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ROLE OF CONSPECTUS IN COLLECTION MANAGEMENT AND RESOURCE SHARING

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Conspectus is an instrument, an assessment methodology and a consortial database which enable providing optimum patron specific access model for resource sharing among libraries. It helps making more informed decisions regarding acquisitions, collection development, fund allocations, budget requests, grants and preservation. A systematic 'conspectus' provides many indirect benefits like (i) filling-in gaps in the collection, (ii) justifying use of approval plans; identifying subject areas where curricular changes dictate that the library starts or stops buying materials, (iii) justifying a grant application or budget increase for training, preservation or collection development, (iv) defining possibilities for increased cooperative acquisitions among local or regional libraries in subject areas of mutual interest, (v) fulfilling institutional or state mandated assessment programs, (vi) providing 'objective evidence' for accredition and professional association reports, (vii) defining collection development objectives, policies, procedures and short and long range goals. The paper provides a birds-eye-view of conspectus methodology, its role in collection development, collection evaluation and resource sharing as well as some problems and pitfalls in adoption of conspectus methodology. Lastly, concludes by emphasising the need for awareness about conspectus methodology among local professionals and some sincere attempts to create such access tools rather than satisfying with acronyms of library network.

KEYWORDS/DESCRIPTORS: Conspectus methodology; Collection management; Resource sharing

1. INTRODUCTION

In a recent paper (Sridhar, 1995), the wide unbridged gap between idealistic theoretical slogans of resource sharing and their implementation together with barriers to library cooperation, inherent limitations of resource sharing philosophy, ways of overcoming barriers and limitations and tips for effective resource sharing and library cooperation are discussed. Resource sharing and cooperation among libraries assumes that accurate, reliable, exhaustive and up-to-date bibliographic information about the holdings of member libraries as well as who has what in terms of specific subject fields are known. This is exactly the purpose of a conspectus. The overall goal of conspectus is fostering collection interdependencies. The tool which tells clearly and reliably

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who collects what, and how intensively do they collect it? Despite so much discussion about cooperation and resource sharing the concept of conspectus is almost unheard in the country.

The purpose of this paper is neither to discuss the methodology and modus operand of 'conspectus' in detail nor to highlight successes and failures of RLG Conspectus, but to create an awareness among Indian Library and Information professionals about the possible role of conspectus methodology in resource sharing as well as collection management.

2. THE CONSPECTUS

Genesis: 'Conspectus' was developed during late '70s for and by RLG, used since 1983 for collection assessment by ARL in its NCIP (National Collections Inventory Project). ARL has created a national online database of the participants' conspectus decisions. The conspectus methodology is used by the Alaska Statewide Inventory project, the metropolitan Reference and Research Library Agency (New York), the Illinois Statewide Collection Development Project and Library and Information Research for the Northwest (LIRN used modified RLG conspectus for non-research level libraries since mid 80s). Endorsed by ALA, over 200 academic, public and special libraries in the pacific Northwest have also adopted and are using RLG conspectus process. During late 80s even Canadian, British and other universities in Europe have began using 'Conspectus'.

The conspectus is a heuristic device. RLG conspectus is considered to be defacto national and international *lingua franca* for describing and assessing collections. The conspectus is an instrument, an assessment methodology and a consortial database which enable recording the strength of existing collections and of current collecting practices by subject terms in a stanadardised and quantified form.

Development process: The process consists of using worksheets for recording collection depth values by broad subject fields (and each broad subject field is called a conspectus). Worksheets listing subject descriptions and LC classification ranges (about 7000 in number) are used for recording individual library collection assessment decision about (i) Existing Collection Strength (ECS) or level, (ii) Current Collecting Intensity(CCI) and (iii) Desired Collecting Intensity(DCI) or Acquisitions Committment or Collection Goal which is optional and reflects library's policy. The collection assessment decisions are recorded on a predetermined six point/interval collection intensity scale or codes (0 to 5) and three subcodes for code 3 as noted below:

0 Out of scope
1 Minimum level
2 Basic information
3 Institutional support level
Subcodes: 3a Basic
3b Intermediate
3c Advanced
4 Research collection
5 Comprehensive collection

For example, an item in a single library worksheet with descriptor 'Antennas' having value 1 for ECS and 4 for CCI would appear as:

Antennas (Scope/comments) 1/4

In case of a multi-library conspectus, 'Antennas' appear at the top and name of the libraries appear in the first column.

