

This article is a post-print copy. The final published version is at:

Blakesley, E. (2008). Best of the literature – By the numbers: Current research in the literature. *Public Services Quarterly*, 4(3): 257-260.

Author Bio: Beth Lindsay is the Assistant Dean of Libraries for Public Services & Outreach at Washington State University. She can be reached at elindsay@wsu.edu.

**BEST OF THE LITERATURE – BY THE NUMBERS: CURRENT RESEARCH IN THE
LITERATURE**

Elizabeth Blakesley Lindsay

INTRODUCTION

Library literature is often characterized as applied research, as being practitioner-oriented, or as dominated by “how-we-did-it-good” articles. However, there are plenty of interesting examples in the literature that showcase the research acumen in our field. This column highlights articles covering a broad range of topics that are of interest to public services librarians, from collections and user services to our own research and professional development. Although addressing many topics, these authors have all used or advocate for solid research methods and data analysis in their works, which can serve as inspiration for potential projects.

I hope to hear your comments about or suggestions for past, present and future columns.

The Best of the Literature

Jones, D. Yvonne. “How Much Do the ‘Best’ Colleges Spend on Libraries? Using College Rankings to Provide Library Financial Benchmarks.” *College and Research Libraries* 68, no. 4 (2007), 343-351.

Jones tackles the issue of determining benchmarks for financial analysis of collection development and comparison to peers. Jones uses two readily-available datasets to construct her study: the *US News & World Report* data on colleges and the

National Center for Education Statistics survey data. Jones looked at input measures, such as enrollment, expenditure, number of staff, and size of collections, and compared them with output measures, such as annual circulation, annual ILL, reference transaction totals and gate counts. Jones used this data to track trends in liberal arts colleges at various levels of the *USN&WR* ratings and also compared them to all liberal arts colleges tracked by NCES and all academic libraries, as tracked by NCES. There are some unsurprising albeit sobering findings regarding top-tier liberal arts colleges and their circulation and expenditures, while data about reference transactions may raise another set of questions for readers.

Littleton, Dawn. "Navigating Pitfalls of Web-Based Survey Development and Administration." *Medical Reference Services Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2007), 75-83.

Web-based survey tools have made the process of survey-making much easier and much more accessible for researchers. It can be tempting to start tinkering with one of the readily available websites before really thinking through the survey design. Littleton provides a useful overview of designing surveys, offering readers a five-step process for planning and designing the survey. Littleton also discusses issues such as perception, privacy, and response representation.

Mezick, Elizabeth M. "Return on Investment: Libraries and Student Retention." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 33, no. 5 (2007), 561-566.

Mezick explored the issue of how libraries impact retention by designing a study that analyzes data from ARL and ACRL along with retention rates collected by the National Center for Education Statistics. Mezick provides a clear representation of her analysis methods and results, which show statistically significant connections between retention rates and library expenditures at all types of baccalaureate colleges. Mezick identifies areas where libraries can work to positively impact student experiences and retention and outlines several areas of possible future research.

Oakleaf, Megan. "Using Rubrics to Collect Evidence for Decision-Making: What Do Librarians Need to Learn?" *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 2, no. 3 (2007), 27-42.

Oakleaf notes that libraries often gather "vast quantities of unwieldy information that is ill-suited" to use in decision-making processes (28), and she outlines a method of using rubrics to assess processes and services for evidence based decision making. Her article provides an excellent overview of the design and use of rubrics and also presents a particular case where rubrics proved useful. The study was designed to assess student responses to an open-ended question about website evaluation in an online information literacy tutorial. Oakleaf addresses several issues that may arise in developing such an assessment program in other settings.

Stieve, Thomas and David Schoen. "Undergraduate Students' Book Selection: A Study of Factors in the Decision-Making Process." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 6 (2006), 599-608.

Stieve and Schoen designed a project to gain insights into the reasons why students choose particular books. They note that earlier works have focused more on the types of sources students select or on circulation statistics. Their study was designed to reach a wide array of students in several required general education courses at Niagara University. Pairs of books were chosen for an array of topics. Each pair of books had identical LC subject headings and were classed in the same call number range. Students were presented with the pairs of books and were asked which they would prefer using for a research paper. Their findings indicate that the physical layout, or “look” of the book, is extremely important to students, although it was less important in cases where the student was already familiar with the topic. Stieve and Schoen also discuss factors that are often important to librarians that went largely unnoticed by the students.

Vega, Robert D. and Ruth S. Connell. “Librarians’ Attitudes Toward Conferences: A Study.” *College and Research Libraries* 68, no. 6 (2007), 503-513.

Vega and Connell confirmed that the articles in the literature that discussed the value of conferences were written only from anecdotal or personal perspectives. To remedy this, they employed a survey to gather data on the topic. The article provides an interesting example of the unintended consequences of survey wording and also offers some insights into our profession’s behaviors, biases and preferences in regard to professional development. Having been at poster sessions that resembled mob scenes and having heard many anecdotal testimonies to poster sessions being the

most valuable component of several conferences, I found it intriguing that Vega and Connell's data showed particularly negative responses in terms of poster sessions' value and impact.