

The Current State of Public Library Research in Select Peer-Reviewed Journals: 1996-2000

by Julie Hersberger and Christopher Demas

The purpose of this article is to examine the current state of research regarding public libraries in the library and information studies (LIS) literature over the past five years of publication. Four characteristics were examined: (1) frequency of publication; (2) author profiles; (3) subject; and (4) methodology.

Previous researchers have studied various aspects of public library issues. Several articles comment on the lack of motivation for public library practitioners to publish. Chapman and Pike¹ note three such barriers to practitioners publishing: (1) publications are not considered as part of the librarian's performance evaluation, (2) publishing can be considered as an inappropriate use of professional time, and (3) practitioners do not have the same access to research materials that LIS faculty do (although this has changed somewhat since this article was published due to access to electronic databases such as NC LIVE). Woodrum acknowledges that "Few public librarians receive any monetary gain from writing, and there is no requirement forcing us to publish to keep our jobs or further our careers." Still she urges practitioners to conduct and publish research as a professional obligation.²

Other authors note a gap between the research conducted by LIS educators and what is useful to library practitioners. Van Fleet and Durrance surveyed 23 public library leaders and found that these practitioners viewed research as

needed, but that existing research was "not relevant" and that "library schools don't understand what we need."³ Practitioners need more of the practical, applied or action type of research, i.e. the "how we done it good" type of article which presents a problem and how the local library solved it. Library educators, on the other hand, are not rewarded for doing this type of research in the tenure process. Perspectives and standards of researchers often result in the perception that such localized, single shot case studies are lesser in quality due to less rigorous research standards. Greiner notes that while basic, theoretical research has its place in the public library area, "applied research as a problem-solving tool in public libraries is often overlooked."⁴ The question then becomes how to bridge this gap. Van Fleet and Durrance⁵ recommend the re-packaging of basic research articles for the professional literature, in such publications as *American Libraries* and *Library Journal*.

Other researchers of public library research focused on either LIS faculty or practitioners and their characteristics and publishing habits. Tjoumas⁶ studied the productivity of LIS professors who appeared to specialize in public library research and found that they published in journals they considered prestigious, but that they produced less than one article per year.

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stitution type, gender, geographic location, collaboration, and level of activity), and the reader is directed to article for further information.

Another Van Fleet article⁸ asserts that there is evidence that LIS educators and public library practitioners share an informal communication system utilizing research and that they share elements of a "communication and intellectual culture."⁸ The bottom line would appear to be that although a gap between the needs and motivation of LIS educators and public librarians who publish exists, there are ways to improve the situation.

Methodology

Our approach to the study can be described as quasi-scientific. The criteria for considering that which constituted a research article was generously applied rather than rigidly considered. The purpose of the article is to illustrate the current status of public library research, mainly practitioner readership. The strategy was to be more inclusive in order to get a sense of the big picture.

The researchers used a purposive sampling approach. We first limited the study to articles on public libraries in the LIS literature. Although it may be very interesting to examine public library research outside the mainstream library literature, time constraints did not allow for this. The strategy developed was to begin with the *Library Literature* database's peer-reviewed literature

list. Journals with a United States emphasis, as well as some national journals with articles by Canadians of interest to North Carolinians were selected. The five-year period of 1996-2000 is somewhat arbitrary as it was predicted that this strategy would yield a useful pool of data for analysis and was manageable given the time restraints of the project; however, some of the December 2000 issues may not have been included in this sample if they were not processed at the time of the data collection. Another sampling constraint is that the authors were limited to the journal holdings of Jackson Library at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. *Library Trends* is not part of the sample because even though articles are peer reviewed, they are more likely to be reports of research in a synthesized form rather than the research report itself.

