Letters

To the Editor:

Jessie Carney Smith, in her excellent article "Special Collections of Black Literature in the Traditionally Black College" (*C&RL*, September 1974), neglects to mention one important fact. That is her own role in making available to librarians and researchers the catalog of the distinguished Negro Collection at Fisk where she is University Librarian.

With the participation of Mrs. Smith and her staff, G. K. Hall and Co. is currently involved in publishing that card catalog in book form. It thereby joins the published catalogs of the Moorland Collection at Howard and the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library, both of which she describes (as well as other black collections not included in her study) and which are also published by G. K. Hall.

Richard Newman
G. K. Hall & Co.
Boston, Massachusetts

"Overdue Policies"

Four letters have been received commenting on the article "Overdue Policies: A Comparison of Alternatives" by Jan Baaske, Don L. Tolliver, and Judy Westerberg which appeared in the September 1974 issue of this journal (p.354–59).

Pertinent extracts from these letters are presented below with a response by one of the authors, Don L. Tolliver, executive director of learning resources, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

To the Editor:

It is incredible that the authors would have concluded that "a search of the literature produces scant statistical data" to support the assumption that overdue notices are "a necessary part of library materials" (p.354). It is even more appalling to see such a statement in a learned journal while undergirded by a bibliography which includes only six—count them—six references to the literature, none of which is more than five years old.

. . . During my doctoral studies, I spent nearly three years in probing into the various aspects of the delinquent borrowers in academic libraries. In my dissertation, the results of these investigations were carefully and fully summarized. In that particular piece of "library literature," I described how I undertook to determine the differences, if any, which occur in the return rate of materials of delinquent borrowers as related to various stimuli (overdue notices).

. . . In order to test how these overdue notices influenced the response in a significant manner, data were gathered subsequently regarding the rates of response. The findings showed that statistically significant differences in response existed the more direct the stimuli and in the predicted manner.

The conclusions drawn by Baaske, Tolliver, and Westerberg in a way corroborate the results of my earlier study, that is that overdue notices "appear to have an important reminder effect and improve the return rate of overdue books" (p.359). In fact, in my summary it was suggested that future research in this area might be undertaken by introducing other variables as treatments. The effort to test the effectiveness of the threat of encumbrances in urging students to return library materials is an excellent example of what I had in mind.

By no means do I wish to denigrate the statement of the problem, the description

of the design and procedures, nor the results of the research described by the Purdue trio. No matter how sophisticated the design and implementation of a research project, however, there is nothing that supersedes certain fundamentals of scholarly investigation. In this case, the answers to the basic questions of whether the problem is one which had never been solved; or had previous research on the subject been found and examined; or can the results of other research be used in solving the present problem—all seem to have been less than thoroughly explored.

Le Moyne W. Anderson
Director of Libraries
Colorado State University
Fort Collins

Response:

Essentially, Dr. Anderson stresses the need for thorough literature reviews of previous research on the subject under study. I agree 100 percent with his criticism and regret that during the course of our work we did not find his 1970 Ph.D. thesis entitled "Delinquent Borrowers in an Academic Library." With his work in hand, we could have potentially made a more significant contribution to library literature. One word in our defense: In the real world of a library research unit, one works within the constraints of management needs, time, and cost factors per study. When a real problem is at hand, one does not always have the luxury of time necessary for an extended literature review. Often alternatives must be suggested to management immediately in order to meet deadlines for policy formulation.

Don L. Tolliver

To the Editor:

. . . There seems to be a tendency to assume that as long as statistical tests of validity are met then the conclusions are sound. . . . An example of uncontrolled variables can be seen in the article by Baaske, Tolliver, and Westerberg. . . .

One must assume that Purdue University has a published overdue policy which includes fines and threat of encumbrance. Therefore, the fact that subjects did not receive notices or formal threats of such action does not mean that they were ignorant of normal policy and perhaps affected by it. In other words, environmental constraints may have been such that a true test of the effect of different notices, or lack of them, was impossible.

The authors conclude that overdue notices "appear to have an important reminder effect and improve the return rate of overdue books." Unless a more exhaustive study of the data exists which was not published, this seems unproved. We still lack conclusive proof that the length of the loan period is preeminent in determining book returns. We suspect that different types of borrowers, e.g., undergraduate vs. graduate students, have different book use period requirements. And it is entirely possible that some differentiation in use periods might be identified on the basis of subject field. Thus it would seem that a true test of the effect of overdue notices could only be conducted in a less contaminated environment, utilizing a more homogeneous group of borrowers, and focusing on book returns in a particular subject area.

Robert L. Burr
Director of Circulation
Earl Gregg Swem Library
The College of William and Mary in Virginia
Williamsburg

Response:

Uncontrolled variables can always contaminate results, especially if they are generated in a systematic fashion. One way to minimize their effect is to employ a random sampling technique. Any contamination effects which might have been present were probably randomly distributed across subjects, thus, not systematically affecting the data. In other words, subjects in each treatment group, in all probability, had an overall equal awareness of the library's existing overdue policies. There could well have been some contamination from learning effects, in that subjects depended on overdue notices as a reminder to return books. Yet, a review of the data generated by a small pool of subjects (who were first-time users of the library and therefore in all probability had not learned to depend on overdue notices) revealed the same results as presented in the study. In a sense, the subjects assigned to group A served as

a control group to which one can make comparisons regarding the effects of the other treatments.

