Among Harvard's Libraries

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Kenneth E. Carpenter

A n editorial prediction: Elizabeth Vernon's statistical description of the Widener Library holdings and circulation will be one of the most studied articles to appear in recent years. It provides information about matters of interest to us all.

It should be noted, though, that the tables must be used with caution. Just to give one example, Table 4 shows 60,904 pre-1821 titles in Widener, and that could easily be construed to mean that a small proportion of the collection is pre-1821 books. In actual fact, the Harvard College Library has a large number of pre-1821 books. Most are, however, part of the Houghton Library. Crucial to interpreting the statistics are the notes that Ms. Vernon has provided to each of the tables.

Readers will generally wish for more information, particularly, no doubt, comparative data. How, for instance, does the percentage of circulation of non-English books compare with circulation of non-English books in other institutions? Efforts have been made to obtain such information from the library literature, but it seems not to be available.

Some intra-library data is also not available, perhaps most notably the number of times a book is consulted and then placed back on the shelf. Circulation reflects only one kind of library use. Just as there are many types of reading, so are there many varieties of library use; and one variety of misinterpretation would be to take that which can readily be counted as more important than others, or to permit the countable to supplant consciousness of other uses. Perhaps these statistics will actually serve as an antidote to that, for they might well stimulate investigation of library reading, just as there are those studying the history of reading generally.

Enough of caveats! Explore the tables, and, if you have observations or questions, particularly questions you would like to have answers to, feel free to contact Elizabeth Vernon (e-mail: vernon@fas.harvard.edu).

THE AREA STUDIES COLLECTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HOLDINGS AND CIRCULATION OF WIDENER LIBRARY

MONOGRAPHS IN ACADEMIC YEAR

1996/1997

Elizabeth Vernon

T hanks to the retrospective conversion of the card catalogs, which is now completed, statistical information that was formerly unavailable can now be gathered. For the first time it is possible to learn exactly how many titles in the Harvard library collections match a specific set of characteristics, such as language, country, or date of publication. The HOLLIS reporting facilities provided by the University Library's Office for Information Systems give librarians the tools to extract this and other important data.

In the Area Studies Department (Judaica, Middle Eastern, and Slavic Divisions), we set out to assemble a statistical profile of our collections as part of an ongoing self-study. It soon became clear, though, that statistics about the Area Studies collections needed a context if they were to be meaningful, so statistics were then gathered on aspects of the Widener Library collections and use as a whole.

The statistics confirmed what librarians in the Area Studies Department had long felt: Area Studies collections represent a significant portion of the holdings and circulation activity of Widener Library. Holdings in Area Studies languages, for example, constituted over 19% of Widener holdings at the end of FY97, and over 6% of Widener circulation of monograph titles in that year. For Widener Library monographs as a whole, almost 6% of the monographs held at the end of FY97 circulated during that year.

In interpreting these statistics, particularly the use statistics, a couple of points should be kept in mind. First the statistics represent only the books borrowed or charged to studies or stalls, not books con-

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