Once a list had been made of the national research journals in LIS (see Appendix A) a quick review of the table of contents from 1996-2000 identified journals in which public library research was published (see also Appendix A). This strategy identified 11 journals containing some form of public library articles and two specialized public library journals (*Public Libraries* and *Public Library Quarterly*). The next phase consisted of examining the public library articles in each journal run from 1996-2000 to select those that were research-based. Articles that were simply opinion pieces were deselected, but articles addressing the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of public libraries were included if they contained some sort of a research question that was answered. The line between research and essay may be rather murky in some of the selections, but again, the aim was to be inclusive rather than rigidly exclusive.

The review process yielded a total pool of 121 research articles from the 13 identified journals for the five-year period. The simple frequency of public library research publication was first examined. Then, articles were content analyzed in several categories using analytical frameworks that were both deductive and iterative in nature. Another category addressed is authorship—whether the authors were LIS educators, practitioners, or other—and the number of authors per article. Next, the subject of the article was analyzed using an emergent analytical framework. Research methods were examined utilizing an analytical framework developed by Powell,⁹ which identified relevant LIS

research methods. The study does not attempt to evaluate the quality of the research nor does the analysis differentiate between public library-based research or research which was simply applied to public libraries.

Both authors analyzed each article, which would imply some measure of inter-coder reliability. A rigorous process was not applied, with several iterations of analysis being developed, nor were outside coders used to enhance the trustworthiness of results; thus the "quasi-scientific" label has been applied to this project.

Data analysis produced some expected research findings as to frequency, authorship, subjects, and methods. Interesting issues and trends emerged from the data which should be of interest to public librarians and perhaps others as well.

Findings

The original research design proposed examining the articles to determine where they fell on the basic — applied — action continuum. This strategy was abandoned due to the difficulties in operationalizing the terms. Still, the impression left to the researchers is that the vast majority of the articles either applied theories to a large pool of public libraries, using national surveys or statewide surveys, or looked at a couple of cases or even single-shot case studies. This would seem to support the call for research that is more readable and useful to public library practitioners. We note, however, that public librarians also read research on topics not solely focused on public librarianship. Other studies in the general research literature, for example, generic studies of reference, collection management, technology use, etc. may not be as practitioner-friendly. Additionally, research conducted on reference work in academic libraries could have applicability in the public library setting, so it would be short-sighted to limit the range of topics read by public library practitioners to such a narrow, single focus.

Frequency

Readers will probably not be surprised to learn that public library research constitutes a small percentage of the total number of research articles published in all thirteen journals over the past five years. Out of an estimated 1,707 articles total, 121 or 7%, are public library oriented. Also not surprisingly, the two public library based journals, *Public Libraries* and *Public Library Quarterly*, pub-

lished public library research with the most frequency. When these two journal totals are removed from the 13 journal sample, the percentage of public library to all research articles published in the remaining 11 journals (1,547 total articles to 57 public library articles) is 4%. Although we did not gather data to analyze the distribution of research articles by type of library subject, the overall impression is that academic librarians wrote the vast majority of articles about academic libraries. Many others are simply non-specific in nature. The difference in numbers may be generated by the requirement for academic librarians in tenure track positions to publish on a regular basis. Specific frequencies can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Publication Frequency

Journal	Total [≡]	PL N	%
PL*	108	41	38%
PLQ	52	23	44%
LISR	82	10	12%
L&C	98	10	10%
LQ	62	7	11%
JYSL	109	6	6%
JELIS	82	5	6%
RL	200	5	3%
RQ, RUSQ	78	5	6%
JLA	191	4	2%
NCLibs	93	3	3%
ITL	73	1	1%
JASIS	478	1	.2%
Total	1707	121	7%
Total**	1547	57	4%

* See Appendix A for abbreviations.