This study did not address the issue of varying loan periods nor were we particularly interested in differences between different types of borrowers or differences in fields of study. Such an approach would have served to limit the degree to which we could generalize our findings. In summary, we needed to know the effects of overdue notices, threats, etc., as related to the user population in general.

Don L. Tolliver

To the Editor:

The experimental design of the Baaske, Tolliver, and Westerberg study of overdue policies reported on page 355 of the September issue calls for three observations on each subject. Presumably, the subjects are people, borrowers. . . .

It will be noted that the criterion measure, the observation, was in terms of the percentage of books returned. What values can this percentage assume? Only two possibilities, as I see it: a borrower in any treatment group either has returned his book on a given day, or he hasn't. The percentage is either 100 or 0. No other values are possible. In other words, we have data of nominal quality. This is the question asked to obtain O_{21}, for example: on day 28, has borrower 1 in group A returned the book, yes or no?

This raises two serious questions about the study.

(1) Were the observations really premeasures and postmeasures, as the authors claim on page 356? I say they were not. O_1, O_2, and O_3, for example, are not three successive observations on the same subject. Instead, as soon as an observation takes on the value of "yes" that subject is eliminated from the study.

(2) More important, were the observations of high enough quality for arithmetic treatment? Again I say, no! The answers were in terms of "yes" and "no." If you add a "yes" and a "no" and divide by two, what is the result? A mean of "maybe"?

Since the analysis of variance design employed by the authors requires data of at least interval quality, I have concluded, for the moment, two things:

(1) This study to determine the differential effect of overdue warning alternatives on return rates has miscarried.

(2) Our profession needs more concern with methodology, not less. And don't listen to the change for change's sake people!

Herbert H. Hoffman
Catalog Librarian
Santa Ana College
Santa Ana, California

Response:

Mr. Hoffman's comments concerning the design are technically correct. A true Campbell & Stanley design was not employed, for subjects did "drop out" along the way. Perhaps if the study were done again, a chi-square (X^2) test would be employed. However, the same results would likely be found and similar conclusions drawn. Another statistical test which is equally effective is the test of differences between proportions or percentages. Thus, the findings remain as follows: At the time measures were taken, the percentages of books returned clearly were not the same under the three treatments.

Mr. Hoffman's statement that the data aren't worth analysis is erroneous. Also his statement that analysis of variance requires interval data is also wrong. It is quite common to perform ANOVA on ranked data, which is ordinal, not interval.

Indeed, our profession needs to be concerned with methodology, and *constructive* criticism is helpful; yet let us not lose sight of a more important issue, namely, knowing which questions merit the energy necessary to complete a study.

Don L. Tolliver

To the Editor:

. . . The authors are to be commended for the relatively complete description of the methodology they employed. However, some questions need to be raised regarding this methodology as well as the final conclusions reached by the authors.

(1) A total of 4361 transactions were "randomly assigned to either treatment group A, B, or C." But the resulting assign-

ment of 969, 1524, and 1868 transactions, respectively, is so unlikely as to defy belief. (A chi-square test of the hypothesis of equal likelihood is rejected at an exceedingly low level: $p << .0001$.) Is there an explanation for this phenomenon?

(2) The authors' statement that all pairs of means are significant at the .05 level appears to be contradicted by another statement appearing later in the same paragraph: "no significant difference in return rate was found between Ss in Group A (overdue notice and threat of encumbrance) and Group B (overdue notice only)" (p.358). And in their conclusion, the authors write, "The threat of encumbrance is effective in urging students to return library materials near the due date" (p.359). When the threat of encumbrance is accompanied by an overdue notice, this conclusion also seems to be contradicted by the first-quoted statement above. Which of these statements accurately reflects the authors' findings?

(3) Finally, a major conclusion of the authors is that "the encumbrance system does not appear to have the cumulative and deterring effect of a fine system" (p.359). This conclusion appears to be entirely unsupported by the study, in which the effect of fines on book return rates is not an examined subject.

Stephen P. Harter
Library Science/AV Program
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Tampa

Response:

Mr. Harter's comments concerning unequal Ns is important. In this study, the assignment of subjects to one of the three treatment conditions was determined by the last digit on each checkout card. Unfortunately, from the pool of transaction cards used, more cards happened to have last digits which, based on the instructions given circulation personnel, provided for automatic assignment to Group C rather than Groups A or B.

Unequal Ns do not diminish the quality of a study, although they can be difficult to interpret or can be misleading. The analysis used did allow for these very large unequal Ns.

Mr. Harter is correct in indicating that the effect of fines on book return rates is not directly examined in this study. As indicated in the study report, no statistically significant difference in return rate was found between subjects in Group A (overdue notice and threat of encumbrance) and Group B (overdue notice only). Thus, it was incorrectly reported that *all* pairs of means were significant at the .05 level. This was the only comparison of means that was *not* significant at the .05 level. However, the trends as illustrated in Figure 2 indicated that threat of encumbrance has some effect in encouraging students to return library materials nearer the due date. In this study, this effect was not statistically different from receiving an overdue notice only. Yet, the trends still pointed in that direction.

Perhaps an observation is worth noting at this time. While results of field research may not be perfect, such results (especially when studies are replicated) certainly can provide library management with needed information and are far better than no research at all.

Don L. Tolliver