

Catalog Use Study

Catalog Use Study [sponsored by] American Library Association, Resources and Technical Services Division, Cataloging and Classification Section, Policy and Research Committee; director's report by Sidney L. Jackson; edited by Vaclav Mostecky. Chicago: American Library Association, 1958. 86p. \$2.25.

There have been studies of catalog users before, but nothing quite as broad in scope as this one. The *Catalog Use Study* was undertaken to identify the demands made on the catalog by its actual users, to measure the adequacy with which the catalog is meeting these demands, to isolate areas in need of more thorough investigation, and to produce a reliable interview form and related tools. A few statistics will give an indication of its magnitude: during a twelve-week period, 5,494 interviews were conducted at 39 libraries, which included 2 general research, 15 college and university, 6 special-subject (5 serving professional schools), 10 public, and 6 high-school libraries; 137 interviewers were used; and an advisory committee of 34 authorities was utilized.

The present report, a summary and interpretation of the findings, was written by the project's director, Sidney L. Jackson of the Brooklyn Public Library, and edited by Vaclav Mostecky of Catholic University. Sponsors of the study were the Norman Bassett Foundation, the United States Steel Foundation, and the former Division of Cataloging and Classification of the ALA.

With such a wealth of data to work with, it is not surprising that this report occupies eighty-six pages of text and includes eighteen statistical tables. In fact, it is evident that a laudable and successful effort was made to restrict the presentation to the most significant findings and correlations revealed by the study. However, most of these findings, and the recommendations arising from them, will come as no surprise to those familiar with the results of other studies of catalog users. For this reason, it is probable that a major function to be served by the *Catalog Use Study* will reside in its furnishing massive statistical support for thoughts previously expressed as personal impressions

or as results obtained from smaller samples.

Perhaps the most significant finding is the one dealing with the effectiveness of the catalog in succeeding in identifying desired items for the user, items which were actually in the library and for which cards were filed somewhere in the catalog. The resulting "batting averages" were 67 to 83 per cent success for known-item searches and 80 to 87 per cent for subject searches. Furthermore, the leading cause of the failures that did occur was found to be incomplete or incorrect information on the part of the user. Such library controversies as filing arrangement and selection of main entry were found to be of relatively minor importance to users. On these grounds, the study states that there is "strong evidence that the catalog is a reliable and reasonably efficient tool." This conclusion furnishes heavy ammunition against charges that the card catalog should be abolished as a complete failure and impossibility. On the other hand, it does not take into account the people who for various reasons do *not* use the catalog; in restricting the study to actual catalog users, we may be looking at a group which is somewhat more skillful than average, due to natural processes of selection and evolution, and we can only speculate as to what makes a person a non-user.

Other important results of the study: oral citations were the major source of references sought in the catalog; inexperience and unfamiliarity with the catalog were frequent causes of difficulty; the number of search failures increased directly with the size of the catalog; divided catalogs failed only about half as often as dictionary catalogs; the subject part of the catalog was more difficult to use, even for librarians, than the author-title parts; and cards under a given subject heading were usually selected by the patron according to date of publication rather than alphabetical position. Recommendations dealing with deficiencies in patrons and librarians as well as the catalog are provided to guide our efforts for improvement. Again, we have seen most of these recommendations before, such as improving library instruction to students, providing explanatory material and staff assistants at the catalog, examining the subject heading structure, supplementing catalog

use with printed bibliographic tools, and putting more cross-references, title cards, and analytics into the catalog, but the study provides us with statistical, in addition to logical, bases for its arguments.

One other finding and recommendation deserves special comment: the average library staff member turned out to be no more capable in using the catalog than was the average patron! The ensuing recommendation is, naturally, that "librarians serving the public at the catalog should be trained specifically in the use of that catalog." But this does not dispose of the basic question which must arise in the minds of administrators, librarians, and educators alike: why weren't the formal schooling, the on-the-job training, and the working experience sufficient to give the library staff member a clear edge over the average user?

A number of shortcomings in the research methodology employed are discussed in a frank chapter entitled "Problems of Method." In particular, the non-random nature of the sample, both in terms of libraries and patrons, is pointed out, but the feeling is that the great number of interviews obtained will compensate for it somewhat. Other weaknesses would include the use of library staff members as interviewers, and having these interviewers consciously select their respondents according to their own individual judgments as to the representativeness of the sample being obtained. Several improvements to remove weaknesses and inconsistencies in the interview questionnaire, which consisted of forty-five check-off or short-answer items, were suggested. A chronological, or open-ended, type of interview form was rejected early in the study, but is worthy of further consideration if other studies of this type are conducted. Evidence for this is presented in the six "case studies" included in Appendix D of the report; these analyses were based on comments written on the backs of the questionnaires by the interviewers, and provide a richness and depth of understanding which often eclipse that of the statistically-tabulated data.

The authors state that an outside group would still not be able to surmount these herent in the nature of the study. This view methodological difficulties believed to be in-becomes untenable when we stop to con-

sider the complex studies pursued by market researchers, pooling and sampling surveyors, and other sociological investigators. As long as we keep insisting that our problems are somehow "different" from those being successfully attacked by such specialists, the quality of our research will be kept inferior to what it otherwise might become.

Nevertheless, the *Catalog Use Study* represents a monumental effort to improve the card catalog by considering the needs and habits of its users. Those who subscribe to this sensible approach will profit from a careful reading of the report.—Robert S. Meyer, *University of California*.

For Every College Librarian

A Study of Factors Influencing College Students to Become Librarians. By Agnes Lytton Reagan. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1958. viii 110p. (*ACRL Monographs*, Number 21).

This monograph should be read by every college librarian who has a genuine interest in students and a manifest belief in the worth of librarianship. Since every college librarian should have these two qualities, this would mean a wider reading than this monograph probably will receive. Consequently, it is also recommended for reading by every librarian—school, public, or special—who is interested in securing new and excellent personnel for the library profession.

The study by Dr. Reagan, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Library Science at the University of Illinois, is a well-organized and scholarly attempt to identify and study factors in institutions of higher education which may influence students in their choice of librarianship as a career.

The background, description, and methodology of the study are presented in compact form. A review of the literature on the subject of recruiting as related to librarians covers some seventy-five publications. Steps in the procedure followed in the collection and treatment of data included: (1) the compilation of information on the educational backgrounds of recent graduates and stu-