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Use It or Lose It! Results of a Use Study of the Print Sources in an Academic Library Reference Collection

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This article describes a use study of a reference collection, which found that 7.1% of total volumes in the reference collection were used over the course of the fall semester.

KEYWORDS *print reference collections, use studies, weeding, academic libraries*

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2010, the Reference Department at the University Library at the University at Albany, State University of New York, Albany, New York, undertook a use study of the reference collection. Like many libraries, the University Library has added many online resources to the reference collection in the last decade and has seen a decline in the use of print reference sources. The consensus among librarians working at the reference desk was that only a small portion of the collection was being used.

In the past, data on reference collection use had been collected but was limited to tracking the number of volumes reshelved, with no title information gathered. Over the years, our collection has been weeded and reduced in size but without the benefit of use data. In addition, given budget constraints during the past decade, it is more important than ever to spend acquisition funds wisely. Use data would help in making the best possible selection decisions, including the allocation of funds between print and online resources. Our goal is to have the reference collection be a dynamic,

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browsable collection that is balanced, supports the current curriculum and the provision of reference services, and reflects changing use patterns.

The University at Albany is one of four university centers in the State University of New York (SUNY) system, with a student body of 13,100 undergraduates and 4,900 graduate students. The university offers a broad curriculum, with 57 undergraduate majors and 120 programs leading to master's and doctoral degrees. Faculty and students at the University at Albany are served by three libraries. The University Library houses collections in the humanities and social sciences; the Science Library houses collections in science, mathematics, and technology; and the Dewey Graduate Library serves graduate students in social welfare, public policy and administration, criminal justice, and library and information studies.

This study sought to gather use data to answer three questions about the print reference collection at the University Library that would help in the management of the collection:

- To what extent is the collection used?
- Which subject areas receive the most use and which receive the least?
- What are the most frequently used titles?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the literature, it appears that use studies are not regularly undertaken by librarians. When Engeldinger (1986) surveyed academic libraries about their reference collection management practices, including weeding and use studies, only 6% reported having conducted a use study of the reference collection. In a survey of academic libraries and their weeding practices, Biggs and Biggs (1987) found that less than 10% conducted use studies. Truett (1990) interviewed 14 academic and public libraries about their reference collection weeding and evaluation practices and found “little or no evidence that formal use studies were being conducted” (p. 57). In a later survey of New York State academic and public libraries, only 12.3% of libraries reported regularly conducting use studies (Kessler, 2010). Although these surveys did not ask respondents why they did not conduct use studies, Engeldinger (1986) postulated that many librarians may find use studies too time consuming and may believe that the data is not worth the effort. They also may feel that informal observation is sufficient.

Both Engeldinger (1986) and Biggs and Biggs (1987) concluded that librarians make weeding decisions based on subjective impressions of use. Engeldinger (1990) advocated maintaining an accurate and up-to-date reference collection through regular weeding and considered use studies essential to effective weeding, noting that “proper reference collection management requires more than subjective judgments” (p. 119). Biggs and Biggs (1987)

concluded that “reference collections tend to comprise more titles than, it would seem, librarians can efficiently manage either intellectually or physically and fully exploit in the course of daily reference service” (p. 77).

Biggs and Biggs (1987) also asked about perceptions of reference collection use over different periods: one month, six months, one year, and five years. The mean estimate of reference collection use over a one-month period ranged from 18% to 23%, depending on the type of institution. The mean estimate of use ranged from 43.5% to 49% over a one-year period and from 62% to 70% over a five-year period.

Although use studies do not seem to be popular, the library literature does contain a limited number of reports of use studies of reference collections at academic libraries in the past 25 years. All of the studies used some form of the reshelving method of measuring use but differed in time periods, from a few weeks to five years. All those conducting use studies felt the process had been worthwhile and yielded useful and sometimes surprising data for collection development and management.

