

The Use and Awareness of Government Publications by High School Librarians

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So little has been written on the use of federal and state documents in public high schools that we set out to determine the current status of the use of documents in North Carolina's public high school libraries. The results of this study reveal an unfortunate and continuing trend, first noted by Eliza Ross Good in her 1965 study of a similar topic. The situation appears to be the same today as it was twenty years ago: public high school librarians in North Carolina do not possess sufficient knowledge of government publications to promote their effective use in the public high schools.

While professional journals, conferences, and workshops often provide information to high school librarians seeking help in media selection and use, there are formal agencies that are responsible for assisting these professionals in meeting their obligations. One such agency is the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, which assists school librarians with media selection by encouraging them to consult the department's own bibliographies, as well as bibliographies and reviews available through commercial sources. In addition, the Department of Public Instruction provides educators and librarians with *Advisory Lists of Instructional Media*. These lists, organized by subject area, contain reviews of items evaluated and approved by North Carolina educators as appropriate for K-12 instruction. Government publications are not generally, if ever, reviewed for inclusion on the *Advisory Lists*. Thus, it appears that the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction does not support documents selection for and by high school librarians.

Another potential source of information for document selection is the GPO (Government Printing Office) and its Depository Library Program. There are thirty federal depository libraries located throughout North Carolina, and these collections hold current, historical, and statistical

information appropriate for high school use. According to the Regional Depository Librarian at UNC Chapel Hill, however, there is no effort presently in force by depository libraries in North Carolina to promote the use of documents in public high schools.

The purpose of this study was to determine both the use of documents and the awareness of documents by high school librarians, teachers, and students. This study also investigated procedures and problems with document acquisition, and the professional backgrounds and activities of the high school librarians. Finally, and perhaps most important, the librarians assessed their needs in relation to documents and indicated specific areas where assistance is necessary.

The terms "government publications," "government documents," and "documents" are used interchangeably, and generally refer to federal government material, unless otherwise specified.

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Methodology

This study was conducted through a mail survey, which was sent to a random sample (110) of the total number (330) of public high schools in North Carolina (i.e., one-third of the total population). This total included any public school with a twelfth grade but excluded extended day schools. The list from which the selection of schools was made is ordered by school district (Northeast=1 to Western=8) and, within each district, alphabetically by county. The eight regional school media coordinators and the director of the Division of School Media Programs, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, were sent surveys and cover letters explaining the research. The regional

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coordinators, the director of School Media Programs, and all survey respondents who so requested were sent summary letters of the survey results. Eighty-eight usable returns (of the 110 questionnaires sent), yielded an 80 per cent response rate. Descriptive analysis was used to present the data.

Summary of Findings

The mean number of documents held in public high school collections is 16.2, but more than half of the respondents indicate that their collections hold less than ten documents or none at all. The lack of documents represents a lack of compliance with state recommendations, as presented in *Media Program Recommendations*: "building-level professional media collection should include current, quality media such as: ... government publications" (1986, IV, 18).

While all but one respondent confirm the presence of Media Advisory Committees, more than half report that these committees do not assist with document selection. This is significant, as the stated purpose of the committee is to assist with selection (*Media Program Recommendations*, 1986, IV, 1-2).

Nearly one-third of the responding librarians are unfamiliar with document ordering and selection. Again, nearly a third do not order documents and some are unsure if they order documents. Just over half receive free documents, and most receive free documents from their congressional representatives.

When orders are placed, they are usually individual orders. Funds, in general, and the pre-paid order, in particular, present difficulties for the librarians attempting to order documents. Only nine per cent order documents from a GPO bookstore, and slightly more (twelve per cent) know the location of the nearest GPO bookstore.

Selection aids present a critical problem since most librarians are unaware of the free selection aids: *Consumer Information Catalog*, *New Books, Price List 36*, *Subject Bibliography Index*, and *U.S. Government Books*. The majority are also unaware of the *Checklist of Official North Carolina State Publications*.

The journal reviews most frequently consulted for selection decisions are found in: *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Wilson Library Bulletin*, and *Library Journal*. *Government Publications Review* received no comment and *School Media Quarterly* received minimal comment, even though they, along with *Booklist* and *Wilson Library Bulletin*, are recommended in Katz's *Introduction to Reference Work*, Volume I, for

coverage of documents (1982, 365-66). Therefore, it appears that the journals most often consulted are not those containing the best coverage of documents.

Use of documents by students and teachers is infrequent, but it is notable that use by students exceeds assigned use. The subject areas that receive the most frequent document use are: economics, history, home economics, health, political science and sociology.

Most teachers do not receive announcements about documents from their respective librarians. Not surprisingly, most teachers never request that specific documents be ordered.

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The professional backgrounds and related activities of high school librarians are reflected in the following data: nearly half hold ALA-accredited MLS degrees; more than one-third hold non-ALA-accredited MLS degrees; most have not completed graduate courses devoted exclusively to documents, but most have taken some graduate work in documents. A positive correlation does exist between the librarians holding the MLS degree (both ALA- and non-ALA-accredited degrees) and the degree of familiarity with document selection.

Most librarians report participation in professional conferences and meetings, and two-thirds claim membership in NCLA. Nearly half do not know the location of the nearest depository library, and most admit that they never receive inquiries about the nearest depository.

An astounding ninety seven per cent of high school librarians candidly respond that they and their colleagues are not adequately informed about documents. Thus, it may be no surprise to learn that one hundred per cent of the librarians polled request immediate assistance from the depository libraries. The specific suggestions from these librarians include: a regular newsletter, state document information, and document workshops.

Conclusion

The public high school librarians have spoken: they acknowledge their lack of awareness

of documents, which appears to result in the lack of use of documents in our public high schools. But these librarians also express a need for assistance and a willingness to learn more about documents. It is time for the Depository Library Program to address these issues by recognizing the high school audience. It is time for the Regional Depository in Chapel Hill to respond to the needs of North Carolina's public high schools by organizing document training workshops. It is time for all depository libraries to conduct outreach activities with the high schools in their congressional districts. It is also time for the Department of Public Instruction to become aware of the vital function documents can serve in high school library collections. Finally, it is time for high school librarians to become knowledgeable about documents and to encourage the use of documents for the benefit of high school teachers and students in North Carolina.

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