

Collection Evaluation in the Small Library

Supporting a New Academic Program

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ABSTRACT This study reviews some of the methods, results, and required resources for when a small library conducts a collection evaluation to support a new academic program. The Baptist Seminary of Kentucky launched the *Institute for Black Church Studies* in 2020. Two primary foci of the Institute are to offer an MDiv concentration and a graduate-level certificate in Black Church Studies. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the subject matter, attention to the breadth as well as the depth of the currently available collection is required as a means of evaluating areas of strength and weakness. The unique, all-digital, cooperative structure of the library provides added complexities and opportunities to support this new program.

CONTEXT

In the fall of 2020, the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky (BSK) (<https://www.bsk.edu>) launched the *Institute for Black Church Studies* with support from the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation (<https://www.baughfoundation.com>). This was an important step in the continuing formation of the seminary and was driven by invitations from and relationships with Simmons College of Kentucky (<https://www.simmonscollegeky.edu>) and the National Baptist Convention of America (<https://www.nbcainc.com>). It is beyond the scope of this study to try and capture the full context and meaning of these developments for the life of the seminary and its stakeholders, but they are transformative. It was incumbent on the BSK library to ensure that sufficient resources were available to support this new academic program.

The library had previously collected intentionally, but not heavily, in Black Church Studies and has always operated with a cooperative library model. Celebrating the 20th anniversary of the institution this year, the seminary was first hosted by another seminary before re-

locating to the campus of a liberal arts college (and very recently to a more ecclesial setting). In anticipation of welcoming and supporting distance students, the library became an owning member of the Digital Theological Library (<https://www.thedtl.org>) in January 2020. This decision served the seminary very well when the pandemic hit and has continued to a great library model as the seminary grows, to the degree that the BSK library has shifted (nearly) all its book holdings to digital formats; the book collection for BSK is, in reality, the DTL e-book collection. This is the collection which would need to be evaluated for sufficiency to support a Graduate Certificate and an MDiv concentration in Black Church Studies.

(EMERGING) METHODOLOGY

Unfortunately, this project emerged slowly. More correctly, it started as a straightforward check of the collection against a significant bibliography in Black Church Studies and expanded from there. The seminary encountered a compilation of contributions to the Twitter hashtag #BlackChurchSyllabus that was put forth by Jayme Wooten and collected on his website. There was a growing sense that this list alone might not completely reflect the local dimensions of teaching Black Church Studies and was supplemented by compiling the required and suggested readings from the syllabi of related courses taught at various institutions over several years by the director of the Institute for Black Church Studies, Dr. Lewis Brogdon. A third list to check against the catalog was taken from the “Recommended Reading” section of Henry Louis Gates’s *The Black Church, This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (2021), which is the companion volume to his PBS television series by the same title.

There are some data considerations which should be noted. The scope of this study is limited to the book collection, and these three lists contain a diversity of materials. This implies no judgment on form or relevancy, but merely reflects the focus of this study. Again, the study emerged more than it was planned: there was a significant time lapse (and some focused collecting done) between the data gathered for the #BlackChurchSyllabus list (March 2021) and the other lists (January/February 2022).

INITIAL RESULTS (AND REGRETS)

The #BlackChurchSyllabus list identified 290 unique book titles, and (at the time searched) the library had access to 124 of those titles (43 percent). After deduplication, the list generated by the collected syllabi had 221 unique book titles, and the library had access to 115 of those titles (52 percent). The “Recommended Reading” list from the Gates volume had 137 unique book titles, and the library had access to 82 of those (60 percent). So, the results were largely positive; there was very likely sufficient support to begin (which was good, because we had, indeed, already begun). There certainly appeared to be room to grow, but there was no indication that immediate or drastic action needed to be taken. The DTL e-book collection is a dynamic, growing collection that is being added to my many diverse libraries. It should also be noted that the results (especially those for the latter two lists) very likely benefited from some recent, intense acquisition of legacy collections by the DTL to its controlled digital lending collection from various sources, a kind of respective collecting coincidence.

These initial conclusions are tempered by the reality that these are snapshots only. Significant bibliographies in any field are seldom comprehensive, and the lists used to evaluate the book collection here are instructive but limited. The intention is, of course, to review the lists of works that were not held and consider collecting those titles, but also to resist the urge to merely add all the missing titles to the collection. That is not only time-consuming and expensive, but it also relies on a false narrative. It is necessary to seek a deeper, more helpful story when evaluating a collection, especially one in an interdisciplinary field like Black Church Studies; there is more than one opportunity for omission.

