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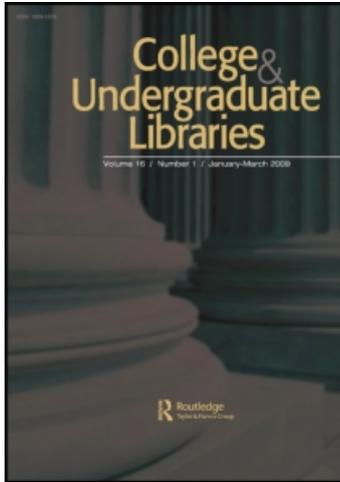
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Testing Lesniaski's Revised Brief Test

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In 2004, Lesniaski revised White's Brief Test methodology for smaller academic libraries that lack sufficient subject specialist librarians to perform the brief tests as originally proposed by White. As a part of regular collection development, Cowles Library implemented Lesniaski's Brief Tests on the print monograph collection. While primarily a review of Lesniaski's methodology, this article also discusses how the Brief Tests were used for improved collection evaluation and maintenance.

KEYWORDS *Brief tests, collection evaluation, conspectus, World Cat*

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the Collection Development Committee at Cowles Library revised the library's Collection Development Policy and collection levels in the conspectus (see Appendix for a description of the Research Libraries Group [RLG] Conspectus). The conspectus levels guide not only the collection development decisions of the librarians, but also act as the basis for the library's approval plan. As part of this conspectus revision, the committee wanted to find a quick way to evaluate the existing print monograph collection. Brief Tests seemed to be the answer. Developed by White (1995), they had the advantage of providing a snapshot of holdings in a subject area without requiring tedious book-by-book comparisons. As the name implies, brief tests are a small random sampling of between forty and sixty titles in a subject area. OCLC World Cat is then consulted to determine how many libraries hold the

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titles and thus how they break down in the conspectus. White hypothesized that if many libraries hold a title, it is more general (corresponding to a level 1 or 2 on the conspectus); whereas, if only a few libraries own the title, it is more specific (a level 3 or 4) (see Appendix). White used only levels 1–4 in his Brief Tests, omitting levels 0 and 5. These titles are then compared to the holdings of the user's library. If the library owns more than 50% of the titles of a given level, it is extrapolated that the library is sufficiently collecting at that level in the subject area.

However, there were two problems with the library's implementation of this test. First, since White published his methodology in 1995, some of his parameters seemed out-of-date (e.g., OCLC holding totals). Second, the creation of lists for comparison required a subject specialist. While Cowles Library has skilled and knowledgeable librarians, it is a smaller academic library (approximately 500,000 print volumes) and the librarians are frequently called upon to perform collection development in unfamiliar subject areas. Lesniaski (2004) developed a revision of White's methodology to address these problems. He updated the OCLC holdings totals to reflect the increased holdings in World Cat and he outlined a procedure for identifying and creating lists that could be performed by any librarian, regardless of subject specialization.

This article discusses Cowles Library's implementation of Lesniaski's revision of the brief test methodology. It also discusses the pros and cons of the process as well as how the library has used the results to inform and improve collection development, evaluation, and maintenance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While relatively few studies have been published testing White's Brief Test methodology, none deal specifically with Lesniaski's revision of White's original methodology.

Twiss (2001) tested the brief test in Soviet history applied to five different libraries (University of Pennsylvania, University of Virginia, Free Library of Philadelphia, Jefferson-Madison Regional Library, and Temple University). He evaluated the validity of brief tests through the four criteria White also iterated: are the results intelligible?; are the results sensible?; are the results convergent?; do the results mesh with librarians' evaluations of their own collections? On all four points, Twiss concludes that White's brief test methodology is valid. Twiss' brief tests showed that when a collection passed at a given level, it also passed at lower levels. Conversely, when a collection failed at a given level, it also failed at higher levels. The results were sensible because the university collections he evaluated scored higher on brief tests than the public libraries, which is to be expected. The brief tests were convergent in that multiple tests done on the collection produced similar results.

Finally, the brief tests validated ratings of the collections that librarians had performed at their respective schools.

Beals published the results of her brief tests in two separate articles (Beals 2006; Beals and Gilmour 2007). Both dealt with using brief tests in a consortium setting (the Information Alliance of the libraries of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, the University of Kentucky, and Vanderbilt University). The former involved a brief test of African Art in the Information Alliance while the latter related to a test of zoology. In both cases, the brief test methodology was validated. While not exhaustive, the existing studies have proven that the Brief Test method is valid in evaluating a variety of subject areas.