Arrigona and Mathews (1988) conducted a use study using the reshelving method for four weeks during the 1986 spring semester at Iowa State University. Their focus was on determining which subject areas received the most use and whether subject use differed between librarians and patrons. Only 21% of the volumes in the collection were used during the study period.

Engeldinger (1990) conducted a reshelving use study at the McIntyre Library at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire from 1981–1986. He found that 65.2% of the collection was used. However, 16.6% had only one recorded use in five years, and 34.8% of the collection had no use in five years. He concluded that much of the collection still went unused despite their efforts to keep the collection lean by annually reviewing each title.

As one tool in an overall assessment of the functionality of the reference collection at the William S. Carlson Library at the University of Toledo, Toledo, Ohio, Sendi (1996) conducted a reshelving use study over the course of one year starting in the fall of 1994. Sendi (1996) gathered data on the use of separate collections: indexes, pamphlets, ready reference, and regular reference. They found that 43% of the ready reference collection was not used. The article did not include data on the use of the entire reference collection.

Welch, Cauble, and Little (1997) detailed the results of their two-year (1994–1996) reshelving use study of print reference volumes at the J. Murrey Atkins Library at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. They concluded that the study’s use data were helpful in making purchase and weeding decisions but did not report an overall rate of usage of the reference collection.

From 1996 to 1997, librarians at the Health Sciences Library at the University of Maryland conducted a year-long reshelving use study of the reference collection and reported that 65.5% of the titles in the collection received use. They also noted that use of the collection increased over time

and concluded that “if use data at a title level is desired, a lengthy study seems necessary” but that “a shorter term study could be considered if it were conducted during the busiest part of the year” (Fishman & DelBaglivo, 1998, p. 548).

The reference team at Stetson University’s duPont-Ball Library conducted a reshelving use study for two two-month periods in 2003 and 2004. Bradford (2005) reported that only 8.5% of reference collection volumes were used in the study period. Combined with the results of another study done at Stetson University (Bradford, Costello, & Lenholt, 2005) that measured librarian use of the collection to answer reference questions at less than 2%, Bradford (2005) concluded that “while use is only one factor in assessing reference collections, certainly this study is a starting point for serious reappraisal of the size, the scope of weeding needed, and budget allocations for future purchases for print reference sources” (p. 555).

Librarians at Columbia International University’s G. Allen Fleece Library conducted a five-year reshelving use study beginning in 1999 to create a “lean, efficient reference collection.” They categorized items as heavily used (21–50 uses), moderately used (6–20 uses), and lightly used (1–5 uses). They found that 12% were heavily used, 17% were moderately used, and 36% were lightly used, with 35% of the books having no use at all during the five-year study. Although not all of the collection received heavy use, the use of print reference books increased by 40.4% over the five years of the study (Colson, 2007).

THE REFERENCE COLLECTION

The print reference collection at the University Library, as of the writing of this article, contained approximately 26,000 volumes. Management of the collection is guided by a written collection development policy. The collection includes almanacs; annuals; yearbooks; bibliographies; biographical sources; concordances; dictionaries; directories; encyclopedias; geographical sources; handbooks, manuals, and guides; indexes and abstracts; and looseleaf services. Highly esoteric and narrowly focused sources, although they may be in a reference format, are included in the general collection.

Along with the print reference collection, the University Library has access to more than 200 online databases and indexes, including key reference sources such as *Oxford Reference Online*, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Literature Resource Center*, *Britannica Online*, and a variety of subject encyclopedias in e-book format. The University Libraries also maintain a subscription to *Reference Universe*, an online master index to the table of contents and indexes of reference books, which has helped reference librarians identify useful titles in the print reference collection for patrons.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at the University Library during the fall 2010 semester. The fall semester is traditionally the busiest time of year for the Reference Services department in terms of reference questions and was therefore selected as the best time to gather reference collection use data. The reshelving method of gathering data was used.

