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# Same Titles, Different Formats: Does Print or Electronic Get More Use?



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## **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the use of both print and electronic monographs at George Fox University libraries over a period of thirty-three months for 8,500 titles that were held in both formats. Results indicate that print is more likely to be used than electronic. The implications of the findings, as well as related factors determining future decision making relative to format, are discussed.

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George Fox University (GFU) is a private, Christian university in Newberg, Oregon, founded in 1891. Through two libraries it serves 2,700 undergraduates and 1,400 graduate students, primarily face-to-face, with a few online programs. GFU offers over 40 undergraduate majors, 5 doctoral programs, and several masters degrees.

User preference with regard to book format has been a topic of interest to George Fox librarians for many years. That is, do our users tend to prefer print or electronic books? While librarians have gathered informal feedback in a variety of ways, it was determined to learn what our users actually did, rather than just what they *said* they did or preferred to do. Our plan was to collect and analyze usage data for books that we have in both print and e-format to see which format was receiving the most use. While we normally do not purchase books in both formats, we do have a considerable number of situations where that is the case. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that e-books are sometimes loaded into leased packages after we have already purchased print copies.

It should be noted at the outset that George Fox libraries have been quite aggressive at transitioning to e-books. Factors affecting this decision include convenient 24/7 access for students in online classes or programs, as well as commuter students and even students in campus housing. Cost has also been an important factor, as we have been able to lease books for sometimes as little as a few cents per book per year.

More recent considerations include a desire to provide e-format for some books on the required reading lists of syllabi. In almost all instances, we acquire e-books only when licensing permits unlimited user access.

The e-book holdings of George Fox are quite extensive, including aggregated packages, leased packages such as those from EBSCO and ebrary, and purchased packages from Springer, Cambridge, Oxford, and numerous others. We are also part of a demand-driven acquisition program administered through the Orbis Cascade Alliance, and we operate a small demand-driven system of our own in conjunction with a vendor. In addition, it is not uncommon for us to purchase e-books on an individual title basis. At present we have close to 350,000 e-book titles available to our users, which is more than twice our number of print volumes.

We use Ex Libris' Alma, which has a powerful analytics reporting component. We loaded our e-book use data into Ex Libris' USTAT, which was then harvested by Alma analytics. This allowed us to amalgamate e-book use from a variety of platforms into a single report. Our data is limited to e-books for which we could get COUNTER BR1 or BR2 reports, which meant we ignored some minor or specialized vendors. We included Gale, EBSCO, ebrary, Springer, MyiLibrary, and Oxford. We also included our purchased EBL titles, but could not include our usage from our consortium's demand-driven acquisition program with EBL; this was the only significant body of e-books we had to ignore. Since these vendors count use very differently, and each is different from a print check-out, we have not tried to compare the degree of use; we have looked only at whether a particular book was used at all or not.

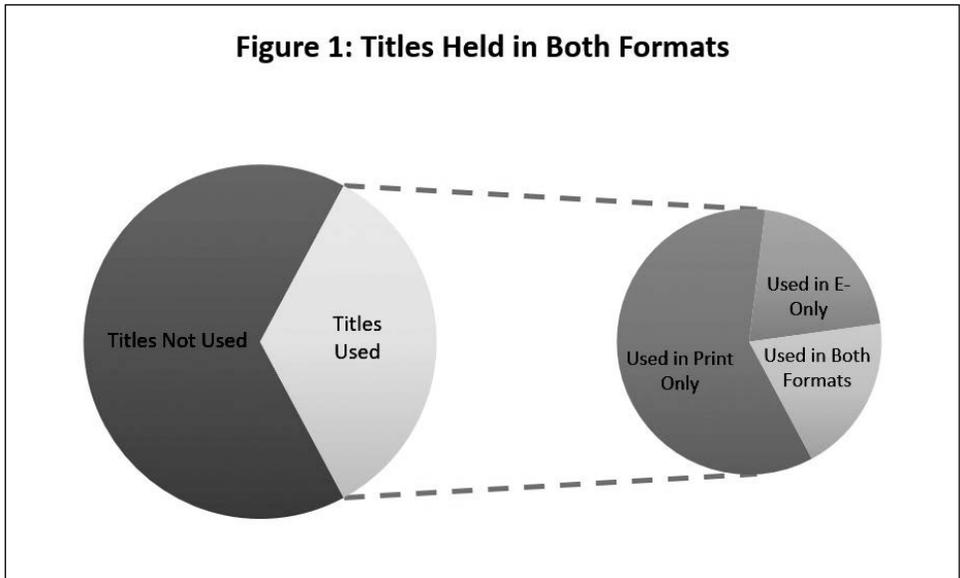
We looked at 33 months of use: from the time we started working with the data, back as far as we could see without losing knowledge of when the use occurred. We migrated from Millennium to Alma not long ago, but we migrated our print usage data as well, so we were able to access the year-to-date circulations and last-year circulations from our old system, which took us back to the beginning of July 2013. Adding the use accumulated so far in Alma brought us up to March 2016. We loaded our e-book usage files for the same period.