METHODOLOGY

The Collection Development Committee began by testing the efficacy of brief tests with a random sample of subject areas in the conspectus; however, it soon expanded the tests to all subject areas covered in the library's conspectus at a level 2 or above (occasionally some level 1 subject areas were included). The committee did not specifically seek out those subject areas that they thought were weak or strong.

Using the guidelines for creating lists for non-subject specialists as described by Lesniaski (2004;18–19), the committee decided to use Choice Reviews Online (Choice Reviews Online) to generate the lists. The committee chose Choice for several reasons: it reviews a wide variety of materials that represent both specialized and general works; the online database goes back to 1988, spanning enough time to be fairly comprehensive without being dated; and, the Choice site contains an advanced search feature allowing searches by Library of Congress Call Number.

The committee decided to perform brief tests on subject areas collected at level 2 or above in the conspectus (although infrequently level 1 subject areas were included). Level 0 and the majority of level 1 subject areas were excluded primarily due to time constraints and because they are the lowest collecting levels and not a priority for the library. The committee decided to focus their energies on collecting areas that more directly impact teaching, research, and curriculum needs at the university.

From there, the committee followed Lesniaski's methodology. For each Library of Congress subject area tested, the committee would enter the Advanced Search section of Choice Reviews and search the titles reviewed in that area. The subject area was the only limitation on the search. The results were then downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet. The Choice data contained some superfluous information that the committee deemed unnecessary for the brief test. For each title the committee kept the following columns in the spreadsheet: title, subtitle, author 1, publisher name, year published, and

ISBN. The committee then added the following columns for the brief test results: Number of OCLC Holdings; Level (1, 2, 3, or 4); Does the library own the title?; and, Percentage of each level the library holds.

For some subject areas, the results were small enough that the results did not need to be narrowed. For broader subject areas, however, the committee randomly chose between forty and one hundred titles. After the list was finalized, World Cat was searched to determine the total number of worldwide holdings for each title. Based on those numbers, the collecting level (1–4) was determined. Then, the committee verified the library's holdings of each title, again by searching World Cat. This could be done through a search of the library catalog if a library does not upload their holdings into World Cat.

Finally, the number of titles the library held in that level was divided by the total number of titles in the collecting level (1–4) to determine the percentage of titles held at that level. For example, if the library held four of twelve level 4 items on the Choice list in a specific subject area, the library would hold 33% of the titles.

Following Lesniaski's methodology, in order to "pass" the collecting level, the library must score 50% or greater. If the library holds 50% or more of titles at level 1, then it is collecting at a level 1. If it holds 50% or more at levels 1 and 2, then it is collecting at level 2, and so on. However, if the library holds 50% at level 1, 20% at level 2, and 50% at level 3, it is not collecting at level 3, rather level 1. Results must be consistent to claim a collecting level. For each Library of Congress subject area, the committee performed the procedure outlined above.

RESULTS

The committee's brief tests generated interesting findings (see Table 1 for an abbreviated list of results by subject). Overall, the Lesniaski methodology and procedure worked well. The committee believes that accurate information about the collection was generated in a succinct and relatively painless manner.

There had not been a systematic collection evaluation since the library instituted their approval plan in 2006. Therefore, the brief tests performed two broad functions: they showed where collection development efforts were working and they highlighted areas needing more attention. For example, it was suspected that the science collection was weaker than it should be. In fact, in 2007, the library undertook a major revision of the approval plan in the sciences in response to input from faculty and students. However, the brief tests demonstrated where more work was needed. For example, natural history/biology (Library of Congress QH) is a level 2, but according to the conspectus it should be collected at a level 3. The same is true for

