Davis, and Nancy Powell, *Using the Conspectus Method: A Collection Assessment Handbook* (Lacey, Washington: WLN, 1997), p. 27.
5. Powell, Nancy and Mary Bushing, *WLN Collection Assessment Manual*, 4th ed. (Lacey, Washington: WLN, 1992), p. 69.
6. *Bowker Annual Library and Book Trade Almanac*, 2004 (Medford, New Jersey: Information Today, Inc., 2004), pp. 496-497.
7. Bushing, Davis, Powell, p.103. The Association of College and Research Libraries has also dropped numerical formulas in its 2004 document Standards for Libraries in Higher Education at www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/standardslibraries.htm and its predecessor document Standards for College Libraries 2000 Edition at www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/standardscollegelibraries.htm.
8. Online at www.bibliotecanacional.ad.
9. Thanks to Calvin Hsu, Yunah Sung, and Kenji Niki at the Asia Library at the University of Michigan for helping me address this point.
10. “Standards for Libraries in Higher Education” at www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/standardslibraries.htm.
11. Bushing, Davis, Powell, pp. 74-78.

Adventures in Librarianship — Vandalism

by Ned Kraft (Ralph J. Bunche Library, U.S. Department of State) <kraftno@state.gov>

In our last issue, *ATG* reported the sudden dismissal of **Herb Cented**, Acquisitions Librarian for **Detmoor Public**. At that time, senior **Detmoor** officials cited the reason for dismissal as “irreconcilable differences.” However, *ATG* investigative reporters have it from an anonymous source that **Cented** was discovered to have instigated several library pranks and petty vandalisms, and had plans for future shenanigans.

Mr. Cented, a fifty-eight year old librarian, unhappy

that the county had recently raised the retirement age, was found to have been involved in the intentional misplacing of several returned books. His fingerprints were found on an HX book in the Z shelves and a PN book found in the NKs. The HX had, between the title page and the fly, the cryptic message “lost forever.” Fortunately the book was desecrated in pencil, not ink.

While raiding **Herb Cented**’s apartment, investigators found hun-

dreds of surreptitiously-taken photographs of book spines, along with step-by-step outlines for future atrocities. One, labeled “Lay the Devils low,” called for using the library’s circulation records to send fake announcement that **Jackie Collins** would be reading the salacious bits of her recent novel during Saturday morning’s Children’s Hour. The announcement suggested reserving one’s spot by calling the mayor’s office. When contacted, the mayor responded to the averted threat by saying that his office would certainly have caught the hoax because they were all avid **Jackie Collins** readers.

Another of **Mr. Cented**’s plans was to reset

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