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## Holistic Statistics: managing rare materials cataloging at KU during times of change

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## Holistic Statistics: managing rare materials cataloging at KU during times of change

### Abstract

When thinking about the typical ways that the work of catalogers is described, statistics play a vital role. However, most statistics focus on the number of items cataloged or the time it takes to catalog an individual item. Though these statistics can be useful for internal processes or reporting for vendors, they don't convey the value of cataloging work to an external audience, even those within the library. This is in part because the materials catalogers work with can exhibit variable needs, and there are additional impacts when working with rare materials that can make statistics seem unbalanced when looking at them broadly. Catalogers use terms like original, complex copy, or copy cataloging to describe the level of complexity of the work they do to attempt to get at this variability, yet this still does not provide a clear understanding of the work. By considering the work catalogers do in a human-centered, holistic manner, provides pathways for developing understanding across departments and the library, strengthening collaboration, highlighting achievements, and bringing visibility to the cataloging unit.

### Keywords

Rare Materials Cataloging; Statistics; Spencer Research Library; Special Collections Librarianship; Technical Services; Holistic Statistics

## The Spencer Research Library

The Spencer Research Library is the University of Kansas' archives and rare materials library. We work in a secure-access, closed stacks environment. We work with confidential materials, following handling procedures, and cannot eat or write with pen in the vicinity of our materials. We have a Reading Room for library users to look at materials and several instruction rooms for classes and groups.

We hold primary source materials that cover a wide range in both historical time and context. This includes the Kansas Collection (local and regional history), Wilcox Collection (extreme political movements collection), University Archives (materials related to KU), and Special Collections.

## Rare Materials Cataloging Unit

Our Rare Materials Cataloging Unit at the Spencer Research Library includes: our core full-time Unit, which includes 2 staff positions: a rare books and manuscripts cataloger and a special collections serials cataloger. We also have 3 faculty positions: 2 rare materials cataloging librarians, one of which is temporarily vacant, and mine as the rare materials cataloging unit head.

We also receive a lot of support from our colleagues in the main library for inventory work, additional project support, and language support from several of our subject librarians that work primarily in the main library. Project-based colleagues work onsite at Spencer anywhere from 4 – 16 hours a week, while those that offer language support work with Spencer materials as needed.

We can be both a small unit and a big unit at the same time. With this level of variation in scheduling impacting project management, the loss of institutional knowledge due to retirements and employees moving on, there have been a lot of changes over the past several years. In some ways, this has allowed for a re-evaluation of Unit priorities and needs, while on the other, it has created a loss of continuity in practice with can cause challenges to daily workflows and procedures. Especially, as we are thinking about documenting the work we do through statistics.

## Typical Statistics

What I am calling “Typical Statistics” is the way in which catalogers usually document the work they do: original, complex, and copy. ‘Original’ refers to original record. This is when catalogers create a new catalog record by assessing, measuring, describing, classing, creating access points and authorities for the item in hand (Smith-Yoshimura, 2019; De Fino, 2008). ‘Complex’ refers to complex copy, which is a type of copy cataloging. This means that there is already a record for the item in hand. The record might be minimal and require substantial updates

to be used in the cataloger's library catalog. It is not necessary to create new records for items that are already cataloged, and instead choose to enhance records. 'Copy' refers similarly to copy cataloging. Similar to complex copy, there is already a record for the item in hand, however this record does not need substantial updates or effort to be used in the library catalog.

This is the general array of possibilities of the kinds of records catalogers create when describing materials. The Cataloging Department at the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library defines original cataloging as: "All cataloging, [variant edition cataloging], & upgraded non-standard copy..., for which re-worked description and/or subject analysis is necessary." In contrast, then describing, "Derived cataloging, where modification involves only addition of call number... is considered copy cataloging." Yet, "...if call number and subject headings are being assigned, count as original." (Cataloging @ Yale, 2018)

Interestingly, the Beinecke's definition of original cataloging is actually broader than the above, including much of what we would consider complex copy to be a part of the category of original.

An individual cataloger will likely create those kinds of records—original, complex copy, or copy. For each of those categories they count each thing they cataloged. The word 'thing' could be item, bound volume, map, or as the Beinecke uses 'piece'. The way materials are counted is determined by institutional practice: "count each piece (volume, reel, sheet, issue, etc.) cataloged. [...]" And for counting serials, "[...]1 bound volume of 52 issues of a serial counts as 1 piece; 52 loose issues of a serial housed in one Hollinger box counts as 52 pieces" (Cataloging @ Yale, 2018) Again, we can see the variation in the definition of these concepts that are meant to be quite static.

