

## Editorial

# The Use of Library Material



To say that our print collections in large academic libraries are underutilized is, I am sorry to admit, an understatement. We have known this for some time. Thirty years ago Allen Kent released a seminal report, *Use of Library Material: The University of Pittsburgh Study* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1979). Kent and his research team studied how the Pitt Library collection was used over a seven year period, 1969 to 1975, and found to the shock of many people, particularly to some of the faculty at Pitt, that “any given book purchased had only slightly better than one chance in two of ever being borrowed” and that a small portion of the titles in the collection accounted for the majority of use. The Pitt faculty questioned Kent’s findings and called for an investigation. But subsequent research has confirmed the basic findings of the Pitt study: a large portion of the print books and journals in our research libraries receive little or no use. The annual statistics of the Association of Research Libraries over the last two decades show a steady decline in circulation transactions in our largest research libraries. Kent’s research showed a close correlation between external use of collections as measured by circulation transactions and in-house use of library material.

As it happens, I was a graduate student in English literature and library science at the University of Pittsburgh during the time period of the Pitt Study, and I had Allen Kent as a teacher for one course in library automation, using punched sorting cards as I vaguely remember. Kent was excellent in the classroom, and his enthusiasm for library research was infectious. I thought I used the library collection intensively at Pitt during my four years there –but obviously not enough to

influence the overall results of the infamous Pit Study!

What is an academic librarian to do with such research findings? Apparently, look away and not do much. In the years since the Pitt Study, not much has changed in how academic libraries, especially our largest ones in the U.S., select and acquire print titles for their collections. Selection and acquisition are still done primarily based on publisher output and a local library perspective: we need our own copy of just about every scholarly work from reputable publishers regardless of their usefulness. Even an effective library consortium like OhioLINK, with a fast and efficient discovery and delivery system, has had little impact on the print acquisition habits of its member libraries. A recent study by OCLC (not yet published) is uncovering steady duplication rates in the print monograph collections of OhioLINK members, while use rates continue to decline even below those reported by Kent. While great strides have been made in coordinating the acquisition of digital publications, print acquisitions and collection management have resisted modernization.

Why is this? One explanation is that some librarians, scholars, and publishers believe that use should not be a factor in selecting titles for a library collection or in their longtime storage management. Use is an acceptable measure in a public library or a small academic library, but not in a large research library that collects the record of scholarship. Who knows when a book might be needed? This perspective and practice make less and less sense today with advances in online union catalogs and indexing, content digitization, and rapid document delivery. We can

fairly accurately measure use of existing collections, and we can even predict with some confidence the use of new books and journal articles. To ignore use and predicted use are to ignore valuable management information that should influence our decisions about acquisitions practice and how we maintain our collections. If we are to really take serious our responsibility for collecting and preserving the record of scholarship, then we have to stop wasting limited and valuable resources on all collecting and maintaining the same low or no use material.

What can we do? To begin with, we should all stop acquiring the same low-use or no-use books and journals. Under current practice they are too expensive to collect and maintain. Drive these publications (their authors and publishers) to new models for sharing their highly specialized scholarship; for example,

move this kind of scholarship to digital publication through enlightened university presses, disciplinary or institutional repository programs that are low cost, open access, and still maintain a rigorous peer-review process. And looking at our legacy collections, we must develop shared print storage and service programs among libraries. There is no need for massive duplication of very low use material. Only through a coordinated collection management approach will we really protect the record of knowledge and at the same time end unnecessary massive duplication.

We at *College & Research Libraries* welcome your research, case studies, and opinions about new techniques and best practices in the acquisition and manage of the record of scholarship as contained in our print collections. Let us not wait another thirty years for better ways.

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