The above values are decided by librarians based on bibliographic records, shelf list contents, best part of the collections, etc. Guidelines have been developed to provide percentage of holdings from standard lists, indexes/abstracts, etc. It may be noted that in this process ECS values reflect what is on the shelves and in circulation by estimating the volume and diversity of a collection's holdings and CCI values reflect

which is actually being added to the collection each year (not collection development policy). CCI provide a glimpse of the collection's slice of the institution's total resource pie. It informs both management policies and budgetary commitment towards a collection relative to all others. CCI values may not match with DCI values unless sufficient budget is available and priority is given to the subject. DCI forces the evaluator to estimate at what level collecting intensity will plateau. The differences between CCI and DCI suggests that existing budgetary allocations and acquisitions practices. DCI values represent both the means (resources) necessary to reach a desired goal as well as the end (collecting level) itself.

Worksheet also provides a column for comments or notes wherein approval plans, time period when collection was strong or weak due to budgetary or other constraints, uncatalogued material, not listed on shelf list or online catalogue, government documents, microfiche collections, archives, special collection, etc. are noted. In addition, area studies, format collection/media (e.g., microfilm), form collection (e.g., standards) and corporate agencies would also be indicated on worksheet.

The conspectus also assigns Primary Collecting Responsibilities (PCR) to participating libraries. The primary collectors (with ECS value of 4 or 5 for research libraries and 3 for non-research libraries) have an obligation, budget permitting, to acquire and preserve a copy of everything in print at the DCI for a particular subject, form of material, or geographic area. They are also expected to maintain and complete their files of serials runs in that area. Along with PCR, Primary Preservation Responsibilities (PPR) have also been considered. These conspectus is a stratified, subject-based description of an area of intellectual inquiry.

Collection assessment and assignment of codes: The levels of codes are cumulative in nature that libraries which collect at level 4 or 3c also acquire the material that support 3b and 3c as well as 2 and 1 levels. Codes suggest a point along a continuum from no or little desire to acquire material to, at the opposite extreme, the need to collect exhaustively. Zero code does not mean an absence of any books or periodicals. Nor does a level 4 collection have double the books of a level 2 collection. In addition, conspectus also uses certain codes to indicate the intensity of collection in English and foreign languages. While assigning codes it is very important to maintain consistency and avoid bias in coding among member libraries. For this purpose a committee of cooperative institutions is formed and a test collection of interest to each member is evaluated. This forum also provides co-operative training, promotes frank discussion, centralised administration, etc.

Some important techniques of collection assessment used by the conspectus are (i) shelf list analysis (by experts for qualitative impressions), (ii) list checking (for comparing with standard or other available lists), (iii) expert (faculty on consultant) opinion, (iv) customer centered statistical analysis of activities and services like circulation, reference, ILL, cataloguing, acquisitions, online and CD-ROM database searches, etc., and (v) computer assisted analysis by using products like OCLC/ AMIGOS' Collection Analysis System.

To avoid conflicting assessments (since 1984) conspectus divisions were limited to logical, single letter ranges of the LC classification. However, dynamic creation of area studies by assembling conspectus subject lines from a variety of disciplines is allowed from 1985.

3. ROLE OF CONSPECTUS IN COLLECTION MANAGEMENT AND RESOURCE SHARING

Collection management : The conspectus is considered to be a landmark collection management development of the late twentieth century.

A comprehensive collection management program is an organic process with the logical progression of phases like knowing user requirements, assessment, collection development, collection development policy statement, funding & budgeting, selection and deselection, preservation and resource sharing. The conspectus helps coordinated collection management. In other words, it results in collective ability to coordinate collection management of groups of libraries and enable each library to build and plan its own collections more independently and responsibly. By way of assigning Primary Collecting Responsibilities (PCR) to member libraries, it acts like an insurance policy against reduced budget of libraries. The conspectus helps to identify collection's historical strength and also to enhance them in under-represented fields and to strengthen them. It also enable everyone to know the strength of existing or current collection practices and trends. In the process of developing conspectus of librarie's collection gaps can be identified nationally. It not only creates a consistent basis for collection development policies but also serves as a basis for librarians taking on collecting responsibilities. Infact the collection development policy is an outgrowth of conspectus work in RLG. Conspectus is expected to serve as the method of communicating policy decision among member libraries. Worksheets can be used to fill in gaps, define profiles for approval plans and emphasise or deemphasise acquisitions areas.