The last type of statistics a cataloger typically keeps is catalog fixes. A cataloger could be "fixing" a record for several different reasons: there could be a typo, an issue with the call number, a situation where additional access points are needed or need updating, authority work, or updating a record so it does not include an author's deadname.

Here the Beinecke uses the term 'Recat' or recatalog and defines this activity as, "Any significant change to an existing bibliographic record affecting access or identification; any significant intellectual revision affecting the reevaluation of the entire record. Generally, this takes more than 5 minutes, and includes updating records to the current cataloging standards, [...] Note: only count recat titles; do not count recat pieces." The Beinecke definition introduces another way to count these fixes, too, this time based on titles not extent or number of associated items or volumes, etc. This definition includes a general time frame—5 minutes or less—which implies that these statistics document the time it takes to edit a record.

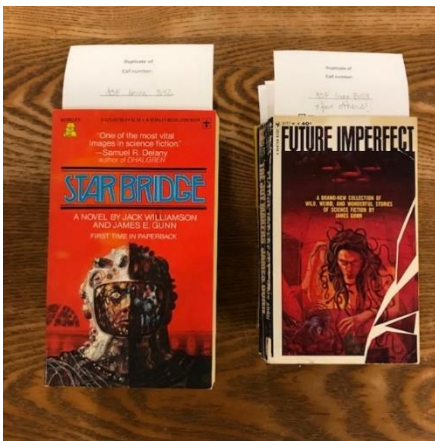
Though not explicit, in the Beinecke definitions for original, complex copy, and copy, there is an implied timeframe as well, where creating an original record is thought to take more time and using a copy record takes less. Rare Materials Catalogers will know from experience that this is not always true. When creating an original record, the level of complexity or time it takes to catalog an item can be dependent on how easy it is to parse the bibliographic details, whether there are additional descriptive notes that need to be added to a record, and if the item is in a language the cataloger does not know well. Cataloging with a copy record can take time too, again, dependent on how straightforward the description of the item needs to be and whether all the bibliographic details of the item are legible. Illegible could mean, the item is missing a title page, there is no year printed, etc. Evaluating copy records can also take a lot of time because every field needs to be double-checked, and can include updates related to the cataloging institution's practice and needs.

With this notion of time, these statistical categories really start to devolve. We start to see reasoning extend to questions such as: How long will it take to catalog X number of items?; How many items a cataloger has cataloged in a month?; How much does it cost to catalog a single book?

## Counting Typical Statistics

To offer a counterpose to these types of statistics, I will analyze some of the materials I am currently working on.

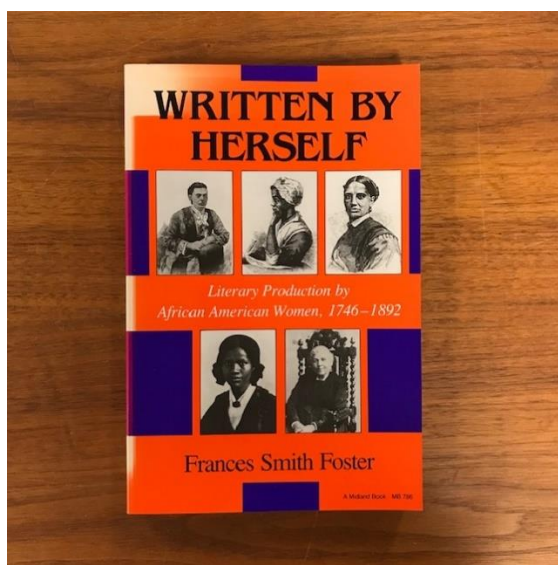
**Figure 1.**



The first example is a collection of books from an incoming sci-fi donation to our ASF (American Science Fiction) collections. 8 items were marked as 'duplicative' of materials we already own. Our sci-fi collections are robust and our Special Collections Curator actively collects different editions and variants of these

materials. It is difficult to tell from our records, due to issues with a past inventory process and the scope of the cataloging project, whether incoming materials are duplicates or variants of a title. I have spent hours in the stacks consulting possible duplicates and variants and updating our records to include the publisher's catalog ID number, the price noted on the cover, any printing information noted inside the volume, edge staining, and whether the item was re-released with a film cover. For 8 incoming titles, that were indeed duplicates, I assessed over 20 volumes. Following our directions for collecting statistics, this would be: Cat Fixes – 8, because we only count titles and those 20+ volumes were all variants or duplicates of the same 8 titles.

**Figure 2.**



Next, was a donation of African American literature from a retired faculty member. These materials were added across most of Spencer's collecting areas. This required being in touch with Curators from all of Spencer's collecting areas regarding the assessment of the materials and communication about this collection.

