

## “The Uses and Limitations of Trueswell”: A Comment

I AM PLEASED to be invited to comment on Seymour Sargent's article but at the same time feel frustrated by the task of having to sort out the mixture of facts, opinions, and misunderstandings in his article. Let me begin by saying that although my work is frequently cited I have found that it is not always fully understood. I therefore welcome this opportunity to clarify some misconceptions about my work.

In reading Sargent's article, I found it interesting that he bases his claim that the “Trueswell procedure” is “fallacious” on a portion of only one early study described in an article in which I summarized the results of six use studies conducted over a period of ten years in five libraries. There is no evidence in the references Sargent cites, and in the statements he makes in his article, that he has bothered to read, much less understand, the original studies that describe the procedures I used and the results I found. In his entire article he quotes me directly only once, choosing instead to attribute his interpretations to me or rely on the interpretations made by other authors. This is less than thorough research at best and can lead to errors at times.

Let me cite a few examples.

Sargent attributes to me (and Gore) the “sensational claims” that libraries can dispose of more than half their collections without noticeably affecting their service. Elsewhere, Sargent states: “Trueswell, Gore, and their followers have generally assumed that to show a book is little used is both to describe a problem and to imply the solution: get rid of the book.”

I do not recall any instance of making the

statements that Sargent attributes to me. In fact, if Sargent reads the publication he cites, he will find the following statement: “I should emphasize, therefore, that I do not advocate full-scale thinning of any library, even by the method described in this paper, until library administrators have accurately weighed its potential effects on library cost, goals, and responsibilities to the user.”<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to see how one could interpret this statement as implying that I recommend getting rid of every book that hasn't been used.

Sargent's main point, however, is that the “Trueswell procedure” is “fallacious.” To the best of my ability, I have not been able to grasp the basis of this conclusion. I can point, however, to a few errors Sargent makes in describing the “Trueswell procedure.”

Sargent's description of the first step in the “Trueswell procedure” is to record the library's circulation for “several sample days.” This ignores the fact that my studies at Mount Holyoke College and the University of Massachusetts were based on total circulation over a semester (more than 14,000 transactions). This is perhaps a minor point but is indicative of either incomplete investigation on Sargent's part or deliberate selection of facts that support a particular view.

More serious is Sargent's rationale for claiming that his findings contradict those that I reported in one study (Deering Library). Unfortunately, the findings he refers to were based on circulation of books in one Dewey class. (Even in my most enthusiastic state, I would not refer to the circulation of books in one Dewey class as representative of the circulation of books in the entire collection!) In fact, the data Sargent refers to were used to verify a simulation method

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that led, in further studies, to the development of my procedures for defining an operating characteristic curve for a library. Sargent apparently mistook the simulation method as the "Trueswell procedure" and took one point on a curve but ignored the rest, just as he ignored my later studies.

Ironically, if one corrects Sargent's misinterpretations of my research procedures, one then finds that Sargent's own data are in agreement with my published results. For example, at Mount Holyoke, 99 percent of the circulation came from approximately 85 percent of the holdings, compared to 88 percent in Sargent's data.

It is unfortunate that there are people who interpret my work as encouraging "speculation that library service as American colleges and universities have known it is an extravagance." I can only take comfort in the fact that, as a researcher, I cannot be responsible for how others interpret my findings as long as I have objectively and accurately reported my procedures and findings.

My research objective was to offer a useful tool that could yield data which administrators could use for making policy decisions. That my procedures are quantitative

in nature does not imply that I subscribe to the myth that quantitative methods are inherently objective and therefore valid, while qualitative methods are subjective and therefore questionable. One can mislead just as easily with numbers as with words.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about scholarship. I welcome debate that leads to clarification and understanding but do not find verbal slugfests to be particularly productive or enjoyable. Readers with a serious interest in this subject should go back to the original studies and come to their own conclusions about the validity of the results, rather than rely on secondary and even tertiary interpretations of these studies. I would also welcome opportunities to collaborate with Sargent and other researchers, or even just engage in discussions of their work with them.

#### REFERENCE

1. Richard W. Trueswell, "Growing Libraries: Who Needs Them? A Statistical Basis for the No-Growth Collection," in Daniel Gore, ed., *Farewell to Alexandria* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1976), p.79.