TABLE 1 Sample of Brief Test Levels By Subject Areas

Call#	Subject	Level 1%	Level 2%	Level 3%	Level 4%	Overall Level	Conspectus Level
BC	Logic	100%	100%	40%	0%	2	3
BD	Speculative Philosophy	100%	92%	52%	50%	3	3
BH	Aesthetics	100%	100%	50%	25%	2	2
BJ	Ethics	100%	69%	64%	0%	3	3
CB	History of Civilization	93%	68%	39%	25%	2	3
DB	History—Austria, etc.	100%	63%	25%	14%	2	2
GN	Anthropology/Ethnology	16%	60%	30%	0%	1	2
HA	Statistics	82%	67%	32%	11%	2	3
HE	Communications	100%	73%	38%	0%	2	3
MT	Musical Instruction	80%	51%	45%	0%	2	3
PN 441-1008	Literary History	100%	51%	33%	15%	2	3
QC	Physics	100%	46%	31%	0%	1	3
QD	Chemistry	100%	65%	29%	14%	2	3
QL	Zoology	73%	37%	23%	0%	1	3
RS	Pharmacy/Materia Medica	50%	57%	54%	57%	4	4

botany (Library of Congress QK). Zoology (Library of Congress QL) should be a level 3 but is only a level 1, calling for immediate attention.

The four levels of holdings in a given subject area tend to present as either a slope (see Table 1) or a bell curve (see Figure 1).

As stated earlier in the discussion of Twiss' results, a slope, where holdings decline from level 1 to level 4, is the hoped for result and a validation of the brief test methodology. An example of a slope would be the results for sociology (Library of Congress HM), where holdings gradually decline from level 1 to level 4 (100%, 75%, 49%, and 14% respectively). While this pattern accounted for the majority of results, some subject areas present as a bell curve with greater holdings at level 2 or 3 than at level 1. For example, in the case of anthropology/ethnology (Library of Congress GN), the library holds 60% of titles at level 2, but only 16% at level 1. In general, the library is more often lacking holdings in higher conspectus levels laid out in the

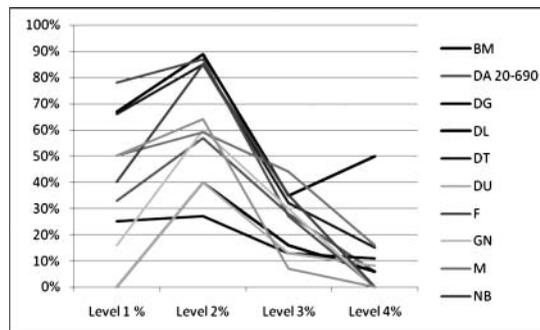
**FIGURE 1** Library holdings results presenting as a bell curve.

TABLE 2 Library Holdings Conspectus Level Matching Among OCLC Categories

OCLC Category	Total Subareas in Conspectus	Below Conspectus Level	Meets Conspectus Level	Above Conspectus Level	Unknown
B	10	20%	40%	40%	—
C	1	100%	—	—	—
D	18	39%	56%	—	5%
E	1	—	100%	—	—
F	1	100%	—	—	—
G	5	20%	60%	—	20%
H	9	78%	22%	—	—
J	10	10%	70%	10%	10%
M	3	100%	—	—	—
N	7	57%	29%	14%	—
P	8	88%	22%	—	—
Q	11	91%	9%	—	—
R	4	50%	50%	—	—
T	3	33%	67%	—	—

Collection Development Policy, but there can be crippling gaps in lower levels as well (see Table 1). Obviously, the library needs to make sure it is collecting general as well as more specialized titles in a subject area. This requires vigilance on the part of the library, especially in those disciplines where the university offers majors, or, more importantly, graduate work (e.g., pharmacy, education, business).

The most troubling findings from the brief tests were that, in many cases, the library is failing to meet the conspectus level as assigned in the Collection Development Policy (see Table 1). When the current collection is evaluated using brief tests, of the ninety-one subject areas in the conspectus that were tested, 53% are below the target level, 37% are being collected at the target level, and 7% are above the target level. Although some specific areas need greater attention, the deficiencies are spread fairly evenly across the subject areas as can be seen in Table 2 (see Table 2).

As stated in the introduction, both the Collection Development Policy and conspectus levels were completely revised and updated in 2008, reflecting current teaching, research, and curriculum trends. If the policy states that the library collects a subject at a level 3, the librarians need to make sure that is happening. It is obvious that, for certain subject areas, the library must reevaluate the approval plans as well as collection development priorities so that the collection is capturing more specialized texts while not losing coverage of general works.

