



## Applying the Tiers of Assessment: A Holistic and Systematic Approach to Assessing Library Collections



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### ABSTRACT

Collection assessment is a key component of collection development, budget allocation, and justification of library collections. Unfortunately, comprehensive collection assessment is daunting, subject to the weaknesses of individual tools and the overwhelming number of subject areas to assess. Few studies have attempted systematic assessment projects using multiple tools or methods, nor have many attempted to assess an entire collection subject-by-subject. This study implements an alternative to the single-tool model, combining multi-tool analysis with a systematic, subject-by-subject approach to the collection. The goal was to determine whether such a model of collection assessment was feasible in an academic library setting, providing usable data without over-investment of manpower and resources. To this end, the method was tested in a pilot program at George Mason University (Mason), assessing three subjects at varying levels of depth. While there was concern that the methodology would prove too ambitious for full-scale implementation, the pilot yielded valuable, tangible results in a timely manner and provides a solid model for future assessment efforts at Mason and elsewhere.

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### INTRODUCTION

In this time of rapid technological, financial, and organizational change, libraries must constantly justify their collections. Each institution has to ask: Are our holdings worthwhile? What are our strengths? What are our weaknesses? These questions help librarians channel their efforts and their funding toward the resources that best suit the mission and needs of the institution. Collection assessment, the process by which one can answer these questions, is an essential component of ensuring that library expenditures are aligning properly with library goals. Yet, in a 2011 survey of 127 academic and special libraries, only 11% of respondents had a formal process for collection assessment (Wilde & Level, 2011). Systematic assessment, the objective alternative to gut feelings and anecdotal evidence, remains elusive for all but a few libraries.

George Mason University (Mason) is a large, relatively young public university in Fairfax, Virginia. Founded in 1957 as a satellite campus of the University of Virginia (and as an independent institution in 1972), Mason has grown rapidly in the last two decades and is positioned to continue expanding. In 2014, the George Mason University Board of Visitors approved a new ten-year strategic plan that includes the goal to “Achieve Carnegie Very High Research classification” (George Mason University, 2014, p. 24). The classification, which is based on the resources devoted by a university to research and development (R&D), is the highest level assigned to doctorate-granting institutions (Carnegie Foundation, 2014).

As Mason has expanded, the University Libraries have grown to keep pace with the University's institutional ambitions. The Libraries now include three distributed facilities in addition to the main research library. Collections have increased from 375,000 volumes in 1993 to more than 1.4 million volumes today, plus over 800 databases, 100,000 electronic journals, and 1.4 million e-books (George Mason University Libraries, 2013; Rein, Hurley, Walsh, & Wu, 1993). The Libraries also house extensive archival materials within the Special Collections & Archives; the reference department, once staffed by just ten people, now includes over 15 faculty-rank librarians and a handful of classified staff. Moving forward, the Libraries hope to continue this growth, and have developed a unit strategic plan to complement Mason's broader efforts. The Libraries' plan includes two rounds of Balanced Scorecard assessment to benchmark collections and services and measure progress over two five-year periods.

From a collections' perspective, the Balanced Scorecard will look at whether library collections reflect the needs of a very high research level institution. Measures of success will include an increase in the current collecting levels for select subjects, an increase in historic collection levels for the entire collection, and an increase in the Libraries' theoretical ARL ranking (based on ARL collection and budget metrics). Central to these efforts will be the assessment of current holdings and the identification of strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for action. At least some of the Libraries' holdings (most likely select subject areas of significance to the University Strategic Plan) will need to be assessed systematically and repeatedly, at the beginning and end of each 5-year Balanced Scorecard cycle, to determine whether collection levels have actually improved.

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Unfortunately, while the University Libraries are conscious of the need for collection assessment, several factors make assessment especially difficult at Mason. First, high turnover in the collection development department has stymied past efforts to establish and sustain assessment programs. Adding to this, many past efforts placed a heavy burden on subject specialists. These specialists, referred to as liaison librarians, were already expected to perform a wide range of job duties and simply did not have the time and energy to spend on a lengthy, subject-specific assessment process. Not only did the added liaison responsibility cause friction in the moment, it soured many library staff on the very idea of collection assessment, risking future efforts. Finally, the size of Mason's collections makes assessment an inherently complex and time-consuming endeavor. Even the simplest assessment could take years to complete thoroughly. Combined, these factors have prevented major progress on collection assessment, and any successful assessment program implemented at Mason must address these issues. The goal of this study is to determine whether systematic assessment of library collections can succeed in overcoming these hurdles by taking a flexible, systematic approach.

### THE ASSESSMENT LITERATURE

There is no shortage of published collection assessment articles, from case studies to literature reviews. The purpose of each assessment project varies, but common goals relate to acquisitions, digitization, preservation, storage, and—particularly—weeding (Knieval, Wicht, & Connaway, 2006). What is consistent among many of these studies is that they are method-specific, applying a single tool or strategy to the task of assessment. Many are also limited in that they assess only a single subject area, or attempt to assess an entire collection with no attention to subject or discipline. Examples of the single tool approach include Beile, Boote, and Killingsworth's (2004) citation analysis of education dissertations; Monroe-Gulick and Currie's (2011) and Spire's (2006) use of OCLC's WorldCat Collection Analysis; Beals and Gilmour's (2007) experience with brief tests of zoology collections; and Kohn's (2013) application of usage data to a whole collection. Example studies are innumerable, but most are method-specific and employ only a single assessment tool or strategy.

