

Research Notes

This section will appear occasionally. Its purpose is to report the results of selected current research on specific topics. Items included in this section have been reviewed by members of the editorial board.—C.J.S.

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KATHRYN B. WILSON AND JOANNE D. EUSTIS

The Impact of User Frustration on Humanities Research

INTRODUCTION

In an article recently published by *Collection Building*, Paul Metz posed an intriguing question: What is the consequence for scholarly productivity of a researcher's frustration in not finding the information he needs in his own library? Or, stated another way, what happens to potential research projects when scholars are thwarted in their need for quick access to the necessary materials? The emphasis here is not on why the user is frustrated, why the library has failed, or what librarians can do about it. It is instead to look at the effect upon scholarship of that frustration.¹

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It is well known that libraries provide inter-library loan service as a means of supplementing local collections. In addition, universities make leave time, sabbaticals, and summer vacations available for pursuing necessary resources. Yet despite these alternatives, there may be a more alarming consequence of frustration resulting from inadequate library holdings. "It may also be," Metz suggests, "that potential research projects which are in their fertile but tentative and fragile early stages are deferred, or worse, abandoned."² Can it be that a research library collection actually has the potential to direct, regulate, or form scholarly research in some way? If this can be proven, then librarians must take another look at their calling. They are not only guardians of the repositories of knowledge but also, through collection development decisions, active agents in the scholarly process. This question inspired two librarians

at Virginia Tech to look into the nature of user frustration at their institution.

VIRGINIA TECH

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, a land-grant university, was founded in 1872 as the Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College. In 1944, the college was renamed Virginia Polytechnic Institute. In 1970, the Virginia legislature voted that VPI, or Virginia Tech, as the university is known, would henceforth legally be called Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. The addition of *State University* to the name reflected a new emphasis on liberal arts during the past decade. Nevertheless, the liberal arts faculty has continued to struggle with the legacy of a technical college, as exemplified by the popular nickname Virginia Tech.

As the nature of the university changed, its library was faced with a formidable challenge. With the addition of many more faculty members in the humanities, and the creation of two humanities graduate programs in English and history, the library needed to develop a part of the collection that until 1970 had largely been ignored. Generous appropriations from the state made it possible to carry out the extensive collection development that was necessary.

Humanities programs have been richly supported since 1970, as has the University Libraries book budget. But because of VPI's earlier emphases, humanists think of themselves as the poor relations in the university family. Given this milieu, we selected the humanities faculty as the test for Metz' questions.

METHODOLOGY

We made phone calls to a random sample of humanities faculty members and asked them to reflect on their frustrations in using the library. Their responses were used to design a questionnaire. In October 1979, the questionnaire was sent to faculty in the seven humanities departments in the College of Arts and Sciences: Art and Art History; Performing Arts and Communications; Foreign Languages and Literatures; History; Religion and Philosophy; English; and Humanities (a cross-disciplinary department). All faculty listed in the current faculty-staff directory as members of these departments were included

in the survey. The majority of those surveyed were full-time teaching faculty. Surveys were mailed to 190 faculty members; 99 (52 percent) responded. The survey was analyzed by rank and academic discipline, but these variables did not yield statistically significant differences.

The instrument consisted of twenty-six questions in four categories.* The first set of questions collected basic data for each respondent: position at the university, length of time employed, and academic field. Also included were average time spent working in the library per week and number of articles or books accepted for publication since 1976. In the second set of questions, respondents assessed the University Libraries and the degree to which they fulfilled the perceived needs of undergraduate and graduate students, graduate-level research, and faculty research. The third category consisted of a series of statements of alternatives that a researcher might choose when encountering weaknesses in the library collection. This was the focus of the study. The fourth section asked the respondent to assess the effect upon his/her research of certain problems in library services or physical environment. A final question asked the respondent whether the quantity or quality of his/her research would be improved if the inadequacies of collections, services, or physical environment were corrected. In this last question we were testing whether the researcher perceived a connection between the library and his/her productivity as a scholar.

RESULTS

Our survey produced some curious results. Humanities scholars do perceive a link between the library and their scholarly output, but they generally do not accommodate their research to available resources.

The second set of questions provided us with a sense of how important the library was to the respondent's work and how well the library met his/her needs. Ninety-seven percent of the respondents were affirmative in their response to the statement "A supportive library is most important for successfully conducting my research." The respondents felt

*A copy of the questionnaire and detail on responses to each item are available on request from the author.

that the library adequately served the requirements of undergraduates, but tended to be dissatisfied with the manner in which it fulfilled the needs of graduate students and researchers. They recorded a strong negative response to the statement "The materials in the library are adequate for my own research needs." It appears that the more the researcher expects of the library and the more specific the research requirements, the less the library is perceived as able to satisfy the humanities scholar.

The third set of questions enabled the respondents to indicate what they did when weaknesses in the collection were encountered. Instead of altering the research topic, the typical humanist pursued the needed material through alternate means, such as interlibrary loan and travel. An occasional person redirected or limited the scope of the topic to use available materials, but more frequently the research was postponed, presumably until a time when he/she could travel to wherever the material is located. In general, topics were not completely abandoned. Sixty-one percent indicated they would never, or almost never, drop their topic. Twenty-six percent said that they sometimes would, and 6 percent said that they did so frequently. We concluded that humanities scholars were a persevering lot. Once they had a thesis in mind or a point to prove, they set to work and were not easily deterred.

Since the humanities scholars were not inclined to select or to discard a research topic solely on the basis of strength in the local library collection, the library and the university must make it easy to gain access to materials elsewhere. In this regard, interlibrary loan is crucial for the humanities scholar. The ability to travel to other locations is also important. Seventy-eight percent of our respondents frequently or sometimes used interlibrary loan; 69 percent said they frequently or sometimes traveled to obtain necessary materials. Fewer relied on friends in other locations to provide them with what they need. Until recently, a popular way of securing materials at Virginia Tech has been to place a book order. Money for such orders has been available in the past, but recent budget cutbacks now make this option more difficult.