The limitations of the reshelving method of collecting use data were outlined by Mary Biggs (1990), with the primary one being that use is underestimated. She pointed out that “unobtrusive observation and other checks on users’ habits show that even when signs ask them not to do so, many people reshelv the books they consult, especially when they have used them for only a few minutes” (p. 106). She also noted that “figures may be deflated when two or more people use a book before it can be reshelved, scooping it up from a table or collection bin” (p. 107). Offsetting this understatement, volumes may be counted as used that were not, having fallen off the shelf or not been opened by the patron. In addition, measuring use by the reshelving method does not offer any information as to whether patrons found the information they needed.

The reshelving method has the advantages of not requiring participation from patrons, and being relatively simple to implement. It was decided not to alert patrons to the study by posting signage asking them not to reshelv books because this may cause them to become self-conscious about their behavior and act in uncharacteristic ways. The study was announced and discussed at library staff meetings.

Reference books were collected from reshelving bins and from tables and workstations by clerical staff and student workers. The library barcodes were scanned using a wireless barcode scanner before the books were reshelved. A small number of reference titles are on reserve and were excluded from the study. At the end of the semester, the file of barcodes was downloaded from the barcode scanner and a member of the Systems department created a report in Excel to include the title and call number.

One problem not uncovered until the report had been produced was that for some volumes, the ISBN barcode had been scanned instead of the library barcode. This problem was corrected by running a second report that matched against the ISBN field, and merging these results with those of the first report. Another unanticipated problem was that because the law collection is interfiled with the reference collection, the file of scanned barcodes included some volumes from the law collection, which had to be manually deleted from the final report, along with a small number of volumes that were not reference books.

RESULTS

There were 1,897 barcodes scanned during the project, of which 1,855 were matched to a catalog record. Of these, 31 law volumes and six volumes that were not reference books were eliminated from the results, along with 42 volumes that were not identifiable by ISBN or barcode. Therefore, the final number of reference collection volumes analyzed was 1,818. Based on this number, the overall rate of usage of reference collection volumes during the fall 2010 semester was 7.1%.

Reference collection volumes used by Library of Congress (LC) class, the total number of reference collection volumes in each LC class, the percentage of volumes used in each LC class to the total use, the percentage of volumes used in each LC class to the total volumes in that class, and the percentage of volumes in each LC class of the total number of volumes in the reference collection were calculated (Table 1). Use by class ranged from a high of 745 for H to 0 for S and V. The two classes with the most usage, H and P, accounted for 58% of all use. Similar data by subclass for P and H was also calculated (Tables 2 and 3). In addition, the 25 most frequently used titles in the collection were compiled (Table 4). The *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women* was the most used title of the semester, with 52 recorded uses. The

TABLE 1 Volumes Held and Used by LC Class

LC Class	Vol. Used	Vol. Held	% Total Use	% Class Used	% Class to Total
A	82	2409	4.5%	3.4%	9.4%
B	79	912	4.3%	8.7%	3.5%
C	16	733	0.9%	2.2%	2.8%
D	101	1742	5.6%	5.8%	5.5%
E	92	855	5.1%	10.8%	5.0%
F	20	405	1.1%	4.9%	1.6%
G	89	1074	4.9%	8.3%	4.2%
H	745	3045	41.0%	24.5%	11.8%
J	41	708	2.3%	5.8%	2.2%
K	5	535	0.3%	0.9%	2.1%
L	75	721	4.1%	10.4%	2.8%
M	7	438	0.4%	1.6%	1.7%
N	10	525	0.6%	1.9%	2.0%
P	309	6849	17.0%	4.5%	26.6%
Q	23	45	1.3%	51.1%	0.2%
R	27	84	1.5%	32.1%	0.3%
S	0	1	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
T	18	124	1.0%	14.5%	0.5%
U	1	42	0.1%	2.4%	0.2%
V	0	25	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
Z	78	4477	4.3%	1.7%	17.4%
Total	1818	25749	100%		100%

Note: LC = Library of Congress.