40 volumes were added, including *Written by herself: literary production by African American Women, 1746-1892* from 1993 by Dr. Frances Smith Foster, Professor Emerita, in the English Department at Emory University. The top left corner of the cover and part of the spine is a crème color which I was not seeing in other images of the edition of this work. I thought it was either light damage or potentially a review copy with a pre-publication printing error. I sought advice and confirmed with our Conservation department that light damage is responsible for

the impromptu design on the cover and spine. Here, our statistics would be: Copy Cataloging – 40 and not account for inter-departmental discussion of this material.

Finally, an email request came from an author asking us to remove their deadname and add their actual name to a catalog record for one of our holdings. I made this change in under 5 minutes, so the statistic here would be: Cat Fixes – 0, and would not be counted.

What this way of collecting statistics does is flatten and erase much of the work we do as catalogers. They cannot account for the consultation and assessment of materials, the conservation of them, the way that we make records more accessible or the ways we support library users. The context of the work we do is simply lost. If the evaluation of our work is dependent on these kinds of statistics alone—those that focus solely on numbers and implied time, it is easy to lose sight of the significance of cataloging and start to surmise that working quickly is the best way to conduct our work.

As these statistics are a common way to try to understand the work that catalogers do, we find that our colleagues form opinions about the value of our work based on a very basic and sometimes inaccurate understanding of these concepts (Tarulli 2008). Quickly we see the ways that we could potentially value our work—as collaborators; working in line with library goals; the ability to tell stories to our users about primary sources; in communicating our achievements and successes—are lost.

## Holistic Statistics

“Holistic Statistics” includes ways of thinking about the work catalogers do from a human perspective that is ethical, tries to account for invisible labor, and uses narrative and outcomes of success as advocacy. The focus is not on a comparison of individual catalogers’ output, but that of the work of a team (De Fino, etc. 2012).

With continued vacancies and fluctuations in our Unit since 2019, I started to conceptualize the way I captured statistics differently. I primarily focused on thinking about how materials enter, move through, and eventually leave our Unit.

I receive all materials that need cataloging. I inventory them in a spreadsheet and then they go to our storage room to be shelved and await cataloging. I capture details that contextualize the acquisition and document any of our Curator’s decisions, which will help us when we catalog the materials.

**Figure 3.**

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1	1	Row	Shelf	Rec'd Date	Department	Call # Coll	Curator	Type	Record Notes
2	2	A	51	5/29/2024	Special	Pryce E8	Eve	Backlog	Gift of Helen Foresman Spencer, 1981
3	3	A	50	2/1/2024	Special	Summerfield	Eve	Purchase	Purchase, Second Life Books, 20240201
4	4	A	12	8/12/2024	Special	Rare	Elsbeth	Purchase	Purchase, Daniel Mellis, 20240812
5	5	A	10	8/14/2024	Special	ASF	Elsbeth	Purchase	Purchase, Uncle Hugo's Science Fiction Bookstore, 20240809
6	6	A	60	8/14/2024	Special	Rare	Elsbeth	Purchase	Purchase, Between the Covers, 20240809
7	7	A	18	8/19/2024	Kansas	RH	Phil	Purchase	NA
8	8	A	63	8/19/2024	Kansas	RH	Phil	Donation	Gift of Labette Community College, 202
9	9	A	19	8/9/2024	Special	Rare	Elsbeth	Purchase	Purchase, YBP, 20240802
10	10	A	62	5/28/2024	Special	Rare	Elsbeth	Purchase	Purchase, BLAZEVOX, 20240510
11	11	A	23	9/3/2024	Special	ASF	Elsbeth	Purchase	Purchase, YBP, 20240826
12	12	A	24	8/22/2024	Special	ASF	Elsbeth	Purchase	Purchase, Arion Press, 20240509; Received as part of Arion Press' 2024 Fine Press Subscription
13	13	A	14	8/1/2024	Special	Ellis Aves	Eve	Donation	Gift of Max C. Thompson, 31072024
14	14	A	24	8/1/2024	Special	Rare	Eve	Purchase	NA
15	15	A	19	9/9/2024	Special	Rare	Elsbeth	Donation	Gift of Wave Books, September 6, 2024
16	16	A	20	1/15/1999	Kansas	KC AV 149	Phil	Backlog	None
17									

I collect information in the following categories:

- **Column A** contains number for each line. I can sort the data in various ways and rely on a final chronological sort in this column to get the spreadsheet back to its original sorting.
- **Row and Shelf** correspond to where the materials are shelved in our storage room. There are rows A-G and shelves up to 70. There are also OS shelves for oversized materials.
- **Rec'd date** is the date when I physically received the material for the Unit.
- **Department** corresponds to Spencer collecting area, either: Special Collections, Kansas, Wilcox, or University Archives.
- **Call # Coll** refers to the classification system to be used for the material.
- **Curator** is the name of the person who is the contact for the materials.
- **Type** accounts for the type of acquisition, or the way in which the materials were received. I use purchase, donation, or backlog. This is



because we prioritize purchases and have mandates related to backlog material.

