



On the ARL Library Index

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You received in the mail a few weeks ago a paper on the ARL Statistics. The Statistics Committee hopes that during this meeting you will offer us guidance on questions raised in that paper. The paper tried to present four main points:

1. There are anomalies in the ARL statistics. Even a visitor from outer space, who knows nothing about research libraries, could find some strange-looking numbers there.
2. The statistics primarily measure ARL resources, and say little or nothing about important aspects of research libraries, such as access, performance, and service.
3. ARL is by no means the only sinner or even the greatest of sinners. You can find strange-looking numbers in any data compilation.
4. The Statistics Committee believes that the ARL statistics can be redeemed. We urge you to join us in this endeavor. We look forward to the day when the ARL statistics can adopt as its motto the old mountain proverb:

*We ain't what we want to be,
and we ain't what we're gonna be,
but we ain't what we wuz.*

I would like briefly to apply some of these points to the ARL Library Index. During the late 1960s, ARL set itself on the path of quantitative criteria for membership. The Index was approved by the membership in 1980 as the latest version of numerical criteria. It combines in one measure ten categories of data—four concerning collections, four concerning expenditures, and two concerning staff. The Index is an attempt to get away from what are called single-variable proxies for library size and resources deployed. Volumes held is an example of a single-variable proxy; it tells something but not by any means everything about library size.

The Index has been troubling people in four ways.

First, strange-looking numbers in the ARL data pass into the Index and produce strange-looking Index scores and ranks. Cleaning up the raw data, as the committee proposes, will also clean up some of the Index scores.

Second, some people feel that the index combines redundant or disparate categories. The most telling argument here is that the Index includes both total salaries and numbers of professionals and support staff. Don't salaries measure about the same thing as number of staff?

On the other hand, don't the libraries with high salaries, like the California schools, have an advantage in the index over the libraries with low salaries?

The answer to these questions is that the Index is a very robust measure. I recently calculated the 1984-85 Index and then removed total salaries and recalculated it. Removing total salaries made almost no difference in each library's rank in the Index. On the average, libraries moved up or down in rank only one place. Delete all expenditures from the index, and the median change in rankings is only three places up or down. Or keep expenditures and delete collections and personnel, and the ranks change by a median of four places.

In short, for those of you who remember Al Capp's shmoo, the Index is like a shmoo. No matter what you do to it, it always remains the same, always continues to smile at you with grave, hopeful eyes.

The *third* criticism of the Index is that it ignores access, performance, and service. This is certainly true. One reason it is true is that some ARL libraries have not yet figured out how to measure access or service. The ARL Supplementary Statistics last year and this year asked for some fairly simple and traditional statistics on circulations, reference questions, branches, and so on. One-third of ARL libraries could not provide one or more of these statistics.

There is another problem about incorporating access measures into the Index. I tried doing this with the supplementary data, where it is available. It turns out that the access measures have almost no effect on the Index. The Index is heavily dominated by measures of resources, and the measures of access simply do not carry much weight.

What you can do, of course, is construct an Index based only on access and user measures. The result is a brave new world for which I am not sure everybody is ready. In the access Index Ohio State ranks 5th, Stanford is 9th, MIT is 12th, Chicago is 19th, Princeton ties with Virginia Tech at 39th, and so on. And, of course, one-third of the members are not represented in the access index.

The *fourth*, and I think most serious, problem with the Index is that it can be misinterpreted as an index of quality and status. My own president has written, "I would de-emphasize currently quantitative measures of library status such as the annual ARL statistical rankings."

Of course, the other side of the coin is that the Index has done yeoman service for some people. The Index can at least be used as the drunkard uses the lamp post æ for support if not illumination. One of our staff members recently received a fund-raising brochure from his alma mater. The brochure listed the recent accomplishments of the university. The greatest accomplishment was of course reaching the Final Four in the NCAA basketball tournament. But the second-greatest, according to the brochure, was that the library made the top twenty in the ARL Index.

That university is going to have to look for a different marketing device, because the Index has not been published this year. The Chronicle may have to publish the ARL data in a boring alphabetical list, from Alabama to York. An alphabetical list is not news, however. News is to report who is number two in the country, Berkeley or UCLA. Maybe the Chronicle will have to use the tried-and-true ranking by volumes held, in which case number two will not be Berkeley or UCLA but Yale.

However much we may deplore it, I am sure that people are going to continue to try to rank libraries æ if not by the Index, then by some other criteria. Volumes held is the old faithful. Bob Molyneux tells me that if you go to the archives in Texas or Illinois or other libraries and look at the original sheets of university library statistics, you will find that back in the 1920s and 1930s and 1940s library directors used to write ranks on the alphabetical lists. When I became a student assistant in the 1960s, ARL was still issuing its statistics only in alphabetical lists. One of my first jobs, assigned by the director, was to go through alphabetical lists and put them in rank order. Last year, when the Group of 25 ARL libraries met, the criterion for an invitation to that group was still volume holdings, or specifically a rank in the top 25 in volumes held. That was the group that outsiders named the ARLRL æ Association of Really Large Research Libraries.

Ranking and the search for commonalties among libraries æ to use a term from factor analysis æ have practical consequences. At the last meeting of the Statistics Committee, we struggled with the question how to divide the membership into discussion groups at today's meeting. Someone said, let's divide them up by Index scores. The committee stopped short of demanding a formal apology for that recommendation. Someone else said, let's use volumes held. But that suggestion was thought to be hopelessly old-fashioned. We got out the statistics and looked at the expenditure tables, but found that the expenditure rankings make strange bedfellows. We finally agreed that the best solution was ... to adjourn, catch our planes, and leave the problem to the ARL staff.

So I would like to suggest the following question as one topic for the group discussions in a little while. Look around the room at the dozen people in your group, and ask: what do we have in common, and how can we describe it? Is it volumes held? Added volumes? Number of professionals? Interlibrary loan turnaround time? Success rates of reference transactions? Or even a combination of variables like the ARL Index?

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