Where have all the “lost” books gone?

By Edward V. Van Gemert

Projecting overall rate of loss using a sample inventory

In 1994–95 the University of WisconsinMadison conducted an inventory of its largest library. The goal of the inventory was to determine a baseline loss rate and to respond to concerns expressed by library users—especially members of faculty library committees—that the loss of materials was inhibiting scholarly research. We sought to replace unsubstantiated perceptions with quantitative data to guide decisions about collection security.

The Madison campus is the largest in the University of Wisconsin system, home to 117 academic departments, 40,305 students, and 2,344 faculty. The General Library System (GLS) consists of Memorial Library (the central library for the humanities, social sciences, and area studies), College Library (the undergraduate library), Steenbock Library (the resource library for agricultural and life sciences), and a
dozen branch or “member” libraries in a range of disciplines.

The charge of the Lost Book Working Group

The Lost Book Working Group was charged to report on the data currently available for lost and missing items across the General Library System; analyze both objective and subjective data to determine the extent of the problem; and recommend actions to the director to alleviate the current problems and keep our collections intact.

The membership of the Working Group included staff from central technical services, public services, collection development, and the member libraries.

Member libraries

Eleven member libraries responded to a request for data regarding the number of known lost monographs as of 1992–93. Six were able to report figures:

- Art: 2,154
- Biology: 935
- Chemistry: 82
- Geology: 200 (approx.)
- Physics: 1,000 (approx. since 1985)
- Engineering: 1,190 (approx.)

These figures reflect a narrow range of 0.5 percent to 0.58 percent of each library’s monograph collection.

Three of these libraries do an inventory every two to three years; one does an annual inventory; one had an inventory in process; and one had done a partial inventory in 1991.

Memorial Library’s sample inventory

Memorial Library is the largest library on the Madison campus with approximately 3.2 million volumes in its collections. Since no inventory had been done of the Memorial Library stacks within the collective memory of present staff, the Lost Book Working Group...
decided to simulate an inventory, based on a sample of the stack monograph collection to establish baseline information on unlocated books.

A search of the literature did not uncover any models for conducting a sample inventory of a large academic research collection. Advice regarding the methodology and focus of a sample inventory was sought from professor Jun Shao, a sampling expert in the UW-Madison Statistics Department. Based on his input, the Working Group decided that a one percent sample of the stack collection (every 100th card in the shelf list) would provide an accurate indication of the overall scope of unlocated books.

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The second phase of searching by permanent staff located more than half of the volumes that student searchers could not find, suggesting a serious problem with inaccurate shelving.

With approximately $2,000 in student funding approved by the director, the first phase of this sample inventory of monographs classed in the Library of Congress classification system was completed over the summer of 1994. Periodicals and monographs classed in Cutter were not included. Cutter classification was used before 1953, and approximately 300,000 volumes remain in the Cutter classification.

The one percent sample inventory searched for 22,663 titles representing 2,266,300 volumes. In the first phase, student assistants searched the NOTIS circulation records. Those titles determined not to be in circulation were then searched further by students. In this procedure students first checked the NOTIS circulation database to determine the existence of copy holdings and an item record. The item record indicated if the volume was charged out, lost, or formally withdrawn.¹

Since retrospective conversion is not yet
Since retrospective conversion is not yet complete, titles which did not appear on NOTIS were searched in the shelflist to determine if they were withdrawn or discarded. The titles that were not charged out or withdrawn were then searched on the shelf in the stacks and in the adjacent shelving rooms. Students indicated whether the items had been located.

At the conclusion of phase one, 2,142 titles (or 9.4 percent) of the sample were not located on the shelf. Eight titles were charged to the “lost” category on NOTIS, and 42 shelflist cards were already marked as withdrawn.

The second phase, a more methodical, comprehensive check by permanent staff in user services, began in December 1994 and was completed in March 1995. Permanent staff are expert in searching the possible locations within the library. They took into account misshelving and searched the adjacent stack areas. They thoroughly understood oversized items which are shelved separately, and were knowledgeable about various reading room locations throughout the library.

In this phase, permanent staff found many of the books not located by student assistants. The original list of 2,142 missing titles was reduced to 973. This represents 4.3 percent unaccounted for in the sample of 22,663. We consider this to be our net figure for unlocated materials.

**Highest areas of unaccounted for titles**

A difference of means test was applied to the data to determine if certain areas had statistically significant higher rates of loss.

This analysis determined a rank order from high loss areas to low loss areas within the collection. A complete breakdown can be obtained from the author upon request.

As noted, the overall lost and or missing rate was 4.3 percent. The top four high loss areas were:

- HD 1-4730 Economic History and Conditions 10.9%
- 4730 Conditions 10.9%
- 4730 Economic History 9.6%
- 4730 Political Economy 8.9%
- 4730 International Relations 8.5%
These subjects experienced more than twice the average rate of loss.

Using the results from the one percent sample inventory; we projected the following figures for the LC collection as a whole:

- 97,300 items would not be on the shelf or otherwise accounted for;
- 4,200 items would be formally withdrawn from the collection based on shelflist information; and
- 800 items would be charged to lost on NOTIS.

