Are your statistics lying to you?

Larissa Sullivant, Indiana University, Ruth Lilly Law Library
“There are three types of lies – lies, damn lies, and statistics.” ~ Mark Twain
73.6% of all statistics are made up (Mark Suster is a former entrepreneur and currently a partner at GRP Partners)
• We rely on our ILS to draw data
• Our ILS can function as one of the most important tools in measuring overall library activity and can provide the sets of statistics most commonly needed for routine operations
• Library reports are accurate as long as our data in the catalog are accurate
• We share records through OCLC: it is our professional responsibility to present the most accurate data
• Ruth Lilly Law Library has not conducted a comprehensive collection inventory since its move from a card to an online catalog which happened in January 1990

• A major weeding project took place in our library in 2015-2016

• A comprehensive review of shelf contents and cleanup of online catalog discrepancies was well overdue!
• The inventory project began in March 2017

• A script was developed by the Library Systems Analyst and Head of Database Management at Indiana University, Bloomington

• The Circulation Department staff (mostly student workers) were trained to scan barcodes and save data into a text file which then was saved and emailed to the Library Systems Analyst

• The Technical Services staff interpreted the data and corrected mistakes/discrepancies between the online catalog data and the shelf
Reference, reserves collection and study aids collection were inventoried first
Our periodicals collection and classified collection were inventoried second.
• Microform collection needed a different approach: both microfiche and microfilm were not barcoded, and cataloging records for a microform title (both microfiche and microfilm) did not contain item records, but a bibliographic record only.

• This part of the project has only been about 45% completed.
• The inventory identified the following:

  - cataloging errors (both on bibliographic and item records level)

  - materials never migrated from a card catalog to an online catalog during the retrocon process (in other words, a book would be barcoded and stamped with IU credentials, and it would have our OCLC holding in the Union catalog, but there would be no record in our online system
• The inventory identified the following (cont.):
  - materials physically withdrawn from the collection, but still having both bibliographic and item records in the local ILS

  - missing and misshelved materials

  - materials that met our criteria for weeding

• The inventory also helped with replacement decisions for lost and damaged items
• We have encountered only one challenges during the inventory process:
  - it is taking longer that expected
• Our inventory is about 80-85% completed
Interesting results

• Our statistics at the end of fiscal year 2016 (some data)
  - Print titles: 42,011
  - Volume count (except microforms): 251,187

• Our statistics at the end of fiscal year 2017
  - Print titles: 34,616
  - Volume count (except microforms): 205,284
Lessons learned

• Years of avoiding inventory of a library’s collection can lead to an extensive error rate in the statistical data

• Inventory is the effective solution to solve user frustration by providing information regarding the library collection as accurate as possible

• There are many immediate objectives of an inventory

• The long-term purposes are to assist the library in budgeting, collection development, space management, and of course, provide correct statistics
The author hopes the inventory experience gained in this project will shed light on similar inventory projects and encourage other libraries to commit to undertaking their own inventory.

Email: lavsulli@iu.edu