The greatest weakness of this single-method approach to collection assessment is that it hinges on the idiosyncrasies of the particular tool or strategy. This is problematic, given the well-documented shortcomings of most assessment tools. Oke and Tyrrell (1999) summarize a few of the challenges concisely. For example, the Conspectus method (in which collections are subdivided and examined meticulously), is prohibitively labor-intensive. It is also less standardized than it would appear, as it depends on call number mapping, which rarely works as objectively in practice as in theory (particularly in the face of inter- or multi-disciplinary subjects). The Conspectus method is also one-dimensional, relying overly much on collection size and overlooking factors like use and quality. Checklists, which seem like an easier way to assess collections quickly and without call number mapping, are also problematic. The most authoritative list is still, to some extent, arbitrary. Worse, lists become outdated, encourage conformity, and—like the Conspectus—focus on quantity. Even seemingly objective measures like circulation statistics are one-dimensional, counting the use of resources but overlooking weaknesses in the collection, non-circulating materials, and the quality of available resources.

Wiemers, Baldwin, Kautz, Albrecht, and Lomker (1984) summarize major collection assessment tools and their shortcomings further. Accreditation standards, a convenient external measure, can be vague and arbitrary. Lists may be inappropriate to the local mission, as well as being time-consuming to check and frequently outdated. Citation analysis cannot easily be applied to broad fields with many sub-disciplines, since too many sources would be needed to sample the full range of core topics, and it does not address core materials that are used for background research without being cited. User studies,

appealing because they reflect actual behavior, are flawed since not only may users be inexperienced searchers, but their past preferences may not necessarily predict future use. Even major, commercial assessment tools have their shortcomings: OCLC's now-retired WorldCat Collection Analysis (replaced by a similar application, WorldShare Analytics Collection Evaluation) was based on notoriously inconsistent WorldCat data (Beals & Gilmour, 2007) and had a tendency to over-report uniqueness and under-report overlap (Orcutt & Powell, 2006). In short, none of the tools and methods covered in the literature is perfect. Collection assessment cannot depend entirely on any one of the available options.

### THE CUMULATIVE OR MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH

After reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of each individual tool described in the literature, as well as the limited usefulness of assessing only a small section of the collection, Mason's solution was to apply multiple tools and measures in a holistic, well-rounded approach to assessment. Unlike single-tool assessments, the holistic approach uses each tool as just a small piece of the greater picture, pulling together a variety of quantitative, qualitative, internal, and external measures. This approach is similar to Oke and Tyrrell's (1999) "cumulative approach to collection evaluation", in which the collection is broken into subject-specific chunks and assessed systematically using a portfolio of tools. Oke and Tyrrell's cumulative approach included the use of peer comparisons, list-checking, and circulation statistics. After assessing each subject area, the researchers could then rate collections based on qualitative and quantitative results. The principles behind the cumulative model are echoed in Bodi and Maier-O'Shea's (2005) principles of assessment, which suggest:

"—breaking down assessment by subject or smaller sub-topics when necessary—blending a variety of assessment tools appropriate to the discipline; and—matching print and electronic collections to departmental learning outcomes through communication with faculty members." (p. 146)

These principles encourage a systematic but holistic approach. Further, unlike the many systematic assessment programs aimed purely at weeding, Bodi and Maier-O'Shea set out to assess the collections at North Park University for more open-ended, strengths-oriented purposes, which echo goals like those at Mason.<sup>1</sup> Thus, their principles are more broadly applicable than those intended only for weeding and adaptable to a variety of assessment aims.

Three years later, Borin and Yi (2008) condensed many of these concepts, proposing a "new dimensional framework" for evaluating collections. Like Bodi and Maier-O'Shea, they urge the use of multiple assessment tools to create a clearer picture of the collection. They also emphasize the use of various perspectives, including usage-based perspectives and standards-based perspectives. Where Bodi and Maier-O'Shea share case study experience, Borin and Yi build a flexible model that can be tailored to local need. Combined, these studies in multidimensional collection assessment make a compelling case for a more comprehensive approach.

Mason's collection assessment program grew out of these theories and models, based on the basic idea that multiple perspectives are essential to good assessment. Thus, Mason's approach is both holistic and piecemeal, addressing each subject area in turn and assessing materials with a portfolio of tools. Data collection and analysis follow standardized procedures and templates that can be molded to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of each discipline. Each subject collection is assessed

<sup>1</sup> A similar approach was adopted in Finland by the Finnish Collection Map Consortium to map the strengths of libraries nationwide (Hyödynmaa, Ahlholm-Kannisto, & Nurminen, 2010). Various assessment tools were applied, though the need for standardization limited the use of qualitative data and the ability of individual libraries to locally customize assessment.

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