

Letters

Letters to the Editor



This letter is in response to the article, "Assessing Collection Usefulness: An investigation of library ownership of the resources graduate students use", by Erin T. Smith, *C&RL* v64, n5, p.344-355 (Sept. 2003).

The author used a citation analysis approach to evaluate University of Georgia Libraries collection. In the study, thirty masters theses and PhD dissertations were sampled from 1991 and 2001. Of these thirty, 7 represented the arts and humanities, 6 for education, 10 for the sciences and 7 for the social sciences. (p.346)

The methodology used by the author was to analyze few graduate publications in great detail instead of analyzing many graduate publications in lesser detail. This is a valid methodology if the focus of analysis is on identifying differences in individual graduate publications – it is not an accurate methodology for evaluating an entire library's collection or for justifying collection policies.

For example, the author makes claims about increased ownership of materials in education and the social sciences,

and a decrease for the arts & humanities and the sciences. These differences, however, were accountable by a very small number of citations, which may have been explained entirely by a single bibliography in each of the subjects. In addition, the author makes these claims without a statistical test. If the standard Student's t-test were used, the results would most likely have indicated no significant difference.

Few ARL library budgets have been able to keep up with the rate of price inflation for materials resulting in fewer purchased periodicals and monographs (ARL, 2001). Justifying current collection policies with this data may have unintended political and budgetary consequences. As the popular proverb goes, "Be careful for what you ask for, you may just get it."

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Notes:

ARL. (2001). Monograph and Serial Costs in ARL Libraries, 1986-2001 (Graph 2). *ARL Statistics 2000-01*.

Response from Erin Smith:

The above Letter to the Editor questions the appropriateness of the methodology for evaluating collection usefulness. Undeniably, the research would be improved by a larger sample and examining the works in “lesser detail” would be a means of increasing the number of publications without dramatically increasing the time involved in conducting the research. Statistical tests were not employed simply because the sample was so small and because, as the letter quite correctly points out, the differences over time were not significant in most cases.

However, it should be noted that this project never intended to provide the

definitive answer to the monograph-periodical question, nor were the resulting findings used as the overriding factor in the Libraries’ allocation decisions. Rather, this research was undertaken in order to determine if quantitative data on the usefulness of a library’s collection could be gathered by analyzing the bibliographies of theses and dissertations. To that end, the goal was not so much to draw conclusions but to develop a methodology that can be employed in any library that supports a graduate school and can be readily expanded to address the statistical concerns raised above.

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