While the fears Metz expressed in his article were not borne out by the results of our

survey, we were still left with concerns. Eighty-five percent of the respondents said that an adequate library was extremely important for successfully conducting their research. Eighty-one percent said the quantity or quality of their research would improve if certain problems in collection, physical environment, or services were corrected.

The fourth set of questions was based on suggestions about various inadequacies collected during our preliminary telephone survey. At that time, the faculty members consulted felt that the problems were lack of faculty carrels, inadequate control of periodicals, materials on microform, and interlibrary loan. A majority of our written survey respondents then confirmed that these situations did indeed have a negative impact on research. For example, 64 percent said that lack of faculty carrels had a serious effect or offered some problem in their research efforts. Seventy-five percent felt that inadequate control of periodicals, resulting in a not-on-shelf problem, was a significant deterrent. Microforms and interlibrary loan were considered slightly less troublesome. Respondents were not asked to detail the specific problems in these areas, but we might expect them to be of the sort that make the research process cumbersome and contribute to tedious, irritating delays.

Humanities scholars seem to consider physical environment and library services as important to their research as the collection itself. They expect the library to be a place conducive to study. Services such as interlibrary loan, reference, and circulation must be efficient in order to make the routine mechanics of research as smooth and unrestrictive as possible. When this is not the case, their scholarship suffers. On the basis of evidence at our library, the important link between scholarly productivity in the humanities and the library as perceived by the respondents to our survey is not the collection but physical surroundings and services.

HUMANITIES RESEARCH AND LIBRARIES

The results of our survey underscore the conclusions of other studies in humanities scholarship. In his article "Limits of Self-Sufficiency," Richard Chaplin describes the humanist's dilemma:

The humanist has an insatiable appetite for re-

search materials and no one library can satisfy all his needs. The humanist needs everything and anything that has been published, plus large collections of unpublished materials. Most of these exist in copies of one, so the humanist will go to the source rather than have the source brought to him. We can state with certainty that libraries are not self-sufficient for the humanities.³

Our results also concur with the findings of a study conducted in England by Cynthia Corkill and Margaret Mann. In surveying humanists in thirty-five universities, Corkill and Mann found only two people who limited themselves to the resources of their own libraries.⁴ In addition, they found that:

Many people were at pains to point out that they would hardly expect the library to hold the material they needed, as they were working with rare or unique material, or on a subject where the primary materials were necessarily abroad, as for example with historians working on American history.⁵

Keeping in mind that the humanist will never be completely satisfied with a single library's collection, library and university administrators might view shrinking book budgets with an eye toward cutting the humanities budget. The scientist and social

scientist may have more urgent need for current materials, but the humanist generally plans his work around travel. Available university funds might be better spent for the humanities researcher by making leave time more generously available, and not by bolstering an already inadequate library collection. However, an underlying theme in our responses was that while the library failed to provide adequate resources for in-depth humanities scholarship, it had an adequate core collection for teaching and undergraduate research. If funds were decreased, the humanities collection might soon lack the ability to provide even basic secondary sources and materials.

CONCLUSION

The major purpose of the survey was to provide information on the consequence of user frustration among humanities faculty caused by collection inadequacy. The results of our survey indicate that such frustration does exist. However, the lack of a strong humanities collection is not deemed to be an insurmountable impediment to research. Humanities scholars seem to accept this as a

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condition of their disciplines. Most important to this group of scholars is the freedom and encouragement to travel to primary sources

and a comfortable work environment with efficient, effective services in their university library.

REFERENCES

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4. Cynthia Corkill and Margaret Mann, *Information Needs in the Humanities: Two Postal Surveys* (CRUS Occasional Paper 2, [Sheffield, England: Centre for Research on User Studies, 1978]), p.26.
5. *Ibid.*, p.25.

RITA A. SCHERREI AND JUDITH M. CORIN

Allocation of Student Assistance Funding in the Public Service Units of the UCLA Library

As is the case in most academic libraries, the UCLA library depends heavily on student assistance to supplement its regular staff. As is also nearly universally true, money to support student help is never available to the degree that would really satisfy unit and department heads. Since there are twenty-seven separate units of the library that do receive funds to hire students, attempting to allocate to each a fair share of the limited pot is an administrative challenge.

Currently this challenge is met for the seventeen public service branches by a zero-based formula approach that relies on annual data in nine work-related areas. These areas, which are listed below, do not cover every task performed in every unit. However, they are those work areas that are common to most units and that are related to the total work load regardless of the specific ways in which tasks are carried out. The areas are the following:

1. Shelving;
2. Circulation;
3. Volumes added to the collection;
4. Serial titles maintained;

5. Public service points in addition to the circulation and reference desks;
6. Reference activity;
7. Material records entered into CLSI;
8. Patron records entered into CLSI;
9. Online bibliographic searches.

From work-load measurement in these nine areas, full-time equivalent (FTE) employee requirements are determined. A 20 percent factor for management activity and a 6 percent factor for collection development are also included in order to account for the total number of FTEs required to maintain the unit's activities. When the number of regular unit staff is subtracted from this total FTE requirement, the difference is the *desirable* number of FTE students. This number can then be converted to dollars, which in turn is compared with other units' requirements and with the total real money available. Each unit is finally allocated its share based on its percentage of the theoretical or desirable total applied to the real total.

The details of the data collection and calculations follow, as does a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages that have become apparent in the two years that this approach has been utilized.

DATA COLLECTION

Monthly statistics are collected from the li-

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