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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 yet another 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 Shellfish 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 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 Association). New needs | New solutions

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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 collec-
tion 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 shelf 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 defini-
tions that I used at the time were—Minim-
imal 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 ver-
sion 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 lev-
els 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-
umerous 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 informa-
tion, as I needed to update our Collection
Development 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 defini-
tions 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 not 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 monogra-
phs. Books for College Libraries comes
into 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
grape with a woefully inadequate hu-
marties collection. In fact, the collection
was so inadequate that I needed to find a
list smaller than BCL 3 just to begin. I fi-
nally thought of the booklist in the back
of Harold Bloom's Western Canon. With-
out 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 IN-
DEX of BCL 3.

In this day and age, I have no need to
consider purchasing all of the titles rec-
commended in this set whether or not they
are not for a college library. An early
lection 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-
lection 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-
ytical 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 had 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
a technology transfer and practical sur-
vival, I would like to close with the fol-
lowing story.

My sewing machine was very im-
portant 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 southeastern
New England. When I would go to
the Singer store, there were three dis-
inct departments—the top-of-the-
line new models, the rebuilt
machines, and the tadle sew-
ing machines and their acces-
sories—mainly belts. I asked
the sales man—"Why do you still sell
treadle sewing machines? Do they go to
collectors?" "No," he said, "they go to
the Azores. 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 Azores
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 in-
formation about the survey, please check
the Collection Development Web Page at
<http://www.sluve.edu/library>.