TABLE 2 P Subclass Use

LC Classification Subclass Description	LC Subclass	Vol. Used	Vol. Held	Use to Total Use (%)	Subclass to Total Class (%)
Philology. Linguistics	P	49	322	15.9	4.7
Greek & Latin language and literature	PA	2	257	0.7	3.8
Modern languages. Celtic languages	PB	0	95	0.0	1.4
Romantic languages	PC	56	558	18.1	8.1
Germanic languages. Scandinavian languages	PD	0	14	0.0	0.2
English language	PE	32	536	10.4	7.8
West Germanic languages	PF	2	136	0.6	2.0
Slavic, Baltic, Albanian languages	PG	0	499	0.0	7.3
Uralic languages. Basque language	PH	0	20	0.0	0.3
Oriental languages and literatures	PJ	4	80	1.3	1.2
Indo-Iranian languages and literatures	PK	0	18	0.0	0.2
Languages and literatures of Eastern Asia, Africa, Oceania	PL	33	224	10.7	3.3
Hyperborean, Indian, and artificial languages	PM	0	6	0.0	0.1
Literature (General)	PN	98	2905	31.7	42.4
French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese literature	PQ	1	287	0.3	4.2
English literature	PR	0	307	0.0	4.5
American literature	PS	14	572	4.5	8.3
German, Dutch, Finnish, Afrikaans, Scandinavian, Old Norse, Modern Icelandic, Faroese, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish literature	PT	18	13	5.8	0.2
Fiction and juvenile belles lettres	PZ	0	0	0.0	0.0
Total		309	6849	100.0	100.0

Note: LC = Library of Congress.

top 25 titles accounted for 390 uses, or 21.5% of all reference collection use during the fall semester.

DISCUSSION

It is helpful to compare the percentage of each class' use to the total use with the percentage of each class' volumes to total volumes held. If reference collection selection was optimal, one would expect these numbers to be close. That is, the use in any particular class should mirror the representation of that class in the overall collection. After all, if we make significant purchases in a particular area, it is because we feel the materials are needed and will be used. If the use does not correspond, especially if there is a large difference, it would seem to indicate an imbalance in the collection and an area for further careful review in terms of weeding and future purchases.

TABLE 3 H Subclass Use

LC Classification Subclass Description	LC Subclass	Vol. Used	Vol. Held	Use to Total Use (%)	Subclass to Total Class (%)
Social sciences (General)	H	20	357	2.7	11.7
Statistics	HA	22	498	3.0	16.4
Economic theory. Demography	HB	7	146	1.0	4.8
Economic history and conditions	HC	10	135	1.3	4.4
Industries. Land use. Labor	HD	15	219	2.0	7.2
Transportation and communications	HE	1	65	0.2	2.1
Commerce	HF	301	563	40.4	18.5
Finance	HG	7	318	0.9	10.4
Public finance	HJ	0	15	0.0	0.5
Sociology (General)	HM	112	130	15.0	4.3
Social history and condition. Social problems. Social reform	HN	18	77	2.4	2.5
The family. Marriage. Women	HQ	214	387	28.7	12.7
Societies: Secret, benevolent, etc.	HS	0	11	0.0	0.4
Communities. Classes. Races	HT	1	64	0.1	2.1
Social pathology. Social and public welfare. Criminology	HV	17	49	2.3	1.6
Socialism. Communism. Anarchism	HX	0	11	0.0	0.4
Total		745	3045	100.0	100.0

Note: LC = Library of Congress.