CRITIQUE

Overall, the committee found that the Brief Test methodology worked well and that the utilization of Choice Reviews for data was adequate. The

committee did encounter some problems, however. Although Choice reviews all types of books (from encyclopedias to specialized works), the committee found that it was sometimes difficult to identify enough level 1 and level 4 titles to make the sample statistically significant. Choosing the number of books that Lesniaski suggests did not always generate an even distribution of works from all four levels. Even when adequate numbers of levels 1 and 4 were represented, there were far more levels 2 and 3 works in a list. The authors believe that this problem has nothing to do with the brief test methodology, but rather the choice of bibliography/authoritative list. Using Choice as a source for brief test title lists resulted in inconclusive results for three subject areas (Library of Congress DJ, GA, and JS) due to a complete lack of levels 1 and 2 books. Even among subject areas that had analyzable results, seven lacked titles in one or more levels (Library of Congress BR, GA, HQ, HX, FJ, JL, and JN); in one case (Library of Congress HQ), there was a lack of any level 4 titles. This is clearly a problem that is compounded by the extremely focused nature of these, and potentially other, Library of Congress subjects. It can conceivably be addressed by using a more specialized list or bibliography or by increasing the number of titles in the brief test.

Lesniaski's addition of authoritative lists or bibliographies as a substitute for subject specialists made it possible for Cowles Library to perform the brief tests. Without this revision of White's original methodology, the committee would not have been able to evaluate such a wide variety of subject areas.

Returning to testing the validity of the modified brief test discussed earlier (Twiss 2001), the authors can now evaluate whether or not Lesniaski's revised methodology is legitimate.

Are the results intelligible? Yes. With few exceptions, the committee found that holdings are strongest at level 1 and weakest at level 4. This is what would be expected from a primarily undergraduate library. In areas where this pattern did not hold (e.g., Library of Congress DA 20–690, DT, F, GN, M, NB), these results did not signal a deficiency in the brief test methodology to the committee; rather, they have highlighted weaknesses in the approval plans and current collection development policies. Many of these weaknesses were suspected. The brief tests have confirmed the committee's suspicions.

Are the results sensible? Yes. They correspond to what the committee expects of the library given the academic programs we have at the university. For example, the university has a graduate program in pharmacy (Library of Congress RS) for which the library is collecting at a level 4. For other areas, where the university does not have a major (e.g., socialism, Library of Congress HX), it is collecting at a level 2.

Are the results convergent? Yes. Sample tests performed separately by different members of the committee returned comparable results. For example, in ethics (Library of Congress BJ), two separate brief tests using Choice

Reviews confirmed that the collection is at a level 3, which is where our conspectus places the collection. This has also been the case when comparing disparate sources for title lists. In one case, human anatomy (Library of Congress QM) was analyzed with the standard Choice list, as well as with a title list derived from Doody's Core Titles service, which reviews medicine and health science titles. Even with the serious difference in purposes and scopes of the two sources, both brief tests gave remarkably similar results when applied to our collection. The collection is at level 2 in both tests.

Do the results mesh with librarians' evaluations of their own collections? Yes. In general, the brief tests confirmed weaknesses in areas librarians thought were weak and validated strengths in areas where librarians have focused collection development attention. For example, in many areas of history (Library of Congress D, DA, DG, DL, DR, DU, etc. . .), which is a subject area where the library does not have a dedicated collection development librarian, the library is below conspectus levels.

CONCLUSION

While Lesniaski's and, to a larger extent, White's methodologies are not perfect, they allowed the committee a relatively quick, reliable way to pinpoint those areas of the collection that need more attention. While it would be irresponsible to overhaul the entire collection development and approval plan procedures due to a single factor, it certainly highlighted weaknesses in the collection that can only be strengthened if librarians know they are there. Without these tests, the collection may have remained skewed, weak, or become more so as time passed with the same procedures in place.

Partially in response to the brief test results, the library is reexamining approval plans as well as current collection development methodology. The librarians will be more vigilant in the future with those areas that have been shown to have weaknesses. The authors would recommend Lesniaski's methodology to any smaller academic library wanting a relatively quick way to effectively and reliably evaluate their collection.

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APPENDIX

The RLG Conspectus, developed by The Research Libraries Group, is a system of collecting levels intended primarily for the uniform evaluation of collections in research libraries. As paraphrased by Lesniaski (2004), these collecting levels are:

0. **Out of Scope:** The Library does not collect in this area.
1. **Minimal level:** Few selections are made beyond the most important and central works.
2. **Basic level:** A general collection that introduces the basic concepts and subareas of the discipline.
3. **Instructional Level:** A collection that is adequate to support undergraduate instruction, including independent study.
4. **Research Level:** A comprehensive, graduate-level collection.
5. **Comprehensive Level:** A collection in which the library tries to collect all significant works published or available in the field, in all relevant languages and formats.