

RBMS 2009

**Panel:** “Public Services and ‘Un-Hidden’ Collections:  
What We Know and What We Need to Know.”

**Title:** Assessing the Impact of Exposing Hidden Collections

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What do ten years of initiatives to expose hidden collections - to process and catalog our backlogs - look like in the reading room? How are our freshly exposed collections discovered and used on the web? What is the impact of the fruits of the past ten years of community commitment to making all of our collections accessible? What has changed, for researchers, archivists and librarians alike? Some have observed that better visibility of special collections has led to increased use of collections. Some report, anecdotally, that the quality of questions is changing, and that readers arrive with more sophisticated questions and engage in research at a deeper level. Some report a let-up in traffic in the reading room accompanied by soaring increases in “remote” reference work and collection use.

I'd like to frame my comments today as questions around **access** and **responsibility** – based on **evidence**. Some current terminology for this is “data-driven decision making.”

I begin where we begin together, with Judith Panitch's catalytic ARL report. This is the work that set fire to the hidden collections initiatives, meetings, reports, publications, grants, etc. etc. I've learned from Alice Schreyer that the survey and report were meant to set a benchmark. (The survey was in 1998 – ten years ago.) Both the conclusion and Executive Summary highlighted assessment of use.

Quoting from Judith's conclusion:

“This survey ran head-on into one of the significant ongoing challenges for special collections: documenting the importance of these operations to the campus and the community. For want of more meaningful statistics that would also be commonly available... [etc. etc.] Documenting these benefits and articulating their relation to the mission of the research library and the university will be one of the great tasks that lie ahead.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Panitch, *Special Collections in ARL Libraries: Results of the 1998 Survey*, (Washington DC: ARL, 2001): 61.

Have archives & special collections integrated assessment and improvement into their operations, as has happened elsewhere in libraries? When the ARL SPEC Kit on *Public Services in Special Collections* came out in 2006,<sup>2</sup> the RBMS Public Services Discussion Group – led by Erika Dowell - took up the gauntlet. This was a great place to launch a discussion of assessment. 71 of 75 respondents in the SPEC Kit survey tracked public services transactions; only 1 of the libraries used formal methods to evaluate the quality of public services.

“One respondent stated that additional research needs to be conducted to assess the impact of Special Collections services on educational outcomes, such as faculty and student conference presentations, publications, faculty lectures, etc. “Often the resulting use of our materials is not reported back to us,” the respondent wrote, “[making it] difficult to get accurate measures.”<sup>3</sup>

I’ll begin with a general overview of assessment approaches that I think pertain to our community in the vast literature. We have good models, like Shannon’s. To name just a few good examples of solid methodologies to measurement impact:

- I. Rachel Applegate’s recent article in *Reference & User Studies Quarterly* is a great example of what can be learned from plain old ordinary

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<sup>2</sup> Florence Turcotte and John Nemmers, *Public Services in Special Collections: ARL SPEC Kit 296* (Washington DC: ARL, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Florence Turcotte and John Nemmers, *Public Services in Special Collections: ARL SPEC Kit 296*, (Washington DC: ARL, 2006): 15.

transaction statistics. Much has been written about the decline in reference, and it turns out most of “the-sky-is-falling” conclusions have been based solely on ARL statistics. Applegate used NCES data for a variety of kinds of academic libraries, sorted by their Carnegie classes. She discovered significantly different trends in general reference transactions in ARLs than in master’s institutions.<sup>4</sup> This is a good example of the power of quantitative analysis. I can’t help wonder what we could learn along these about different kinds of rare book rooms and special collections, from ordinary transaction statistics and gate counts.

- II. ARL’s annual statistics are a terrific track of change over time. (For example, they reveal system-wide trends, such as those for circulation and reference statistics.) ARL, after all, commissioned the “hidden collections” report. For qualitative assessment one can cite tools like LibQUAL, and a much larger movement in libraries toward a culture of assessment. The research literature on library assessment is colossal.<sup>5</sup> (Here’s just one recent example...<sup>6</sup>) We’ll come back to the ARL statistics and LibQUAL. (Does anyone use LibQUAL?)