** Total minus PL and PLQ totals.

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Authorship

Article authorship was analyzed in regard to the number of collaborative effort and as to the gender of the authors. LIS educators appear to collaborate more often than did public library practitioners.

ners. Some of the articles seem to have evolved from class projects or research conducted by faculty with multiple students or graduate assistants. Other articles appear to be the written reports of master's thesis work. There were several interesting collaborative efforts between LIS educators and practitioners, and between practitioners and vendors or consultants. Such innovative collaborations would seem to heed the recommendation of Van Fleet and Durrance¹⁰ for more cooperative efforts between all stakeholders in the interest of public libraries. Table 2 displays the distribution of collaborative efforts:

Table 2: Collaborative Efforts

1 Author	2 Authors	3 Authors	3+ Authors
77	35	6	3

Due to the cross-collaboration between LIS educators, public library practitioners, and other interested parties, we decided not to try to document the number of occurrences since the results were more confusing than edifying.

Authorship was further analyzed by gender and career position with the results shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Authorship by Gender and Career Position

LIS Educators	106 Total	46 male	60 female
LIS Practitioners	52 Total	24 male	28 female
Other	20 Total	12 male	8 female
Total	178 Total	82 male	96 female

Results show that there are more female than male authors both in the educator and practitioner categories, but marginally more males than females in the "other" category. Some names were difficult to distinguish as to gender, such as Pat, Lee, Alex, Leslie, etc., so where clues were not available, a "best guess" was made. Comparisons to the distribution of gender, for example the ratio of male to female LIS educators nationally, and the public library practitioner population would be interesting to make if this information is readily available in a usable form. We were not able to quickly locate such information for this article.

Twenty of 178 total authors (11%) were not currently employed in LIS educational programs or as public librarians. This "other" category consisted of an interesting mix of library consultants, vendors, library users, and even the Librarian of Congress. The issue of "others" conducting public library research is an interesting

area that could benefit from more encouragement either as single authors or in collaboration with LIS educators and/or public librarians.

Some authors published several articles in the five-year period examined, but most contributed only one.

Subject

While there exists some evidence of patterns of subject preference by certain authors, a closer examination of the research topics of the 121 articles revealed some interesting trends and issues.

Subject categories emerged from the data in an iterative process. For some articles the journals provided keyword terms which were used for the analysis. For the rest of the articles, subjects were derived from abstracts, where provided, or from a scan of the entire article. The range of subjects addressed in the research articles is displayed in Table 4.

The fact that management studies constitute the majority of research studied is not surprising. Much of the action research represented was aimed at gathering data to resolve specific problems or to make better management decisions. Also not surprising is the fact that technology studies comprise the second most frequent subject researched. The influx of new technologies into public libraries *should* lead to studies evaluating the information technology needs of library users, how they are using these technologies and the information gathered, and how satisfied users are with this information technology. We predict many more research projects concerning information technology in the next five years.

Management studies, reference studies, and collection management studies comprise three of the four core class areas we typically require of all students in an LIS curriculum. Interestingly, there is a dearth of technical services, or cataloging, research represented in the sample. A quick review of technical services-specific journals revealed that most of these studies are either generic in terms of type of library or aimed at academic libraries.

We could conflate the two categories of children and YA services with the more generic user studies, which would then represent 23 of 133 total subjects studied, or 17%. From this result, it is difficult to report whether this repre-

Table 4. Subject Areas

Subject	Number*
Management Studies	30
Technology Studies	17
Reference Studies	14
Collection Management Studies	13
Children and Young Adult Studies	12
User Studies	11
Intellectual Freedom	7
Theory, Philosophical	7
Gay Oriented Materials Studies	4
Community Studies	3
Risk Management	3
Library/Librarian Image Studies	3
Geospatial/Geosystems Studies	2
Reader's Advisory Studies	2
Other	5

*Articles had multiple subject headings assigned to them.

sents a significant percentage, and thus we cannot tell, without comparison figures, if there is a trend towards more user-centered research or not.

The five studies included in the "other" category include one article on a 1951 reading conference, one article on McCarthyism and film, one article on library development, one examining library standards, and one gauging public opinion.

More studies need to be conducted in all of these categories, and more, innovative topics, will most likely appear in future work.