- **Record notes** includes any specific gift or purchase notes as relayed by the Curator.

**Figure 4.**

K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
Quantity	Size	Formats	Items	Student Y/N	Completed Date	Status	Cataloger	Priority
1	3.5	Monographs	Etymologiae	N	7/24/2024		Jaime	Yes
1	1	Monographs	Recueil de poésies; Les Exilés	N	7/26/2024		Jaime	
1	4.5	Monographs	Tango with cows	N	8/14/2024		Jaime	
1	2	Monographs	Dark Matter Reading the Bones	N	8/19/2024		Jaime	Yes
1	2	Monographs	From the Deep Woods to Civilization	N	8/19/2024		Jaime	Yes
1	1.5	Monographs	Shaft	N	8/21/2024		Jaime	
1	0.5	Monographs	Year of the Storms	N	8/21/2024		Jaime	
1	1	Monographs	Strangers	N	8/21/2024		Jaime	
1	0.5	Monographs	Disapparitions	N	8/21/2024		Jaime	
1	1.5	Monographs	Ghost Summer	N	9/4/2024		Jaime	Yes
1	3	Monographs	Kindred	N	9/11/2024		Jaime	
6	108	Monographs	Kingfishers and Related Birds, part 1-3, vols 1-6	N	9/18/2024		Jaime	
1	2	Monographs	gli incunaboli e le cinquecentine (biblioteca di bibliografia)	N	9/18/2024		Jaime	
1	0.5	Monographs	Unsignifiant	N	9/18/2024		Jaime	
1	0.025	AV	Watching you ep, sin city disciples	N	7/10/2024		Jaime	

- **Quantity** refers to the number of items in the acquisition or group of material
- **Size** contains the measurement of the materials on the shelves in inches. I eventually calculated this into linear feet. To measure the materials, I rely on the *Guidelines for Standardized Holdings Counts and Measures for Archival Repositories and Special Collections Libraries*.
- **Formats** corresponds to the kind of materials in the acquisition.
- **Items** includes all the titles in the acquisition regardless of size of acquisition. I break up large acquisitions into smaller groupings to catalog them in batches.
- **Student Y/N** notes whether a student will help support the cataloging of the acquisition. For example, by searching the library catalog for potential duplicate titles.
- **Status** refers to any contextual notes about the material. Such as if the Curator has a specific decision about the material that is not typical, or if the materials are in Conservation.

- **Cataloger** notes the name of the cataloger that will work on the materials.
- **Priority** notes whether the Curator has asked us to work on the material as a priority. This is also why the lines are highlighted in red. Materials are usually prioritized due to instruction or research use.

When we start cataloging a group of materials, I move the line of information to each cataloger's queue, which is a different sheet in the same spreadsheet file. The only change is the row and shelf information changes to me and my desk. Finally, when materials are completed, they move to a different sheet, where I keep track of all completed materials.

- **Completed Date** refers to the date when the materials are fully cataloged and have been moved to be labeled and shelved.

This information is used to understand where materials currently are in case a Curator or a researcher needs them, which happens frequently. I also need to have an average overall sense of how quickly small and large acquisitions move through our Unit. This is so I can give general updates to Curators who may have requests from a donor about when the materials should be cataloged by.

This information is used to report our successes in a somewhat-quarterly email to Spencer leadership and our collections team. I share a brief version of these statistics and include a narrative of what we have done and highlight achievements. Using information from the 'Record Notes' field, I can say we completed specific groups of material by collecting area. I note the number of items and the size of the collection for each collecting area overall.

In my narrative, I note individual cataloger's achievements when there is something particularly complex, new, interesting, or something they are proud of that communicates what we are working on. I want to showcase that our catalogers are creating thorough, accurate records that researchers can find and use. I also let our Curators know that the materials they acquire are becoming accessible. I also make note of the work that we have done in collaboration with other departments and any work we have done that fits within the goals of our library, like access and equity.

## Conclusion

By documenting our cataloging statistics in this way, I provide information about the value of the work catalogers do and how that work can positively impact library strategic plans and goals. It showcases the Unit's flexibility in responding to priority requests and the needs of the University of Kansas' scholarly community. This moves away from understanding a cataloger's work through the number of records

created or how long it takes to catalog an individual item. Instead the work of cataloging is seen as an integral part of the library's overall function.

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