We then exported our entire print holdings, with use data when present, from Alma analytics. We also exported all our e-books holdings, and used a perl script to find the overlap, producing a spreadsheet of titles that we had in both print and electronic formats. Then we exported our e-book usage, and ran the script again to add that information to our spreadsheet. We first matched on ISBN, and then ran the script again based on the first 50 characters of the title, to catch as many as possible. Still, there may be some titles that fell through the cracks because of no common ISBN

between records and differences in title. Then there was some manual data clean-up involved, to collapse multiple print copies into one line, and to deal with cases where vendors recorded e-book use under two different ISBNs. The result was an Excel spreadsheet with one line for each book, showing its print use (if any) followed by its electronic use (if any), listing each platform if there was more than one. This dataset is available at the online version of this article.

As previously stated, for the purposes of this study we mostly just looked at whether a book was used or not, whether it was one page (or chapter) or thousands of pages. It might be argued that this approach does not lead to a true determination of how much meaningful use the e-book actually received. While this may be true, we felt the same was true for print books. That is, there is no way of knowing whether a circulated print book is even opened once checked out, or how much is actually read. It was our conclusion that, while it would be desirable to determine extent of use or value gained from each use, whether print or e-book, this would be difficult or impossible to ascertain. Our approach did at least allow some insight into what was getting used for comparison purposes.

As of the end of March 2016, GFU libraries had 8,593 book titles in both electronic and print formats. Of that number, 1,111 had been used as e-books, and 2,187 as print books (renewals of print books were not counted but multiple checkouts were). Of those, 534 had been used in both formats. Additionally, 577 were used as e-books only, and 1,653 as print only (see Figure 1).



In considering this data it is important to note that print use includes books loaned through Summit Borrowing (the Orbis Cascade Alliance's borrowing system) and interlibrary loan, while e-books are "disadvantaged" in that they cannot be loaned to other libraries. Consequently, we believe a more accurate comparison would be that of print circulations to only George Fox patrons vs. e-books used by George Fox patrons. Since this was not possible to ascertain, we decided to factor in the known statistic that nearly 32% of all George Fox print loans are to other libraries. While there is no way of proving that 32% of this particular sample of print circulations was to other libraries, factoring in this estimate is likely to lead to a much more accurate comparison than would otherwise be the case. If we subtract 32% from the print totals on the assumption they went to other libraries, the data adjusts to 1,487 print books received use by GFU compared to 1,111 e-books received use by GFU. On the other hand, our students borrow a roughly equivalent number of books from other libraries, some of which we may have electronically. Since those titles could not be included in our data, we may have lost some evidence of preference for print.

To avoid making arbitrary decisions about how to apply this reduction to various subsets of our data, we use our actual, unadjusted data going forward.