TABLE 4 25 Most Frequently Used Titles

Title	No. of Uses
<i>Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women</i>	52
<i>Masters Abstracts International</i>	34
<i>Contemporary Authors</i>	30
<i>New York Times Index</i>	22
<i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i>	21
<i>Encyclopedia of Careers and Vocational Guidance</i>	20
<i>A Dictionary of Sociology</i>	19
<i>Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology</i>	19
<i>Dictionary of Feminist Theory</i>	19
<i>Occupational Outlook Handbook</i>	18
<i>Blackwell International Encyclopedia of Communication</i>	18
<i>A Feminist Dictionary</i>	16
<i>Encyclopedia of Racism in the United States</i>	13
<i>World Almanac and Book of Facts</i>	11
<i>World Book Encyclopedia</i>	9
<i>New Encyclopedia of Africa</i>	9
<i>Encyclopedia Latina</i>	9
<i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i>	7
<i>Encyclopedia of Bioethics</i>	7
<i>Encyclopedia of Global Warming and Climate Change</i>	7
<i>Collins Robert French-English/English-French Dictionary</i>	6
<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>	6
<i>Encyclopedia of Modern China</i>	6
<i>Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology</i>	6
<i>Encyclopedia of Psychology</i>	6
Total	390

However, when looking at the four classes with the most volumes, A, H, P, and Z, this is not the case. In three cases, A, P, and Z, the percentage of the class usage to the total usage is less than the percentage of volumes in that class to the total volumes in the collection. For example, the P volumes comprise 26.6% of all volumes in the reference collection, with 6,849 volumes. However, the usage of the P volumes (309) only accounts for 17% of all uses recorded. This indicates that these sections are full of little-used volumes. To further pinpoint what is going unused, an analysis of each of these three classes was done. Looking at the breakdown for P, Romanic and English language dictionaries accounted for 15.9% of the P volumes (8.1% and 7.8%, respectively), but their use accounted for 28.5% of the total volumes used. On the other hand, the 499 volumes of Slavic, Baltic, and Albanian language dictionaries constituted 7.3% of P volumes but 0% of P volumes used. In contrast, H constituted 11.8% of the total volumes in the reference collection but accounted for 41% of recorded use. Because the University Library is a humanities and social sciences library, it is not surprising that this class would exhibit frequent use. Three subclasses, HF, HM, and HQ, account for much more use than their representation in the collection.

Many of the titles appearing on the most frequently used list in Table 4 are standard reference sources and were not unexpected, such as *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *World Almanac and Book of Facts*, *World Book Encyclopedia*, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, *Oxford English Dictionary*, and the *New York Times Index*. The top three titles were somewhat unexpected and accounted for 21% of the use for the semester. Apart from the standard reference sources, the remaining volumes on the most frequently used list seem to be driven by assignments, and thus could vary from semester to semester. Unfortunately, no record was kept of large library assignments during the semester, which would have been helpful in analyzing these results. Two of the titles (*Occupational Outlook Handbook* and the *Encyclopedia of Careers and Vocational Guidance*) are known to be useful for a recurring assignment on researching a career.

It is likely that there was an assignment for which the *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women* was a good or required source of information, along with the *Dictionary of Feminist Theory* and *A Feminist Dictionary*. *Masters Abstracts International*, the second most frequently used title, was also unexpected until we recalled that a graduate assistant had been assigned a project to confirm that the information in *Masters Abstracts International* is covered in the *Proquest Dissertations and Theses* database. The third most frequently used title was *Contemporary Authors*. The University Libraries have a subscription to the *Literature Resource Center*, which includes the full text of *Contemporary Authors*, so it was surprising to find so many uses of the print set. It may be that users are unaware of the online version or that they may prefer the print format.

What did not make the top 25 was also surprising. It was expected that the MLA, APA, and Chicago style guides would appear on this list, but all had fewer than six uses. This appears to be a case of several patrons using these books before they were reshelved, or patrons reshelving the books themselves, because we know these volumes to be in very high demand.

