

The Crisis in Libraries' Collection Coverage of Global Publishing: An Update

North American research libraries' collection coverage of global publishing output, once thought to be comprehensive, is declining. Each year research libraries in the United States and Canada, in the aggregate, are able to purchase a smaller portion of internationally published materials than they did the year before.

—Jutta Reed-Scott, *Scholarship, Research Libraries, and Global Publishing* (Washington: ARL, 1996)

After three years, the above quotation from the final report of the ARL Foreign Acquisitions Project remains an accurate summary of the fragile state of North American research libraries' efforts to build collections supporting area studies and international education programs. What *has* changed in the interim, however, is how libraries are using technology in cooperative programs to respond to budgetary pressures and reverse the downward spiral of declining foreign acquisitions. This article provides background on two projects that laid the foundation for the AAU/ARL Global Resources Program and highlights the findings of an updated statistical analysis of overseas publishing and North American libraries' acquisition of foreign imprints.

Background

ARL's Foreign Acquisitions Project began in June 1991 with full support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The first step for the Project was to develop a clearer understanding of the forces hindering North American research libraries' ability to build and maintain collections of publications produced outside the United States and Canada. The Project found that while nine factors contributed to the problem, at its heart was budgetary pressure. As each institution faced these demands for fiscal retrenchment, a frequent response was to cut back or eliminate less used foreign-language material in favor of English-language resources. The Project set out to explore whether this problem might be alleviated through the smart use of networks and information technology. Were information technologies mature enough to offer unprecedented opportunities for rethinking global resources management and fashioning cooperative strategies to ensure the success of aggregate holdings?

From the outset, the goal of the Foreign Acquisitions Project was to develop recommendations for how libraries could reverse this trend of declining foreign imprints in their collections. It was clear that these recommendations needed to be developed with the active involvement and support of stakeholders from within and beyond the library community. What unfolded during the Project was an exceptionally valuable collaborative process between ARL and the Association of American Universities (AAU). The operation of the AAU Task Force on the Acquisition and Distribution of Foreign Language and Area Studies Materials in 1993–94 provided ARL and AAU a unique opportunity to define new cooperative programs with the involvement of university and research library leadership.

Based on the work and recommendations from the AAU Task Force, ARL in partnership with AAU identified and launched three pilot projects on foreign publications—projects selected for their potential to demonstrate the viability of implementing a program of distributed, networked, coordinated collection management for foreign research materials. In 1996, with additional funding and ongoing interest from the Mellon Foundation, the two associations joined forces to create the AAU/ARL Global Resources Program, described fully in several articles in this issue of *ARL*. The Global Resources Program has sustained the momentum of the original three projects and expanded its geographic reach by scaling up those projects as well as seeding three new initiatives.

Quantifying Trends in Global Resources

Another dimension of the ARL Foreign Acquisitions Project was data analysis to quantify trends in the availability of foreign resources within North American research libraries. This is not a straightforward task, given the complexities of the environment and the inherent limitations of all available sources of data. With caveats that the data and analysis were neither comprehensive nor definitive, the final report of the ARL Foreign Acquisitions Project highlighted several key indicators in global publishing and in library holdings of titles published overseas. First, world book production outside North America, as reported to UNESCO, was examined for patterns. Second, the OCLC database was analyzed for holdings of foreign imprints in libraries. And third, due to the major acquisition role played by the Library of Congress, the foreign acquisitions of LC were examined.

In preparation for this special issue of *ARL*, the Foreign Acquisitions Project analysis was partially replicated with updated data from UNESCO and OCLC (see accompanying [charts](#) for updated representations of this data). The bottom line of the new analysis remains the same as when it was undertaken in 1995—*research libraries' collection coverage of global publishing output is declining*. In addition, some new findings emerged to provide a better sense of how overseas imprints are added to library collections.

One key lesson from the recent data analysis is that a significant number of original foreign titles with older imprint dates are cataloged in OCLC yearly (see [charts of trends in cataloging foreign imprints](#)). This pattern may be the result of cumulative delays in acquisition, shipment, and processing of foreign materials, as well as backlogs in cataloging. Comparing the results of the 1995 and 1999 analyses of the OCLC database shows that it takes more than five years for many foreign imprint titles to be added to the database.

Another lesson from a comparison of OCLC's 1999 database against the snapshot taken in 1995 is the surprisingly steady level of foreign acquisitions. The decline in foreign acquisitions identified in the earlier data was in great part caused by processing and cataloging delays rather than by reductions in purchases. However, when the new data are compared with the overall book production figures provided by UNESCO, there remains a decline in foreign acquisitions but not in the absolute numbers suggested from the previous data.

The indicators that emerged from the updated statistical analysis substantiate the importance of the goals of the Global Resources Program and the tests of new models that employ technology to maximize the aggregate acquisition budgets for foreign materials. Importantly, the data also flag delayed holdings records for foreign publications as another issue that must be addressed before interdependent collection building is considered a workable substitute for local ownership.

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