

Stacking Up: A How-To Guide to Condition Surveys

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ABSTRACT. Item level surveys have a place in both public and university library collections. Although rarely applied outside of special collections, item level surveys benefit both patrons and library staff in several ways. These benefits include the reference or subject librarian's increased knowledge of the collection, which passes to the patron through reference services and collection building; the ability to compile precise statistics about how the collection is used by patrons; and the identification of particular challenges the collection faces (such as theft, mutilation, or damage). doi:10.1300/J105v31n03_07 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

Condition surveys have become commonplace in academic and some special libraries since the late 1970s. There are three types of condition survey: Large random samplings, which offer the most accurate results; small random samplings; and item level surveys, in which each item is examined, defects are noted, and individual recommendations are made (Walker 1989). In the literature, random sample surveys are done

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more often than item level surveys; the latter are commonly used for rare and special collections "where item level prioritization is desirable" (Teper and Erekson 2006).

At the most basic level, condition surveys are designed to identify the physical condition of a collection at a particular point in time. The process of a condition survey benefits the librarian in a number of ways. Primarily, it is an opportunity to check a shelf list against the actual holdings and make sure that the books are present, and an opportunity to remove books that need minor repairs before more extensive rebinding or replacement becomes necessary. For the librarian who is also a subject bibliographer, examining each book for the condition survey provides an unequalled opportunity to become familiar with the collection. If the librarian knows what topics are covered by the collection, and how heavily the books are used, she/he is better able to make additional purchases for that collection. If the librarian is a reference specialist, his/her improved knowledge of the collection will boost service to the patron.

Much of the literature addresses surveys done on university collections; however, the methodology presented here could also be applicable to public libraries, which have the same needs to track the condition of their collections, deal with damage, and identify holes in the collection for which collection building would be beneficial.

THE OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY SURVEY

Although condition surveys are often undertaken by students or staff members working under a librarian's supervision, the Oklahoma State University (OSU) survey was completed by the author working alone over a 15-month period, with approximately 450 working hours devoted to the task. There are approximately 2.2 million books in the Edmon Low Library collection, and 12,995 of them are fine arts books shelved in the 730.99-779 call number range. Despite having to work around many other tasks, I found that using a single examiner for the entire survey offers the advantage of consistency. This is particularly important for an item level survey for which no survey instrument is used and notes are taken on each volume. The benefit to the examiner is a deepened knowledge of the collection, which is of value to the subject bibliographer, selector, or reference librarian. The library benefits as well, since administrators will have a clearer picture of condition, loss, and circulation within a given collection.

