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Academic Library Statistics: New players change the scene

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For many years there were only two recurring sources of statistics about academic libraries in the U.S.: the annual *ARL Statistics* which included the approximately 100 largest academic libraries and the biennial *Academic Libraries, 19xx* from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) which covered all academic libraries. The two sources cover the same basic data (expenditures, resources, staff, services) and use definitions that are relatively similar. Recently there are new products and services available to the seeker of academic library statistics and new agents asking academic librarians for data. This article describes them all briefly in order to answer a question put to me recently by a busy library director: What's going on with academic library statistics? Where should I focus the limited time available for this topic?

First a word about the two standard sources: the **Association of Research Libraries (ARL)** has been publishing basic descriptive statistics about its members annually since 1961-62 continuing what used to be the Gerould Statistics dating back to 1908. In the 1990's ARL began collecting the data electronically and posting it on their web site along with software that enables the user to manipulate the data. Although only a small number of libraries are covered, these statistics are of general interest because ARL libraries collectively spend about 40% of the dollars spent by academic libraries and employ about one-third of all academic librarians. *ARL Statistics 1998-99* is the latest publication in the series. See <http://www.arl.org>.

The **National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)** has been publishing statistics about academic libraries for over a century. Until recently, the academic library survey (ALS) has been part of a set of surveys, known collectively as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS). Since 1988, the academic library survey has been conducted biennially with results published on paper about four years later. In the mid-1990s, NCES began posting a preliminary file on the web about 18 months after data collection. This allowed individual researchers and others to work with the data long

before a report was released ♦ both on paper and on the Web. Starting in 2000, the ALS will be collected under the auspices of the Library Statistics unit at NCES. Also, two other major changes are taking place.

- data will be collected via the Web (Fall 2000).
- software for peer comparison will be available on the NCES Web site (in July 2000, with 1998 preliminary data).

These developments are very encouraging. Of all the agencies mentioned in this article, only NCES collects data from all academic libraries and presents national and state totals for all variables. Those factors are largely responsible for the well-known delay in publishing results. The changes just described should help reduce that delay. See <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/libraries/academic.html>.

The **Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)** has been collecting statistics from a small subset of academic libraries since 1979. The biennial report, *ACRL University Library Statistics 19xx ♦ 19xx*, is modeled on the annual ARL report and covers about 100 institutions that are not in ARL but are in Carnegie Classification Research I and II and Doctoral Granting I and II. In 1998 ACRL made a radical change and began soliciting data from all academic libraries in the United States and Canada using a web-based data collection method. For 1998, responses were received from almost 35% of the 3,096 libraries invited to participate. The result is available as *1998 Academic Libraries Trends and Statistics*, published in two volumes by ACRL. The volumes show library by library data as well as summary statistics by Carnegie class. That same data may be purchased from Management Dynamics (see below) on a CD-ROM that also includes a search engine for peer comparison. Comparison to peers and within Carnegie categories is the goal of ACRL ♦'s data collection. ACRL does not intend to produce the kind of state or national totals produced by NCES. ACRL began this expanded data collection because reports from NCES were not available on a timely basis. Once NCES reports results on a timely basis, ACRL will reconsider its data collection effort. Data collection for academic year 1999 began in January 2000. See <http://www.ala.org/acrl/statshp.html>.

Bibliostat.com, formerly, Management Dynamics, publishes a CD-ROM that contains several data sets of academic library statistics and a search engine that facilitates peer comparisons using any one of the data sets. At this writing, the CD-ROM contains the following data sets:

- from NCES: the 1996 Academic Library Survey.
- from ACRL: the *1998 Academic Library Trends and Statistics*.
- from several states: the 1998 Academic Library Survey (as submitted to NCES).

Scholarstat Libraries will be entirely web-based by mid summer of

this year and will contain historical as well as current data for trending purposes.

See <http://www.bibliostat.com/scholarstat/index.asp>.

John Minter Associates has used the IPEDS-ALS data since 1986 to provide published reports and tailored peer comparisons. For several years Minter used preliminary files from NCES to publish a library by library report of descriptive data and reports of norms or ratios of key variables presented for such groups as Carnegie categories, accreditation region, staff size. These publications will continue.

In the fall of 1999, Minter started something totally new. Using a file of email addresses available from the publisher of the *Higher Education Directory*, he contacted all academic libraries asking them for basic expenditure data for academic year 1998-1999 and projections for 1999-2000. Respondents key data into a benchmark ratio calculator on Minter's Web site and immediately receive ratios for their institution. Users who complete the form are given access to a report program allowing them to pick peer group categories and receive calculated forms for as many groups as they wish. Names of survey participants are also reported giving the user an opportunity to select a specific peer group. Up to this point, there is no charge. If a library wants to order calculated norms for a specific peer group, JMA charges \$50 per peer group. For more information about the calculator see: <http://www.jma-inc.net>.

At this writing, Minter is pleased with response to this idea. He sees it as NOT in competition with any other source mentioned in this article. Instead it is a quick method of getting a few basic figures for planning purposes. Will it be done again? That's up to the users.

Conclusion

After many years of very infrequent data except for ARL libraries the academic library community has a surplus of statistics, made possible by recent development in information technology. What does this mean for the individual librarian, eager for management data but not eager to fill out one more form even if it is on the Web. Clearly people will make different choices. My hope is that, whatever else is chosen, librarians will always respond to the NCES Academic Library Survey. Thanks to close cooperation between ARL and NCES, the terminology and definitions used by those two agencies are the standard for other data collectors. Only NCES covers the entire universe of academic libraries and produces statistically reliable summaries useful to state and national policy makers. We all have an interest in the continued success of the NCES Academic Library Survey.

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