Methods

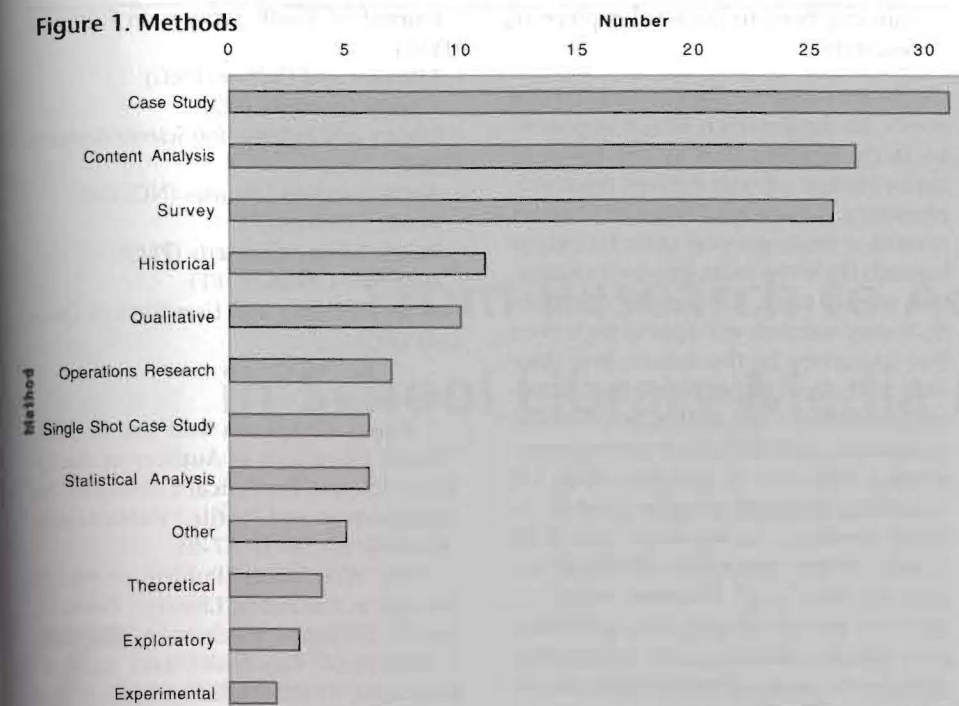
Methods used in the research articles were analyzed utilizing the framework Powell developed in his research.¹¹ The distribution of methods used is shown in Figure 1.

Results show the three main research methods used were case studies, content analyses, and surveys, which fits with the subjects being studied as noted previously. Management studies were generally case studies, often used in combination with other methods such as interviews and surveys. Content analysis studies were used to examine library collections, library policies, and library documents.

It is interesting to note the 11 historical studies. Understanding public library history is an important part of understanding the present and predicting the future, so we hope more such studies will be conducted in the future.

The term "operations research" was

Figure 1. Methods



co-opted and adapted somewhat from Powell's definition to include the more general library system analysis and not just pertaining to technology systems. Single-shot case studies were separated from the general case study category where multiple cases were the object of study. Some of these studies came close to edging away from research towards more journalistic efforts. Care needs to be taken to make case studies research as rigorously scientific as possible. *Library Journal*, *American Libraries*, and *Public Libraries* are good venues for these more informal reports. Statistical studies were those which analyzed data such as circulation statistics, national public library statistics, etc. Other methods used included geographic analyses, checklist use, nominal record linkage, and the development of a standard algorithm.

The more common research methods will continue to be represented in LIS research conducted by both library educators and practitioners. In addition, researchers in LIS are continually importing new methods from other fields and developing exciting new and innovative methods. Public library research will hopefully reflect these new trends, too.