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<sup>4</sup> Rachel Applegate, “Whose Decline? Which Academic Libraries are “Deserted” in Terms of Reference Transactions?” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (winter 2008): 176-189.

<sup>5</sup> For recent selective bibliographies, see Joseph Matthews, *Library Assessment in Higher Education* (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Harry Meserve et al., “Developing a Model for Reference Research Statistics,” *RUSQ* 48, no 3 (spring 2009): 247-258.

- III. Wendy's Duff's work at Yale<sup>7</sup> is an excellent example of qualitative methodology used to assess impact. Her team tracked orientation sessions for classes at Manuscripts and Archives in Sterling Library (Yale). They conducted interviews with the undergraduates and the professors, both before and after the end of the term, and assessed the impact of teaching in special collections.
- IV. Another good model is in the UK. The Public Service Quality Group for Archives and Local Studies (PSQG)<sup>8</sup> initiated, in 1998, the National Survey of Visitors for U.K. Archives.<sup>9</sup> This is a comprehensive survey, conducted every 18 months. It yields longitudinal data and tracks levels of satisfaction in visitors to archives. For example, from the aggregate of national surveys they learned that 33% of respondents reported staying at the archives 3 hours or more in 2008, compared to 53% in 2006. The PSQG has created a Standard for Access to Archives.<sup>10</sup> A *Standard!* Institutions in the UK have a mandate for assessing quality of service, thus in directing resources to improving service. This is another example of the power of evidence.

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<sup>7</sup> Wendy M Duff and Joan M. Cherry, "Archival Orientation for Undergraduate Students: An Exploratory Study of Impact," *American Archivist* 71 no. 2 (spring/summer 2008): 499-529.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/research\\_and\\_development/public\\_services\\_quality\\_group/](http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/research_and_development/public_services_quality_group/)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/research\\_and\\_development/survey/](http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/research_and_development/survey/)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/research\\_and\\_development/access\\_standard/](http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/research_and_development/access_standard/)

V. I am a huge fan of Beth Yakel's Archival Metrics Project and the tools they have developed for the community.<sup>11</sup> Beth's group has built tools for assessment with researchers, students, for teaching, for online finding aids, and for websites. The Researcher toolkit, for example, includes a questionnaire, instructions on how to administer the questionnaire, instructions on how to prepare your data for analysis, a pre-formatted Excel spreadsheet for data from the questionnaire, samples of coded data, an SPSS file, and a sample report. Anyone can download whatever they want, for free. She is please to have learned recently that sometimes people re-purpose questions and tailor them to their needs and their circumstances. This is an invaluable set of tools. Kudos to the Mellon Foundation that funded much of the research, and to Beth and her team.

**Why has Beth Yakel's work not been more widely used? Why don't we use LibQUAL? Why are we shy about sharing our assessments when we do them?**

Now I'll lay out some impediments that may have slowed our community from collectively developing – or adopting – standard assessment tools and practices.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://archivalmetrics.org/home>

- I. Wendy Duff, in another piece of research,<sup>12</sup> interviewed archivists about what impediments staff says hold them back from conducting user studies. The results were: taking the time away from daily work, not having good tools, worry that they have insufficient expertise, and fears that their administrations might see low or declining use. Wendy found that many people do gather data about users from registration forms, informal conversations at the reference desk and exit interviews. Wendy writes: “Listening is not enough.” We rarely analyze this data systematically to evaluate our services and whether we are meeting the goals of the institution and the needs of our researcher.
- II. More obstacles and bottlenecks? This is a personal anecdote about quantitative statistics. Two years ago I set out to collect evidence of change over time in public services in special collections.<sup>13</sup> My hypothesis was: those trends in those aggregated ARL statistics were not the trends in special collections. (This was a proof-of concept project to look at nuts-and-bolts issues). I naively thought that ARL libraries would keep and re-use the gate counts and circulation statistics that each department tallies every year – those “annual hated

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<sup>12</sup> Wendy M. Duff et al., “Archivists’ Views of User-based Evaluation: Benefits Barriers, and Requirements,” *American Archivist* 71, no. 1 (fall/winter 2008): 499-529.