Conspectus provide a measure of objectivity, standardisation and respect to the process of collection evaluation. But, it should be noted that it does not result in an online union list of every book owned by consortial members. Being a multi-faceted, multi-purpose collection centered assessment process, conspectus provides a sort of survey of a library's collection.

Resource sharing: As far as resource sharing and library cooperation are concerned, conspectus appears to be an excellent proposition. Being a matrix of the member's collection depth indicators and online inventory of collecting patterns arranged by broad subject division, it helps to avoid unnecessary duplication of little used material, promotes joint acquisition of expensive material and promotes planned coordinated interdependence. It assures national coverage and helps in directing scholars to strong collections. Conspectus can serve as a surrogate to the fully converted national union catalogue. But, as noted earlier, it does not result in an online union list of every book owned by consortial members. Conspectus online contains assessments in over 8000 subject lines by more than 80 RLG members, one foreign collection (The British Library), 10 NCIPs (North American Collection Inventory Projects) and one land grant institution (Kansas State Agriculture). Information from other libraries are likely to be added to this online file. Since 1988, preservation librarians throughout RLG have entered information about local and grant-funded projects (about 150 in number) into the conspectus. RLIN of RLG provides online access to conspectus information, WLN has introduced microcomputer based conspectus software for local and consortial use. Software products are also believed to be developed by both RLG and ARL.

Completed worksheets are reference tools for informed decision making not only in collection development but also for ILL, cooperative acquisition, resource sharing and preservation. Conspectus can stimulate interest in and support for cooperative programs.

Other benefits : There are other incidental benefits of conspectus. The subject areas identified with high collecting intensities may incidentallybe targeted for retrospective conversion, acquisitions, cataloguing and preservation. Conspectus can provide useful and understandable information and 'objective evidence' for accreditation and curriculum reports for academic institutions.

Conspectus helps to create a consistent basis for written policies of libraries, monitoring expenditure, reflecting user needs, communicating to faculty and researchers, training librarians, bringing rationality to acquisitions and de-selection of materials. Conspectus can also serve as a link between collecting policies and processing and preservation policies. It can also serve as a possible fund raising tool.

Above all, it is reported that the participating librarians and library staff experience significant professional growth, increased interaction and improved communication while dealing with RLG Conspectus.

In a nutshell, conspectus is claimed to be a road map of collection landscape for individual libraries for coordinated and cooperative collection development, collection evaluation and resource sharing by recording mutually agreed upon, subject-specific statements and then mentioning collecting priorities, space allocation, preservation selection, selector training, materials allocation, faculty-library communication, etc.

4. SOME PROBLEMS AND PITFALLS OF CONSPECTUS

Cost efficiency: Conspectus is not all that rosy and totally free from drawbacks. The process has quite a few pitfalls. The major criticism of conspectus is on its time-consuming consultative efforts including extensive documentation in the form of worksheets, supplemental guidelines, bibliographies and verification studies together with subjective and interpretative judgments and educated guesses in the assessment of collections. Basically its cost efficiency and empirical precision and validity are questioned by some. In other words, whether the great effort put in to assess a subject across the libraries is reliable and provide commensurating benefits is in doubt. It is alleged that the enormous efforts in itself is militating against the confidence in the conspectus values.

Collection assessment methodology: The methods adopted for collection assessment are also questioned. By and large, the assessment is qualitative and only experienced bibliographers and subject experts can provide reliable qualitative impressions. For list checking method, if there are not enough comprehensive and up-to-date bibliographies to cover the subject area adequately the collection managers have to make the most reasonable guessing possible as preparing bibliographies afresh is costly. The process of list checking is time consuming unless resorted to sampling methods. The method also may lead to frustration as many items are no more available for buying and if available it results in spending substantial part of the budget for buying old volumes. Regarding expert opinion method, it is difficult to identify and hire faculty or consultant with expertise matching LC classification ranges. Getting complete cooperation of expert is not an easy task.

