

# Research Notes

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## NORMAN DESMARAIS

### Losses in a Theological Library

Librarians often assume that the greatest number of book losses occur in medical and legal libraries. Some librarians would add theological libraries to the list. A search of the literature has revealed that no adequate study of losses in theological libraries has been published, thereby making it impossible to draw valid conclusions. St. Mary's Seminary and University Library, Baltimore, Maryland, studied its loss rate, compared it with that of other libraries, and considered the security measures that might be taken to reduce such losses.

#### NEED FOR THE STUDY

Prior to 1978, the library at St. Mary's had poor exit controls. Circulation often relied on the honor system as the desk was often unsupervised and members of the small faculty and student body were expected to sign out for the books themselves. A new library director found this system unsatisfactory and began considering methods to increase security.

Statistics were needed to substantiate adopting new methods and to verify their ef-

fectiveness. The library hired several students to assist library personnel in inventory of the entire collection during May and June of 1978. A year later, the library staff conducted a sample inventory of 11.28 percent of the collection to determine annual loss rate.

#### FIRST STUDY

Two-thirds of the collection was still classified according to the Dewey decimal classification (DDC); all acquisitions after 1971 and recataloged materials followed the Library of Congress classification (LC). The director assumed that newer books were more likely to be used and therefore more likely to be lost or missing.<sup>1</sup> On this basis, he decided to inventory every fifth shelf of the LC collection and every eighth shelf of the DDC collection (which was denser than the LC collection). The reference collection was inventoried completely. Of a total of 2,588 shelves with more than five books on them, a sample of 292 (11.28 percent) was inventoried—152 DDC and 140 LC.

Book losses amounted to a total of sixty volumes, or .69 percent of the collection, while periodical losses amounted to twenty-three items, or .17 percent of that collection. In addition to this partial inventory, the staff conducted a book census (counting every book and bound periodical) to determine the exact size of the collection, and to serve as a basis

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for the efficient establishment of loss rate in the future.

The library adopted the following security measures: (1) the hiring of extra personnel for more consistent staffing of the circulation desk; (2) the elimination of the honor system; and (3) general tightening of some of the lax procedures.

#### SECOND STUDY

The same sampling procedure was followed in May 1980. The staff inventoried 12.96 percent of the LC collection (27,537 volumes) and 12.5 percent of the DDC collection (45,944 volumes) and the entire reference collection (1,966 volumes). This revealed that the heaviest losses occurred in the LC collection (1.09 percent of the sample, or thirty-nine volumes). Next came the reference collection (.457 percent of the sample, or nine items), followed by the DDC collection (.24 percent, or fourteen volumes).

During 1980-81, the library staff expected to merge part of the undergraduate liberal arts library from another campus with the theology library. They anticipated reorganizing the library and having better exit controls; but this reorganization came too late in the year to allow them to draw valid conclusions. As long delays in the merger of the shelflists were expected, the staff had to devise an alternative method of data gathering.

#### THIRD STUDY

It was assumed that, by taking the base figures for the size of the collection (gathered through the book census), adding the yearly acquisitions, and subtracting the withdrawals, the librarians could determine book losses more quickly and economically on a yearly basis. This would also eliminate skewing due to shelving errors. Such a method would not account for human errors in counting, however. This procedure indicated a discrepancy of 928 items or .935 percent of the collection, which totaled 99,245 volumes at this point. At a cost of \$22 (the library's average cost per book for 1980-81), this would yield a total loss of \$20,416.

#### COMPARISONS

St. Mary's loss rate compares favorably with studies done at other libraries. C. W. Post Center Library of Long Island University (a large library of 460,000 volumes) ex-

perienced an average annual loss rate of 1.35 percent prior to installing a book detection system, which lowered the rate to .38 percent.<sup>2</sup> Bristol Community College's Learning Resource Center Library (Fall River, Mass.), with a collection of approximately 43,000 volumes, saw its losses climb from .3 percent in 1973 to 1.3 percent in 1974 to 1.7 percent in 1975.<sup>3</sup> A Carnegie study found that the undergraduate libraries at the University of California at Berkeley, Northwestern University, and the University of Washington report annual losses of 4 to 5 percent.<sup>4</sup> "Tufts University found that almost eight percent of the books in its libraries disappear after just one year on the shelves. . . . A 1976 inventory at Claremont Colleges (California) pinpointed losses in the past 20 years at 15,000 books. And an inventory at the University of Maryland found losses of more than 30,000 volumes."<sup>5</sup>

J. W. Griffith reports that the Lewis Central High School in Council Bluffs, Iowa, experienced annual losses of 3 percent of the religion collection and 3.06 percent of the philosophy collection, with the highest rate occurring in the applied sciences (6.48 percent).<sup>6</sup>

Public libraries seem to fare the worst. The New York Public Library pegs its annual losses at about 10 percent of the collection.<sup>7</sup> The situation in Britain is much the same, where "the rate of loss reported in the Library Association College Library Survey showed that the *actual* annual losses from open shelves was 2.6%. A national average frequently quoted is 1% per annum."<sup>8</sup>

#### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ungarelli's study reemphasizes that "there is a correlation between loss rate and publication date, and that there is also a correlation between loss rate and the use of materials."<sup>9</sup> We may infer from this that the loss rate of a given library does not depend so much on the type of library as it does on the expectations of its users, and the use they make of its collections. Libraries noted for having good theology collections will experience more use (and loss) of those collections, while libraries with strong literature collections may expect corresponding use and loss in their literature collections.

As the student body increases and as circu-

lation and use continue to increase, academic libraries can expect that losses will increase proportionally. In 1979, when St. Mary's losses totaled .69 percent of the collection, circulation had increased 5.6 percent over the previous year. The following year, the loss rate dropped to .55 percent of the collection, even though circulation increased by 81 percent. This decrease may be partly accounted for by the great amount of publicity and consciousness-raising devoted to the problem. The 1981 loss rate jumped to .93 percent of the collection, while circulation increased by 33.5 percent. It appears, then, that the security measures already implemented have done little to reduce losses. Even though the percentage of losses at St. Mary's is small compared to other studies, it is still unacceptably high considering that most volumes are irreplaceable. Even a 1 percent annual loss from a large collection represents a large number of volumes.

As a theology library whose primary purpose is to support the education of future priests and ministers, St. Mary's has been reluctant to propose installation of a book detection system, partly because of the initial costs, and partly because of the negative image this might project to its users and supporters. However, as other security measures do not seem very effective, as libraries increasingly become targets for casual and professional thieves,<sup>10</sup> and as losses and replacement costs continue to increase, the time may be ripe to consider the installation of such a system. Researchers have assumed that, in order to be considered adequate, the effectiveness level of book detection systems should be around 85 percent, and the results of actual studies have been higher than this. Most libraries find that the system begins to pay for itself in the second or third year of its operation. By preserving their collections, libraries are able to spend more funds for new acquisitions, rather than replacements, and are thereby better able to satisfy their users by providing the books they need.

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