Letters

To the Editor:

The recent article by Professor Julie Hallmark entitled "Scientists' Access and Retrieval of References Cited in Their Recent Journal Articles" (*College & Research Libraries*, 55 [May 1994]: 199–209) reported potentially interesting results, but her methodology may not give them adequate support. I believe that the following points should be clarified.

Hallmark selected nineteen journals from which to take the sample of articles, journals recommended by scientists and chosen through independent evaluations; the evaluations are attributed to Katz's *Magazines for Libraries*, 1989, which is general and dated. The list of titles chosen is small and does not adequately represent the disciplines. For example, the list for Biology omits basic titles in genetics and molecular biology, that for Chemistry consists of only three ACS journals, and Physics is represented by only the parts of *Physical Review*. Also, why are *Nature* and *Science* excluded, but *PNAS* included? Were impact factors or times cited considered? The titles on the list may be prestigious, but the groups seem narrow for the disciplines they represent.

The timing in this study is another concern. The sample letter is dated March 23, 1992, and the articles chosen for the sample were published during the last six months of 1991. Does this mean that an author could have been asked about one reference in a paper published nine months earlier thus written as much as twelve or eighteen months ago? How is the reliability of the author's recall taken into account? Another related concern is whether the scientists had cited the reference in previous work, or if instead the citation was new to them. If it was previously cited, then it might be even more difficult to recall with accuracy how it was originally accessed or retrieved.

Some further methodological concerns. The scientists were given choices about access and retrieval of their references. How were these derived? Were they a result of pretesting, or drawn from another reliable(?) instrument? Also, what value was there in prefixing the sample to contain 60 percent citations from 1980–1991, 35 percent from 1979 or earlier, and 5 percent foreign language? Hallmark has already restricted her research to cited journal articles; with monographs, conferences and patents excluded this formula is more restrictive still. On the practical side, if a citation to a 1978 paper in German was randomly chosen, how would this be categorized? And when the data for access and retrieval are tabulated, ranges of percentages reflect how these articles were discovered and obtained, but these describe the aggregate set of scientists, not the individuals. Some may find most references by talking to colleagues while others may not find any this way. In order to see patterns of individual use and discovery of references, one must ask scientists how they find several of their references.

The identification of user needs is such a constantly popular and elusive topic that librarians have asked for better studies than have been done to date, studies with methodologies that yield valid and transferable results. This report suggests several ideas about scientists but these may not be justified. Because the author achieved both a high response rate and many comments, perhaps she could provide a more detailed interpretation of her data.

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