

“Librarian’s Shelf” by Jill Owens

Getting the picture with numbers at your library

Whether you consider them to be “timely, accurate, and relevant data” or beans to count, many enterprises keep various types of statistics. One has to decide which things can and should be counted, and one has to learn to read between the columns of numbers to understand what they tell you.

In library land we do a lot of counting. It seems that no matter how one slices, dices, and divides her numbers, someone always asks for a percent not anticipated. Each month we run reports and then work out relationships among some of those numbers. We also produce some annual snapshots.

The Nebraska Library Commission (a.k.a. the State Library) is one of the bodies which receive our information. Having just completed the annual statistical report to them (a total of 18 pages when printed out), I can tell you it is more work than the word “survey” brings to mind.

The introductory paragraph from the announcement of the latest round reads as follows: “Every year the Nebraska Library Commission, along with state library agencies from all other states and U.S. territories, collects statistics through the Public Library Survey. There are almost 90 shared data elements in this survey that are used to analyze and compare public library service in the U.S. In Nebraska, these data, along with some state-wide information, are gathered through an online survey instrument known as Bibliostat™ Collect. Submission of this survey is required to become eligible for the public library accreditation program and for state aid to public libraries.” In addition to the value of the data, you can see the carrot and stick approach used for incentive. No play, no pay.

In addition to qualifying for eligibility for various funds, we can see if we are spending more or less, for instance, on electronic materials than other libraries. The next step is deciding what that indicates and whether a change should be made.

Sometimes numbers do not tell the whole story. For instance there are no audiobook or art print check-outs from the bookmobile. Does that mean bookmobile patrons are not interested in these items or does it mean the bookmobile doesn’t have room to carry these items? Similarly, if the stats go down for the bookmobile or library, one notes whether there were blizzards, school closings, truck breakdowns and so on.

We can see interesting numbers that indicate our check-outs of physical materials have gone up slightly in spite of all the downloadable audio books and e-books added in the last few years. It will be interesting to see when that levels off. It takes time to build up an electronic collection, and the total number of items available through OverDrive has an effect on total check-out of electronic materials.

Numbers of e-books checked out through OverDrive are topped out for now – they are all always checked out, and libraries in our OverDrive group are adding as fast as we can. Until there are

more e-books there cannot be more check-outs. So again, the check-out totals don't always tell the whole story.

Be sure to make use of our 87,241 books, 163 serials, 25 databases, 7,280 cataloged NetLibrary books, 3,991 OverDrive audiobooks, and 981 OverDrive e-books, 1,703 books and music on disc, 114 art prints, 2,987 DVDs, and other resources, such as our 25 public access computers, five meeting rooms, and one auditorium, either during the 61.5 hours we're physically open or using the 24/7 access to our electronic resources.

The public library survey, and other surveys and reports are useful tools. I should count someday how much time is spent just on counting. Eeek! One more thing to track? I don't think so!