<sup>13</sup> A link to the August 2008 web seminar “Assessing the Impact of Special Collections” recording is at <http://www.oclc.org/programsandresearch/parcasts/default.htm>. Project description at <http://www.oclc.org/programs/ourwork/measures/enduserbehaviors/publicservicetrends.htm>.

giant statistics forms,” to quote a colleague. Aside from some exemplary institutions, most of my ARL-RLG special collections colleagues didn’t send them to me, for one reason or another. People couldn’t find them, they had been sent to administration, they are all on paper, people were too busy, they handed off the assignment to the wrong person who never does anything, etc. etc.

- III. More obstacles to engendering a culture of assessment? ARL statistics and LibQUAL themselves have been obstacles, because – as we all know - we’re different (we’re “special”). Standard data definitions are usually the first thing mentioned as an impediment. The ARL measures are all arranged around books. They don’t work for IRLAs. They don’t work for manuscripts, mixed collections and archives. They don’t work for hybrid collections and born-digital records. For example, the ARL equivalence for archives and manuscripts is 1 record box = 1 book volume (and this definition was hard to locate in the documentation, according to Rich Oram).
- IV. We must acknowledge the touchy issue of comparing different kinds of special collections, with different sizes, different funding and different missions...

Returning to Judith Panitch's "Hidden Collections" report, I'm quoting from her Executive Summary - "Unanswered Questions and Areas for Further Investigation:"

"What are the most appropriate measures by which to evaluate and compare usage of special collections, and what are the most appropriate terms in which to convey the centrality of special collections to all levels of research and scholarship?"<sup>14</sup>

As several people have commented, it breaks our hearts that we didn't have a use-metric baseline in place at that time, ten years ago, in order to track change over time. A lot has happened in ten years, with the uptake of EAD, the hidden collections initiative, and the birth of Google. We'll never have the evidence of the difference our work has made.

Conclusion: We have to start somewhere.

- I. We need community consensus on transparency and data definitions. Given the varying levels of processing for collections, what would be a measure of use? transactions? What are the units? What is the quality of the service? How do we count remote use? Use is use, right? Even more useful would be a complete picture, so

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<sup>14</sup> Judith Panitch, *Special Collections in ARL Libraries: Results of the 1998 Survey*, (Washington DC: ARL, 2001): 9.

we can know objectively who is doing a great job and figure out how to emulate them. Institutions who are not great performers can then see improvements.

- II. We need projects to promote a culture of assessment in rare books and special collections. Academic, independent, smaller and government institutions together – as a community – must develop tools to assist rare books and special collections overcome impediments to implementing assessment and improvement programs. ARL Directors could take the lead here. Luckily, we are not starting from scratch. We can adapt tools – such as LibQUAL, the UK Quality surveys, and Archival Metrics Toolkits – that have already been developed for related contexts.
- III. “If we don’t do this, someone else will.” I’d rather we develop the metrics and the tools to assess our collections – both individually and comparatively – ourselves. I believe we need to establish our own data definitions, metrics, and criteria for evaluations, and develop evidence from both quantitative and qualitative methods. For example, SAA’s RAO survey called for best practices tracking reference questions with a relational database.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “While the survey does not address this issue, the Task Force feels that a best practices guide should propose the tracking of reference statistics using a relational database. The information tracked should include data regarding the nature of individual requests and specific collections used, in addition to the time required for answering, patron type, and other administrative information. This tool would help reference archivists to guide processing decisions in a more

We have accomplished a great deal. We do not always have evidence of the impact of our accomplishments exposing hidden collections. In the past we could get by on intuition and experience. Times have changed.<sup>16</sup> How can we demonstrate our success, beyond sentiment and anecdotes?

Let's not continue on as we have, rather move to something more organized, building on the work that's already been done, like Shannon's survey. I would like to make decisions, assign resources, and set policy about exposing hidden collections ("full-level processing or with minimum-level processing?") based on data. On evidence. Let's prove - to ourselves, to our administrations, and to our donors and patrons - that we're accomplishing what we have set out to do.

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articulate and educated way." *Society of American Archivists Reference, Access, and Outreach Section MPLP Task Force Report*, (n.d.) Published online at:  
<http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/rao/MPLPreport.asp>

<sup>16</sup> Ian Ayers, *Super Crunchers* (Bantam, 2007).