**Titles misshelved**

As noted above, the second phase of searching by permanent staff located more than half of the volumes that student searchers could not find, suggesting a serious problem with inaccurate shelving. Therefore, Memorial Library's permanent staff shelvers were asked to report items found to be misshelved in the course of their regular work. These items were then checked against the circulation system to determine if search requests had been placed on these titles by patrons. In a two-month period, 1,225 items were reported as misshelved. This indicates that a large number of items are misshelved, and although not entirely relevant to the sample inventory, data were used by the Working Group to form a recommendation.

**Complete inventory of an LC subclass**

In response to concerns expressed by library users and librarians regarding unaccounted for titles in the Spanish literature portion of the PQ classification, a complete title-by-title inventory was undertaken. The first phase studied 19th- and 20th-century Mexican literature (PQ7297-
Mexican literature (PQ7297-
PQ7298.36).

This classification was recommended by
faculty and selectors alike. There are
4,600 titles in this subclass. The findings
are shown below:

169 (3.7%) charged out to patrons
3 Charged to lost
2 Charged to bindery and preservation
collection
27 Withdrawn per the shelflist
159 (3.4%) not located

The Lost Book Working Group
concluded from this title-by-title
inventory data that subclass PQ7297-
PQ7298.36 was not, after all, a high loss
area. In fact, it turned out to be lower
than the average loss rate, contradicting
user perceptions.

**Summary conclusions
and recommendations
to the director**

The Lost Book Working Group
recommended that the following steps
be taken:

1) Another sample inventory should be
done to determine an annual loss rate.

2) Shelf reading should be done at least
annually in the LC classes.

3) Special collection budget allocations
should be made to selectors who can
document losses in their subject areas.

4) An automated inventory process
should be developed.

5) The replacement fee for unreturned
and lost materials should be increased.

6) Libraries should purchase up-to-date
security detection systems.

**Conclusion**

The Memorial Library inventory
demonstrated the feasibility of using a
one percent sample to gather data on
loss of materials.

The costs in student wages and
permanent staff time proved to be
affordable in a university setting.
affordable and reasonable. The 1994—
95 sample inventory provides baseline
data only. Since materials may have
disappeared over a period of decades,
we cannot calculate a current loss rate
until we undertake further inventories,
as planned for 1997 and periodically
thereafter.

A one percent sample provides
sufficient data for decision-making on a
broad scale; it does not, of course,
identify all missing items at the title
level. Where there is reason to suspect
systematic losses in a subject area, a full
inventory can be conducted to identify
titles for replacement.

Au. note: I'd like to thank the students
and permanent staff of Memorial
Library's User Services Department for
their contribution to the completion of
the inventory; members of the Lost
Book Working Group; professor Jun
Shao for his consultation on statistical
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this article.

“Lost” is a term used when an item is
searched for and not located after six
months.

“Withdrawn” is a term to indicate that
the item has been declared lost.
Circulation notifies central technical
services to update the record for
unavailability of the item. It may
eventually be located or returned.

“Discarded” indicates that the library
has intentionally removed the item
from the collection. For example, the
item is removed for preservation
reasons.

Note

1. “Missing” is a term used by circulation
to indicate that an item cannot be
located in the stacks. After searching,
the item may or may not be located.

Lost worlds, battles between good and evil,
extreme landscape, mystery, swords and spears and guns, these were epics, not domestic stories. Allan Quatermain and Axel and Jack Hawkins got to do things. As I got older, I turned to Ice Station Zebra and Wilbur Smith’s The Seventh Scroll, as well as Tolkien’s Middle Earth. To ask where all the brave girls have gone. There are plenty of female protagonists in classic children’s literature, from Mary Lennox in The Secret Garden to Laura in Little House on the Prairie to Jo March in Little Women. And in contemporary children’s fiction it’s the same: think of Philip Pullman’s Lyra in His Dark Materials or Katniss Everdeen in The Hunger Games or Paige Mahoney in Samantha Shannon’s The Bone Season. Are they “heroes”? Read unlimited* books and audiobooks on the web, iPad, iPhone and Android. Where have all the men gone? Faced with 25,000 more women than men in London, and gleeful media reports that it’s statistically more likely for single women to be murdered than get married, Katie is reached an all-time low. But all is not lost ... Another hilarious high-concept romantic comedy from Jenny Colgan. While Katie’s glad it’s not a man’s world any more, she’d be quite pleased if there were more men in it – or at least single ones, anyway. Where Have All the Leaders Gone? is a New York Times bestseller book by Lee Iacocca, the former CEO of Chrysler. It was published in 2007. Iacocca goes into the test of a good leader, citing these Cs: Curiosity, Creative, Communicate, Character, Courage, Conviction, Charisma, Competent, Common Sense and the one he regards as most important, Crisis. Lee Iacocca expands on the thoughts and ideas discussed within the book on his website, LeeIacocca.net.

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