The Conspectus Approach

In Regards to Collection Assessment

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Abstract

This paper discusses the Conspectus approach to collection development. Included are both strengths and weaknesses and an assessment of the validity of the approach as a useful method of collection assessment and development. It also includes some of the major criticisms of the Conspectus.
Introduction

Collection analysis is an important part of having a healthy library collection. It is an ongoing process that keeps collections valid and useful to patrons, while also helping librarians to maintain their library’s objectives and goals. Collection analysis comes in many forms, but usually in a qualitative or quantitative system. Collection analysis is useful for librarians to develop a healthy and useful collection for their patrons by prompting weeding, acquisition of new works, and fund allocation to specific collections. In addition, collection analysis enables librarians to know what is located in their collections, which will then help librarians know what they need to do to have better collections, and what condition their collections are in, which can alert librarians of climatic fluctuation. Librarians often believe that their collections could be better and more helpful to their patrons; therefore librarians believe that constant collection assessment and analysis is needed.

This paper is going to discuss the Conspectus approach, which is a qualitative system. The Conspectus approach to collection development is a helpful tool for librarians to use to understand their collection’s strengths and weaknesses. Librarians use this approach because they know what is in their collections and many librarians find it to be useful for deciding where their collections have weaknesses, which will lead to better collection management and development.

Background

The Conspectus method is a subjective assessment that assists librarians evaluate their collections. A conspectus, in this sense, is a method in which librarians assign a scale, either numerical or alphabetical, that describes the strength of the collection. The scale often is numerical from 0 to 5. For the Conspectus approach the scale is as follows: 0 equals out of
scope for the collection, 1 equals minimal, 2 equals basic information, 3 equals study or instructional support, 4 equals research, and 5 equals comprehensive (Johnson, 2009, p. 234-235). Librarians use this scale to decide how comprehensive their collections are. Most libraries aim for 4 because unless they are a special library or dedicated to few topics, rating a collection a 5 is very difficult. Often the rating of a 5 includes works in several languages and formats, which sometimes is not necessary for libraries to have. After the librarians have rated their collections, they then are able to decide which collections need to be augmented, either through weeding or acquisition. This method is most often used for individual topics instead of the library’s entire collection because it is intended for specific topics.

**Strengths**

One of the major strengths of the Conspectus approach to collection assessment is the librarians’ knowledge of their collections. The librarians are the most familiar with their individual collections, which allows them to be able to judge how sound their collections are for their specific user needs (Munroe, 2004). In addition, the Conspectus approach can be adapted to almost any library. It is extremely versatile because of its flexibility and can be used by almost any library. “It allows libraries to use whatever level of detail is appropriate to its collecting efforts,” (Gould, 1985, p.46). Consequently libraries can do as little or as much in-depth work as necessary to assess their collection, instead of being forced to do more than necessary in order to achieve numerical or statistical results. Another strength of the Conspectus method is that it encourages librarians to actually physically look at their collections to determine the condition of the collection.

**Weaknesses**
The Conspectus method is time consuming because student workers and volunteers are not qualified to perform it, therefore librarians are required to perform the Conspectus. Another weakness is that librarians often have doubts about their assessment choices even when their assessments agree with other assessors (Davis, Jr. and Saunders, 1992). It seems that librarians doubt themselves when it comes to judging the quality of a collection, even though they are trained to judge such things.

**Other Approaches**

Other collection assessment approaches include List Checking and Citation Analysis. Citation Analysis is a quantitative technique used by librarians who believe that the more a work is cited the more important the work is (Johnson, 2009). Therefore works that are not cited as often will most likely not be purchased for the library. Citation Analysis heavily uses listed statistics and software programs to determine how often works are cited. This is a helpful tool to use when patrons need highly sought after works. It would also be helping in many academic libraries, especially those that boast large scientific collections. Citation Analysis would be less advantageous for popular fiction collections because they would definitely be cited less than a medical article that purports to have the cure for some disease. List Checking is a technique that compares library holding with lists of works that are from a variety of sources, be it other libraries, Amazon.com, a dealer’s catalogue, a professional association, or even a government authority (Johnson, 2009). This technique is less quantitative than Citation Analysis, but is less qualitative than the Conspectus. List Checking would be beneficial for popular fiction collections because the librarians could use the New York Times’ best sellers list to decide which new publications to purchase. List Checking would most likely not be as accommodating for journals and other periodicals, though there are lists for those too. Both List Checking and
Citation Analysis depend upon what other organizations or what other people have said is important, where the Conspectus depends upon the librarian’s understanding of what their individual library needs. This creates a dependence on others that some libraries might not want, or it can create a community or consortium that other libraries might require.

**Criticisms**

The main criticism of the Conspectus method is that it is subjective. The Conspectus approach does not have a universal standard and therefore can be interpreted differently by every user. For example, a librarian at one library might rate their collection as a 3, and a librarian at a different library might rate the exact same collection as a 4, and another librarian at another library might rate the same collection as a 2. David Henige wrote a rather scathing criticism of the Conspectus, “…the Conspectus provides no more than a largely undifferentiated, highly subjective, and abstract aggregation of selectors’ opinions concerning the strengths of their libraries’ holdings” (Henige, 1987, 210). Then he wrote another criticism because no one rebutted his claims. He stated that the Conspectus is not only subjective; it creates an indecipherable and useless numbering system that is unreliable and unrepeatable (Henige, 1992). Henige seems to be the most outspoken and critical commentator of the Conspectus approach though his dissatisfaction with the method is mostly sound. A few of his criticisms seemed to be pedantic and semantic. He was quite frustrated with the Conspectus’ interchangeable use of the word inventory.

**Validity**

The Conspectus approach’s subjectivity and flexibility might actually be its greatest strengths instead of its greatest weaknesses. Each library is unique and therefore has unique needs, which calls for unique decisions for unique collections. The librarians in each of these
libraries should know their collections better than anyone else. They should also know their patrons’ needs and therefore be able to judge how the library’s collections stand up to those needs, instead of following a ratio that someone not in their library decided was the appropriate ratio.

Conclusion

The Conspectus approach is a subjective, qualitative method of collection assessment that is used by librarians to evaluate collections for strengths and weaknesses. Supporters approve of the Conspectus because it is an adaptable method that allows librarians to use their expertise to judge the usability and comprehensiveness of their collections. Critics of the approach dislike it because it is subjective and not universal, which creates inconsistent parameters and loose definitions of terms. The Conspectus approach is a valid and useful method of collection assessment because each library is unique and the librarians who work there are better able to decide what is useful or necessary to their patrons than lists or citations created by people or organizations that are not affiliated with the individual libraries.
Works Cited