The collection assessment methods like 'client centered statistical analysis' and 'computer assisted analysis' have been found to be easier than other methods. Variety of techniques have been developed to gather and analyze statistics relating to circulation, reference service, ILL, cataloguing, acquisitions, online and CD-ROM database searches in the former method. In the computer assisted analysis, products like OCLC/ AMGOS' Collection Analysis Systems (on CD or tape) were claimed to provide easy-to-use, inexpensive, nearly instant assessment by comparing a library's collection against peer group library collections using OCLC member MARC tapes. Analysis can also be done simultaneously for matching an academic library's MARC tapes against the 'Books for College Libraries' (3 ed.) and overlap information for customised reports.

The numerical codes of ECS and language codes used to indicate the diversity of foreign language material often require users to possess a considerable degree of knowledge of the range of foreign language material available in a subject.

The DCI values may very well envelop in-house real politic in as much as a selector may think his or her collection merits a current intensity level higher than what administrators are willing to allocate. ECS is central to the determination of the more policy-oriented values for CCI and DCI. Scrutinising the instrument used to measure ECS become crucial. Conventional bibliographic checking and comparing with library holdings to an external standard list is inexpensive and 'hits' indicate both qualitative and quantitative assessment of the collection. But loose application of the method in choice of bibliography and measurement without justifiable interpretative frame work can lead to errors of comparing very unlike collections but having same level of collections. Further, two unevenly ranked collections may contain considerable amount of overlap or the collections which are ranked the same may yield wildly different scores on a common test. Verification studies are of some help to overcome this problem. Thus it becomes inevitable to state that the 'conspectus' values are not data, but expressions of opinion and despite standardisation of evaluative criteria, the conspectus has a 'soft' approach towards collection assessment. Thus comparison of collections of two libraries depends largely on how evaluators share the same perceptions.

Qualitative assessment of collection involves use of some sort of 'more or less' categories of variables. The quality itself is conceptualised as a composite of purely quantitative measures like the number of volumes added per year, shelf list counts, the relative strength and use of the books and the periodical collection and an analysis of ILL and circulation patterns. In other words, quantity approximates quality. Collection level codes imply that the items within each level must be ordered according to some sort of hierarchy of value so that certain items are collected before others, which is not always practiced. Collection assessment through conspectus has revealed that assessment should incorporate both qualitative and quantitative indicators. Using scaled bibliographies is proposed as one solution to this problem. For example, each item in the bibliography may be marked a score 4 to 1 meaning essential, special, general and peripheral respectively. Two changes suggested to conspectus are incorporating 'Desired Collecting Goals' (DCG) and Cooperative Collecting Responsibility (CCR).

LC Classification scheme: Some have expressed difficulty in using the classification scheme in the conspectus. What level of details of LC classification schedule to be used depended on goals, policies and programmes of the institutions. Yet the problems like total collection not represented by the classification numbers, overlapping and interdisciplinary areas required to be tackled with notes in comments column and developing interdisciplinary conspectus worksheets remain untackled.

Other problems: Some of the criticisms that conspectus is time consuming, imprecise, subjective, requires enormous money and manpower and its benefits do not commensurate with its costs as well as lack of bench marks or guidelines to ensure consistency between and among libraries in collection evaluation cannot be easily brushed aside. Even when gaps in the collections are identified, if no funds are available the whole exercise becomes academic and futile.

It is also a fact that conspectus level 3 (instructional support level) is most difficult to understand and can be ambiguous with regard to what kind of instruction is meant. Similarly comparing the supplemental guidelines can be confusing to the user. As each discipline is unique comparing supplemental guidelines to each other may be inappropriate.

Lastly, conspectus is developed for research libraries and attempt to force it on other types of libraries can be frustrating.

The above problems and pitfalls in the development of conspectus instrument through the collection assessment process have clear impli-

cations on collection management and resource sharing among member libraries.

Some solutions to problems: There has been continuous efforts to solve some of the problems. Two tools developed to overcome some of the problems (atleast partly) including the inadequacy of quantitative measures of collection utility or excellence and lack of guidance for specific subject, etc., are (i) verification studies and (ii) supplemental guidelines. These studies and guidelines purport to increase the reliability of collection assessment data.