Conclusion

It is clear from this review of the public library research conducted in the past five years that there is a solid, growing body of knowledge being produced by library educators, public library practitioners, and interested other parties. Public library research comprised 7% of

the total research published in the 13 journals sampled. Single authors wrote the majority of these articles, but interesting collaborative efforts were noted between educators, practitioners and other interested parties. Women authors dominated in the educator and practitioner categories, but more men than women were represented in the "other" category (60% men and 40% women). None of the disparities were great. The main subjects studied in these articles were the core areas of librarianship comprising management, reference, and collection management. Case studies, content analyses, and survey research methods were the most commonly used approaches in the majority of the studies.

We conclude by analyzing the results of our study in the context of the five recommendations for improving the utility of public library research offered by Van Fleet and Durrance:¹²

1. Make the research literature more available to librarians.

Publishing in popular journals, publishing review articles on specific topics and developing a "research digest" are specific recommendations made by Van Fleet and Durrance. Repackaging basic research for publication in professional journals may need to be encouraged more. Just as Woodrum¹³ urges practitioners to publish as a professional obligation, library educators may need to realize that publishing for practitioners may be *their* professional obligation, even if academic administrators do not re-

ward them for such publications. *Library Trends* seems to be publishing review articles, though not specifically for public library research. A public library research digest could be published as a service by a particular library school or might be extracted from a database and document delivery service such as *CARL UnCover*.

2. Enhance public librarian/researcher opportunities for interaction in library settings.

Specific recommendations made by Van Fleet and Durrance¹⁴ mention involving more public libraries in the research process, developing funding for innovative collaborative efforts, and encouraging practitioners to develop research positions or agendas. We would advocate further efforts as simple as encouraging LIS educators to frequent their local public library, use local practitioners as guest speakers in classes, and to serve, when requested by public library directors, as consultants. This general interaction could lead to cooperative efforts and research collaborations. Funding for research is always an issue, but it would seem intuitive that the wider the range of researchers on a project, the wider the funding pools. Woodrum's article¹⁵ is a good example of library administration encouraging staff development of research positions and supporting these research projects.

3. Develop a framework for interaction through association activities.

More specific recommendations from Van Fleet and Durrance¹⁶ involve encouraging more activities between the research sections of library professional organizations, encouraging research as part of the PLA action agenda, including both educators and librarians on committees, devoting more attention to collaborative continuing education efforts, and to include library administrators in the Association of Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) research activities.

We would like to see more interaction between educators and practitioners at the state level as well, perhaps at the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA) biennial meetings. According to their Web site,¹⁷ NCLA does not have a research section, and this may be an area of interest to pursue in the future where public, academic, and special librar-

ians share their research efforts. Public Library Association (PLA) conference programming is another area where improvements could be made to include more public library research sessions. Based on the conference program, few sessions at the 2000 Public Library Association meeting held in Charlotte¹⁸ were research-based, most being single-shot case studies.

4. Emphasize state library and other cooperative research ventures.

Recommendations include the support of cooperative research efforts by the state library and the support of state library research efforts through consultation. Van Fleet and Durrance¹⁹ go on to note that many M.L.I.S. students and librarians are unaware of the role that state libraries play in the research process. The State Library of North Carolina²⁰ takes a supportive role in the dissemination of some research. Several studies conducted by the N.C. State Library Commission, such as one on "Children, Teens, and Libraries" and another on the impact of school media centers, is available on their Web site. Better communication between the State Library, library schools in the state, and the public library practitioners, is desirable. From the Web site it appears that while funding for public library research is not readily available from the State Library, it can facilitate research efforts through the excellent statistics accessible via their Web site.

5. Develop a research perspective at the M.L.I.S. level.

Van Fleet and Durrance's²¹ recommendations include integrating research literature and methodology into appropriate courses in the M.L.I.S. curriculum, encouraging independent study and research for credit, involving students at the M.L.I.S. level in faculty research, and establishing extracurricular activities such as forums and presentations with a research emphasis. All of these are very important recommendations, and some have already been integrated into the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) M.L.I.S. curriculum. We would further like to note that this article is the collaboration of an LIS faculty member and a graduate student. Throughout the process of conducting the research, time and effort was spent in the educational process of

learning how to do a solid piece of research.

