



Evidence Summary

Print Books are Cheaper than E-Books for Academic Libraries

A Review of:

Bailey, T. P., Scott, A. L., & Best, R. D. (2015). Cost differentials between e-books and print in academic libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, 76(1), 6-18. doi: 10.5860/crl.76.1.2

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Abstract

Objective – To determine the difference in cost (if any) between print and e-book titles for an academic library.

Design – Case study.

Setting – Library system of a small, regional university in the southern United States of America.

Subjects – 264 titles requested by faculty (out of 462 total requests) that were available in both print and electronic format.

Method – Using Baker & Taylor's Title Source 3 (now Title Source 360), the researchers compared pricing between the print version (paperback preferred) and electronic version

(single user only) of titles requested by faculty during the Fall 2012 semester.

Main Results – As a whole, print titles had a mean price of \$53.50 and electronic equivalent titles had a mean price of \$73.50 (a \$19.17 difference). Only 44 of the 264 e-book titles were less expensive than their print equivalents. When broken down by LC classification, e-books were generally more expensive than print across all subjects except for religion and philosophy (BJ-BY) and the social sciences (H-HV). Average prices for both print and electronic were cheaper for university press publications versus non-university press publications. (This was true for both arithmetic and weighted means.) Humanities books were the least expensive (mean cost/print title), but the average e-book cost was slightly higher than the social

sciences. Science books were most expensive (average) both in print and electronic.

Conclusion – On average, print books are cheaper than e-books for academic libraries.

Commentary

Many e-book articles explore usage and attitudes, but – with the exception of those that discuss demand-driven acquisition models (Downey, 2014) – only mention actual costs of e-books in passing. Influenced by Gray and Copeland (2012) who looked at cost differentials between print and electronic books in public libraries, this article looks specifically at price differences in academic libraries.

The Glynn's critical appraisal checklist (2006) was used to determine that a case study was an appropriate tool for this research. The authors are commended for the clear, easy-to-follow way this research design can be repeated in other university library contexts.

The authors gave a very robust literature review for anyone interested in learning more about general e-book issues, libraries' transition to electronic format for book collections, pricing models, demand-driven acquisition, and price comparisons. Criticisms of this paper are minor. The library used a paperback-preferred acquisition model for their print books, which are often cheaper than hardcover. Results might be slightly different if comparing to mostly hardcover instead of paperback copy, although it is not known how many print books actually are hardcover versus paperback.

In analyzing the results of the study, the authors discussed the physical processing and storage costs for print versus ongoing maintenance costs for continued access to e-versions. In the literature review they mentioned staffing costs for print, but there was no mention of staffing costs in maintaining e-books. Staffing time for maintaining electronic resources (including e-

books) is very significant (Samples & Healy, 2014), and this is certainly an area for further future study.

The only real criticism about this article has nothing to do with the article itself, but with the time lapse between the study taking place and the publication of the article. E-book publishing has always been and continues to be in a state of flux. Although a pre-print has luckily been available since 2013, the "official" record of the publication is 2015; the data are already 3 years old. Those researching similar "in flux" topics should be attentive to time-sensitivity when writing for publication.

With decreasing budgets, an increasing need for study space, and varying needs of users, this research is useful in helping academic libraries to make sometimes difficult acquisition decisions. Academic libraries could easily be inspired by this research to conduct their own smaller-scale study in order to investigate possible local differences.

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