Overall, if a book had electronic use, there was a 48% chance it also had print use. (It is important to note that almost a third of our print use was likely from other libraries, not our own students.) If a book had print use, there was a 24% chance it also had electronic use. This juxtaposition shows a marked preference for print. This is in spite of the fact that many of our e-books are presumably used by people unable to access the print version due to limitations of time or distance. Additionally, it's easy to imagine a user of a print book wanting access to the e-book, either because they have to turn their copy back in, or because they want to use features such as searching the book. Yet even when a print book was in fairly high demand (10 or more checkouts in our 33-month period), there was still only a 56% chance someone would touch the electronic version. Perhaps there are still some students who ignore e-books entirely.

The preference for print was true for every LC top-line classification except for the Rs (medicine), and even then electronic titles barely edged out print, 180 to 164. We can readily explain this, given how we interact with our counseling programs. What is noteworthy is that we were ready to give similar explanations for other disciplines as well, but this was the *only* one that used more e-books than print books, when given the choice of both formats for the same title. This remains the case even if we apply the 32% haircut for print circulation to other libraries in each classification.

Looking at specific products turned up one more area that bucked the general trend: PsycBOOKS titles. Of the PsycBOOKS overlap (414 titles), 104 were used in

print, and 140 electronically. And that use was heavy; for every print checkout, there were nine chapter downloads (234 vs. 2,212). We have been educating students and faculty in psychology and counseling about PsycBOOKS for a very long time, so perhaps familiarity with a product makes a difference. Another possibility is that those students value the purity of the resource, which has nothing but APA publications.

A surprise that our data turned up was the fact that many more books were used on EBSCO's platform than ebrary's platform. A whopping 718 e-books were used on EBSCO's platform only, while only 373 were used on ebrary's only. Eighty-one were used on both. We haven't had other indications that our users prefer EBSCO e-books to ebrary e-books, and our ebrary numbers have always been healthy. Differences in content may explain this, particularly as they impact this particular sample.

The results of this study show that both print and e-books clearly have value to our users, but print books are preferred more frequently than e-books. While this conclusion is important and must be considered in making purchasing decisions, we believe there are other factors that strengthen the argument for e-books. These include the following:

1. In general, we pay less (often much less) for e-books than print books and our return on investment studies indicate that we actually get more use per dollar spent with e-books. This might surprise some, as side by side comparisons often indicate that an e-book purchase is more expensive than a print book purchase, especially if the library purchases a license for multiple or unlimited users. However, while this is frequently true with the purchase of individual titles, leased packages and in some cases even purchased packages are available at far more reasonable costs, resulting in a very favorable cost per use even when factoring in that many titles in these packages receive no use. Therefore, it must be considered that this is often not simply a choice between purchasing a title as an e-book or a print book, but rather recognizing that our library simply cannot afford to purchase all e-book titles as print books and forgo the e-version due to the cost differential.
2. There is a cost savings with e-books that goes beyond what is stated in the above. With e-books, there is no cost for shelving or building space and related utilities, a significant consideration. In addition, there is no cost to maintain or repair as there can be with print, and no possibility of theft or lost copies. There may be an annual maintenance fee with the vendor for purchased e-book packages, but these are usually quite minimal and can sometimes be waived if the library continues to purchase in the future. In some instances, such as at George Fox libraries, space saved by moving to more e-books and other electronic resources has enabled us to repurpose library space and meet other critical needs.

3. The unlimited user license has great advantage to the library and its users, especially if the title is on a syllabus' required reading list. We have recently started publicizing held e-books on such lists.

In addition to the above considerations, we believe that some hesitance in using library e-books is due to some users not really understanding the advantages of or how to use e-books. Quite commonly when e-books are discussed and demonstrated, students who might otherwise be disinclined to use them change their perspective. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that vendor-specific e-book platforms are an unfortunate fact of life, and make things somewhat more complicated for the e-book user.

All things considered, we are still inclined to move forward with a relatively aggressive e-book preference, and we believe the use of e-books will increase over time. Having said this, the results of our study indicate that print certainly still has an important place in academic libraries and we believe this will likely continue into the foreseeable future. Consequently, we will also continue to purchase print books. Many books are still not available as e-books, and some disciplines might more naturally continue to prefer print, a consideration we would like to study further. We will continue to monitor the use of both print and e-books. †

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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