As mentioned previously, the reshelving method in general may result in undercounting use. In this case, undercounting may have been exacerbated by our practice of pulling reference books useful for assignments in classes with large numbers of students and leaving them at the reference desk because students return them directly to the reference desk, with the barcodes only being scanned on their final return to the shelves. However, even allowing for a margin of error, a use rate of 7.1% seems quite low.

Although it is difficult to make comparisons between studies because of differences in methodology, the use rate found in this study of 7.1% is comparable with the latest study done by Bradford (2005) in 2003–2004, which had a use rate of 8.5% over four weeks. It is significantly lower than the Engeldinger (1990), Fishman and DelBaglivo (1998), and Colson (2007) studies. These studies were all conducted over longer periods of time, and the Engeldinger (1990) and Fishman and DelBaglivo (1998) studies were done more than a decade ago. One would expect use to be higher the longer the period of study, and there is a much greater reliance on Web-based reference sources now than there was at the time these studies were done.

This study has provided much useful data for managing the reference collection. It is clear that there are several areas in which sources do not get used that could be weeded or relocated without affecting the provision of reference service or inconveniencing patrons. Collecting data has allowed us to pinpoint areas to review and to investigate what has caused the low use. Collecting data has allowed us to pinpoint areas to review and to investigate what has caused the low use. If use in a class is low compared with the volumes held in that class, it could be that the best sources are now online, that fewer courses are being offered in the subject, or that the sources in the collection are outdated or inappropriate. Determining this allows us to take corrective action, whether it be weeding the class, purchasing updated sources, switching to online sources, or deciding to purchase fewer titles in that class in the future.

Opinions will vary on what is an acceptable rate of usage for a reference collection, but a low use rate such as the 7.1% found in this study argues for a thorough review of the collection. Traditionally, one of the main criteria for including an item in reference collections was frequency of use. The reference collection development policy for the University Library reference collection states that usefulness to librarians and patrons is the principal criterion for inclusion in the reference collection, and that seldom used sources should not be included in the collection, even though they may be arranged

in a reference type of format. Thus, if we were to abide by our own collection development guidelines, significant weeding would be done.

Of course, unused does not necessarily mean useless. Some materials may be discarded as outdated, but many sources may benefit from being moved to the stacks where they are more likely to be discovered by browsing patrons. Many academic libraries have begun to interfile reference sources with the general collection. Librarians have an obligation to spend limited funds as wisely as possible, and that may require frequent changes in funding allocations and purchasing patterns, along with vigilant attention to use data. The low use rate of print reference sources is one rationale for reallocating funds to online sources. Bradford (2005) argued that “reference budgets must now be stretched to accommodate expensive electronic sources most of which have an administrative mechanism for tracking use statistics. Use of the print collection should likewise be monitored so that the percentage of the reference budget spent on print sources mirrors the extent of its use” (p. 547).

FURTHER RESEARCH

The use data gathered in this study, although enlightening and helpful, is a snapshot in time and thus may not represent a complete use pattern of the reference collection. Gathering data over a longer period of time or continuously would be ideal. Because the use data were easily gathered and helpful, the decision was made to continue to collect it on an ongoing basis. In addition, when the scanned barcodes are used to create a report, the publication year for each source will be included, giving some measure of currency of the sources consulted. Keeping track of large assignments and the reference sources selected by librarians for these assignments will also help to interpret the use study results.

Given that most academic library reference collections now include both print and online sources, it would be interesting to compare their use. In general, online sources are more expensive, but does this online convenience result in more usage than print sources?

CONCLUSION

This low use rate of reference collection volumes leads to the larger question of what the reference collection of the 21st century academic library should look like. Because so much factual information is available on the Web and many standard reference sources are now available online, many print reference sources that used to be consulted regularly are no longer needed. Tyckoson (2004) has questioned the need to maintain a print

reference collection and believes that “over time the reference collection will wither away” (p. 38). Certainly, reference collections must evolve to meet the evolving needs and preferences of patrons, changes in publishing, and the changing methods of delivering reference services.

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