Verification studies consist of lists of titles constructed to 'test' certain aspects of a collection and to 'verify' the reliability of the conspectus values that institutions have reported. In verification studies comparative collection analysis are planned by small teams of expert bibliographers. Four basic models developed over ten years of experience in verification studies are useful tools for collection evaluations. They are: (i) expertly selected studies (ii) randomly drawn studies (iii) randomly drawn stratified studies and (iv) 'mixed' studies. Discussion on these models of collection assessment is beyond the scope of this paper. Supplemental guides are meant to offer prospective assistance and establish some objective guidance in the setting of conspectus values. It is supposed to provide thorough testing procedures that ensure that the guidelines accurately reflect collecting realities. For example, a supplemental guide helps to establish a relationship for instructional and research collections between the number of journals held locally and appearing on the list of 1000 most frequently cited journals. Another guide provides evaluative assistance for minimal (level 1) and basic informational level (level 2) collections. It also provides help for expansions and/or extensions to the conspectus in collaboration with other organisations.

With the notion of hierarchy of collecting levels collections are expected to experience changes in collection quality as well as increase in total holdings over years. The conspectus is supposed to show how collection quality is something more than a function of volume. There is also a proposal to introduce scaling technique for testing instruments like bibliographies.

5. CONCLUSION

Conspectus is 'patron specific access'model which enables libraries to provide access to what the patron wishes without spending budget and owning the material. The model allows libraries to collect materials in specific areas and to compare their collecting levels with that of other libraries. In the process, libraries need not have to give up collecting materials to meet the goals of the parent institutions.

Conspectus is considered as a standardised tool for the evaluation of library collections. It is a collection assessment method that maps subject strengths and weaknesses using standardised criteria and description. The purpose of this standardisation is to provide a composite picture of collection strengths and current collecting intensities. Conspectus has arrived at a time when there is seemingly endless search by libraries for methods that bring greater objectivity to the assessment of collections and hungry for standardisation in the field of collection evaluation. Conspectus is even believed to have the potential of becoming an internal evaluative tool when the quantified indicators of current practices are juxtapositioned with projections of long-term needs.

Studying conspectus methodoloy can be extremely helpful to take a disciplined approach to collection development. The methodology is claimed to have been adopted and modified for use in libraries other than research libraries. As far as application of this methodology in other environment is concerned each library has to determine what will work in the given circumstances and adopt them to fit situation and no need to use every possible method or piece of data to determine collection levels. Libraries have to

make their choice looking at the entire conspectus worksheet and not piece meal.

Factors like growing literature, automated circulation systems and vendor services, trend of using conspectus divisions for comparable publishing and related date and continued efforts of validation studies have made data gathering and implementation of conspectus theory easier for those libraries who have already embraced.

Despite its existence and use for last 15 years or so RLG conspectus is not so conspicuous in India. The professionals discussinglibrary cooperation, resource sharing and union catalogues have not tried to learn from the experiments of RLG conspectus. It is true that the conspectus of RLG has to overcome many drawbacks in its design and implementation, but it has left behind a rich data and experience for libraries of LDCs to learn and adopt the methodology to suit their local conditions. This is particularly so as most of the libraries in this country have no up- to-date and comprehensive written collection development policies.

Lastly, it is regretted that there are no worth the name attempts to build any such access tools like conspectus and standardised collection development, collection evaluation, ILL and resource sharing in the country. This becomes all the more paining when we see acronyms are being coined every day beginning with almost all alphabets to represent our fantasy-ridden idealistic theoretical library networks, most of which are yet to become operational. What we find in this country during the last decade is fragmented duplicate efforts of building tools similar to union catalogues and informal inter library cooperation arrangement, utility of which is limited. For example, an informal consortium of Bangalore Special Libraries Group formed during late 1990 has attempted to prepare a profile of member libraries rather than a real conspectus. Apart from union catalogue of serials and other collective information sources like CD-ROM databases subscribed, standing orders, etc., the circulation of list of exceptionally priced items acquired or being acquired by member libraries did help in its own way to contribute to the objectives of resource sharing but depended heavily on the willing participation of member libraries. Cooperative collection development remained ellusive even after development of RLG conspectus for the reasons that it was wrongly considered as an end rather than means and tackling barrier to library cooperation is different from developing tools. Conspectus does not assure breaking barriers for cooperation and resource sharing but allows libraries to map their strengths and weaknesses at narrowsubject levels, communicate this picture to each other and bring libraries having some problem together to work in their common weaknesses.

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