What started as a simple task of checking a collection against a significant bibliography eventually outgrew the simple data tracking practices that were initially implemented. This has prevented, or at least forestalled, asking other questions of the data—for instance, comparing these (admittedly diverse) lists to each other. Out of a total of 648 book titles contained in the three lists, 556 were unique titles, with only 92 titles overlapping. Due to the limited data tracking that was somewhat hurriedly employed, there is no easy way to identify what those titles are (or which titles were common to all three sets). It is regrettable that this was an emergent study and not a planned evaluation. While the results may or may not have been particularly interesting, better data management from the outset would have made them reasonably accessible.

ANALYSIS

In the interest of having a fuller picture of what data was available, a classification analysis was done on the deduplicated combined lists. There is a certain irony in identifying call numbers for e-books (or, more accurately, mostly for their print counterparts), but given limited time it was preferable to have one subject datapoint for each book. Library of Congress call numbers are not perfect, especially when applied to works by and about historically disenfranchised people and groups, but they are widely used in peer libraries (and have proven useful here). It was hoped that by comparing call numbers and groupings between the titles held and those not held, potential gaps in the collection might be better illuminated than by lists of titles alone. The Library of Congress catalog itself was used to identify the majority of these call numbers. If a title was not held in that collection, other (mostly theological) catalogs were consulted.

It was decided that groupings of more than two books with the same (or substantially similar) call numbers would be more useful and manageable than looking at each individual call number. Even the initial data was instructive: 97 out of 556 unique titles had the same call number—BR563.N4 (essentially history of Christianity related to African Americans). Classification is not an exact science, but it was surprising that 17.5 percent of titles from these lists shared the same call number. Again, analyzing the *application* of call numbers is a bit out of the scope of this project, but it is difficult to imagine that other, more specific numbers were not available. This is balanced out (at least a bit) by the fact 45 percent of the unique titles across the lists only shared a call number with one other title or with none at all.

This portion of the study was mainly concerned with the comparison of titles held versus not held in any given number or range. Out of 21 groupings of call numbers with more than two unique titles from these lists, only about 5 merit comment: those where the number of titles “not held” was higher than the “held” might indicate a gap in the collection or at least warrant closer scrutiny. Three of these are important, but relatively easy to explain: those with call numbers that don’t begin with “B”. A broad but coherent call number range from E184.6 to E185.97 (essentially U.S. history; African Americans, by periods, topics, region, including biography) had 65 total titles, with 28 held and 37 not held. Overly broad but still meaningful ranges (for a

theological collection) for all titles with call numbers beginning with either ML (literature on music) and PS (American literature) fared much worse: in ML only 4 of 19 titles were accessible, while PS recorded 6 held out of 24. It may not be surprising to find these are the deficient areas of a theologically focused collection, but it can still be disappointing. Scholars in Black Church Studies are telling us to broaden our collections further into history, music, and literature to support learning and research.

There were two call number ranges where none of the associated titles were held. Both are cause for possible concern, one more immediate than the other. There were five titles in either BV4526.2 (Practical religion. The Christian life—Religious duties—Religion of the family. The Christian home—General works—1951–2000) or BV4526.3 (...2001–). Upon closer inspection, however, it is not immediately apparent that any of these specific titles address their topics explicitly from a Black Church perspective, so the concern may be whether there are sufficient resources in this area for the collection in general. More troubling however, are the six titles listed under BV4241.5 (essentially collections of Black sermons). The importance of preaching in Black Church life is very well known so this result is as confusing as it is concerning and will be a first priority for deeper investigation (followed shortly by history, music, and literature in support of an interdisciplinary field).

FUTURE RESEARCH

As this study focused on book resources in support of a new academic program, the next logical step would be to look at the journal literature supporting it. Initial attempts to identify the core journal literature in Black Church Studies have been inconclusive, at least so far. This is a bit trickier problem. While Griffin (2011; 2016) Educational Leadership and Emerson (2014) detail how citation analysis of dissertations and theses in a field can identify what journals are actually being used by people working in it, citation analysis does have its criticisms, and it remains to be seen if this methodology will translate to an interdisciplinary field like Black Church Studies. It would be an expansive, detailed project, but may be worth doing unless a viable alternative methodology (or a credible list of core journals) is found.

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