



Tracking periodical usage in a research library

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Because spiraling subscription costs necessitated an annual evaluation of journals at the University of South Florida's Florida Mental Health Institute, in 1987 the research center library staff began monitoring journal usage with the aid of computers. The Institute, located on the Tampa campus, has a staff of 300 and specializes in developing new treatment strategies for the mentally ill and providing modernized training to strengthen mental health services throughout Florida. In support of this mission, the research center library collection includes manuscripts, research reports, 8,000 monographs, 4,000 unbound periodicals, and 130 current journal subscriptions.

Articles in library literature have explored the issues at length, focusing on increased prices, evaluation of serials, and methods of eliminating titles from periodical subscription lists. In his 1985 examination of rising prices Stephen J. Bensman advised that from 1967 to 1984, the average cost of an American periodical had risen 534.8%.¹ A. K. Kundu and R. R. Sinha included foreign journals in their 1989 study, in which they attributed rising costs to inflation, the fluctuating exchange rate, and growing production costs.²

Again in 1989, Jamie Webster Hastreiter contributed additional data indicating that price increases were more than 5 times the inflation rate. Hastreiter also advanced the following causes: "twigging" by publishers that creates new titles, the "publish or perish" phenomenon, and the need of authors to build their reputations by submitting variant versions of material to several journals.³ So

serious is this matter of rising costs that the Association of Research Libraries recently created the Office for Scientific and Academic Publishing to study the problem.⁴

To identify journals that should be retained, Robert N. Broadus recommended in 1985 using citation counts as found in *Journal Citation Reports*, and he addressed the "exception to the rule" problem by providing a rationale for retaining some little-cited titles.⁵ Paul Metz and Charles A. Litchfield included current serials in their use study of the overall collection at Virginia Tech in 1988, and Charmaine B. Tomczyk recently discussed use studies as a means to in select journals for a small academic library.⁶

Placing dots on journals, stapling use statistics sheets to periodicals, direct observation, and distributing patron surveys randomly are methods that have been employed to monitor patron use, according to Tomczyk. She cited a University of Chicago study that entailed concealing ballpoint pens and questionnaires in selected journal issues with a request for the finders to write in their answers on the surveys and keep the pens. Even without a completed questionnaire, library staff was able to tabulate patron use based upon the missing pens. Also in frequent use is the "sweep" procedure, which involves tallying journals left on tables by users.⁷

The "sweep" method, combined with the inclusion of misshelved journals and interlibrary loan use, was selected by the USF research center for

¹Stephen J. Bensman, "Journal Collection Management as a Cumulative Advantage Process," *College & Research Libraries* 46 (January 1985): 13-29.

²A. K. Kundu and R. R. Sinha, "Price Hike on Periodicals and Their Impact on Subscriptions," *Herald of Library Science* 28 (January-April 1989): 41-49.

³Jamie Webster Hastreiter, "Guidelines for Periodical Acquisition and Budget Control: An Overview of Selection and Deselection in the Smaller Academic Library," in Gerard B. McCabe, ed., *Operations Handbook for the Small Academic Library* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1989), 229-38.

⁴"New ARL Office Directs Research and Concern Over Serials Pricing," *Library Journal* 114 (December 1989): 28.

⁵Robert N. Broadus, "A Proposed Method for Eliminating Titles from Periodical Subscription Lists," *College & Research Libraries* 46 (January 1985): 30-35.

⁶Paul Metz and Charles A. Litchfield, "Measuring Collections Use at Virginia Tech," *College & Research Libraries* 49 (November 1988): 501-513.

⁷Charmaine B. Tomczyk, "Faculty and Librarian Participation in Selecting Journals for a Small Academic Library," in Gerard B. McCabe, ed., *Operations Handbook for the Small Academic Library* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1989), 239-57.

the following reasons. First, it was not difficult to secure the cooperation of library users because the USF research center psychiatrists, psychologists, and other mental health practitioners are library-oriented and very aware of rising journal costs. Second, because the research center library has a staff of four—one full-time professional, two full-time paraprofessionals, and one graduate assistant—it was necessary to utilize a procedure that was not heavily labor-intensive; various ways of marking journals, distributing patron surveys, or direct observation would not have been feasible.

Once the choice was made, the following procedure was implemented. During the day, any journals that are found anywhere within the library are brought to the circulation desk. Available library staff records the usage for each journal, with tally marks on a weekly data collection sheet that lists all current journal subscriptions. The items are then placed on a reshelving cart. At the end of every month, the total of these weekly tally records is combined with interlibrary loan statistics and inserted into a Lotus 1-2-3 computer spreadsheet. Formulas automatically compute the usage for the

year to date, and printouts are provided to any interested patron.

Administrators and department chairs regularly review the monthly journal usage, and these statistics serve a useful purpose. Combined with reports of periodical subscription increases supplied by the librarian and updates of the ongoing research projects of the Institute staff, journal usage statistics help to determine which subscriptions will be canceled and which ones added in the next fiscal year. There are no funding surprises, and there is no requirement for a written justification for a periodical budget increase from the librarian. Also, by involving faculty and staff in the project, they acquired a vested interest, and “the” library became “our” library. Unwittingly, the library staff made a positive contribution to public relations with library patrons. Indeed, perhaps this enhanced collegiality has been the most valued result of all.

By refining the data collection sheets and adding categories for the next fiscal year, the research center library staff plans to study additional aspects of periodical usage.



Access to serials: Local improvements may make a difference

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Every library has a limited list of serials to which it subscribes. Beyond that it relies on interlibrary loan or some other means to obtain articles for its patrons. Most libraries have seen the use of this service expand in recent years. The number of journals grows and the proportion represented in the local collection inexorably falls. It is commonly believed that the advent of indexes on CD will contribute to the demand for articles not in the local collection.

What alternative is there to increased reliance on borrowing or document delivery services? We determined to try to improve access to the journals we already receive. Like many libraries, we recently introduced compact disk indexes and have seen their use grow quickly. We also noticed that there remained a bottleneck in the search process. Checking the citations obtained so quickly from the CD had to be done manually in the library's serials

list. The first remedy that occurred to us was to somehow match the journals on the CD with a list of those we receive, and have our titles highlighted or otherwise noted on the screen.

We have suggested this to CD producers, and there is some expressed interest, but nothing to show for it yet. Since we catalog our serials and shelve them by call number we would need to show, in addition to the holdings of a title, the call number. In theory this should be possible since we, like most libraries, have our serials and holdings in machine-readable form. The screen display for each citation could include local holdings information obtained from that list.

But this didn't seem to be an immediate possibility. A less automated approach was, however, within the range of our abilities. Using Microsoft Works (a simple, widely-used database program) on a Macintosh computer, we produced a database