In conclusion, the current state of public library research would appear to be fairly healthy. But as the focus of many library schools evolves from emphasizing the study of types of libraries toward a more general orientation, or towards the even more general information science track, it is possible that public library research will appear with even less frequency in the future. Practitioners will need to publish more, heeding Woodrum's call to this professional obligation, and the public library community will need to actively lobby LIS educators to conduct more public library research. As has been noted by almost all the researchers who have addressed the "gap" between what research is published and what practitioners need to know, more and better communication is the resolution to the problem. The five recommendations made by Van Fleet and Durrance need to be revisited and actively advanced by both LIS educators and public librarians. The public library world is an exciting one of excellent services and programs. This excellence needs to be documented and disseminated through more, not less research.

Appendix A

Peer reviewed journals that did not contain public library research, 1996-2000

Behavioral and Social Sciences Librarian
Cataloging and Classification Quarterly
Catholic Library World
Collection Building
Collection Management
Current Studies in Librarianship
Government Information Quarterly
Information Processing and Management
Journal of Education for Librarianship
Library Acquisitions
Library Hi-Tech
Library Resources and Technical Services
Online and CD Rom Review
References Services Review
Serials Librarian
Serials Review
Technical Services Quarterly

Peer Reviewed Journals Containing Public Library Research, 1996-2000 and Abbreviations Used

Information Technology and Libraries (ITL)
Journal of the Association of Information Science (JASIS)
Journal of Education in Library and Information Science (JELIS)
Journal of Library Administration (JLA)

Journal of Youth Services in Libraries (JYSL)
Libraries and Culture (L&C)
Library Quarterly (LQ)
Library and Information Science Research (LISR)
North Carolina Libraries (NCLibs)
Public Libraries (PL)
Public Library Quarterly (PLQ)
Reference Librarian (RF)
RQ or Reference and User Services Quarterly (RQ)

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- ¹ Karen Chapman and Lee E. Pike, "Public Librarians as Authors in the Library Science Periodical Literature: An Examination and Profile," *Public Library Quarterly* 13(1993): 47-61.
- ² Pat Woodrum, "Publish or Perish! But not in the Public Library," *Public Libraries*, 28(January/February, 1989): 28.
- ³ Connie Van Fleet and Joan C. Durrance, "Public Library Leaders and Research: Mechanisms, Perceptions, and Strategies," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 34 (Spring 1993): 137-152.
- ⁴ Joy Greiner (ed), *Research Issues in Public Librarianship: Trends for the Future*. (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1994).
- ⁵ Van Fleet and Durrance, 146-148.
- ⁶ Renee Tjomas, "Research Productivity and Perceived Prestige of Professional Journals: An Examination of Faculty Specializing in Public Librarianship," *The Serials Librarian* 25 (1994): 65-81.
- ⁷ Chapman and Pike, 47-49.
- ⁸ Connie Van Fleet, "Evidence of Communicating among Public Librarians and Library and Information Science Educators in Public Library Journal Literature," *Library and Information Science Research* 15 (1993): 257-274.
- ⁹ Ronald H. Powell, "Recent Trends in Research: A Methodological Essay," *Library and Information Science Research* 21 (1999): 91-119.
- ¹⁰ Van Fleet and Durrance, 148.
- ¹¹ Powell, 92-93.
- ¹² Van Fleet and Durrance, 147-148.
- ¹³ Woodrum, 28.
- ¹⁴ Van Fleet and Durrance, 148.
- ¹⁵ Woodrum, 29.
- ¹⁶ Van Fleet and Durrance, 148-149.
- ¹⁷ <<http://nclaonline.org>>
- ¹⁸ <<http://www.pla.org>>
- ¹⁹ Van Fleet and Durrance, 149.
- ²⁰ <<http://statelibrary.dcr.state.nc.us>>
- ²¹ Van Fleet and Durrance, 149.

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