Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Comparison of E-Book Acquisitions Strategies Across Disciplines Finds Differences in Cost and Usage

A Review of:
Carrico, S.B., Cataldo, T.T., Botero, C., & Shelton, T. (2015). What cost and usage data reveals about e-book acquisitions: Ramifications for collection development. *ALCTS, 59*(3). Retrieved from https://journals.ala.org/lrts/article/view/5752/7199

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Abstract

Objective – To compare e-book cost-usage data across different acquisitions styles and disciplines.

Design – Case study.

Setting – A public research university serving an annual enrollment of over 49,000 students and employing more than 3,000 faculty members in the Southern United States.

Subjects – Cost and usage data from 15,006 e-books acquired by the Library through packages, firm orders, and demand-driven acquisitions.

Methods – Data was collected from publishers and vendors across the three acquisitions strategies. Usage, cost, and call number information was collected for the materials purchased via firm order or demand driven acquisitions and these were sorted into disciplines based on the call number assigned. Discipline, cost, and use were determined for each package collection as a whole because information on individual titles was not provided by the publishers. The authors then compared usage and cost across disciplines and acquisitions strategies.

Main Results – Overall, e-books purchased in packages had a 50% use rate and an average cost per use of $3.39, e-books purchased through firm orders had a 52% use rate and an average cost per use of $22.21, and e-books

purchased through demand driven acquisitions had an average cost per use of $8.88 and 13.9 average uses per title. Package purchasing was cost effective for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) materials and medicine (MED) materials. Demand driven acquisition was a particularly good strategy for humanities and social sciences (HSS) titles.

Conclusion – There are differences between the acquisitions strategies and disciplines in cost and use. Firm orders had a higher cost per use than the other acquisitions strategies.

Commentary

This study examined cost per use across three acquisitions styles and three disciplinary groups. The results agree with studies from other institutions that have found demand driven acquisitions to be a cost-effective strategy for e-books, particularly when cost per use is considered (Downey, Zhang, Urbano, & Klinger, 2014; Herrera, 2012). The findings also agree with studies that have found a good cost per use, but low percentage of use in package acquisitions (Lannon & McKinnon, 2013; Sprague & Hunter, 2008). Further research examining data from multiple institutions could help to determine whether low percentage of use in subscription collections is a discovery issue for individual libraries or a selection and packaging issue for publishers.

The authors also found it difficult to justify firm ordering as a cost-effective strategy for e-book content. Though there have been strong critiques of using methods like cost per use and percentage of use to evaluate the value of firm ordered books (Fry, 2015) there is little evidence to support this strategy in the e-book environment, where turnaround time for purchases is generally much shorter. The authors identify the difficulty in drawing a line between firm orders and demand driven orders. Firm orders often represent demand from faculty members and students through traditional channels. The changes to the subject University's acquisitions methods seem

practical and in line with the findings they reported.

The study presented a relatively small sample size, especially for materials that were purchased via firm order and demand driven acquisitions. Materials acquired in packages represented 13,027 out of 15,006 monographs in the study. Generalizability is a problem common to most, if not all of the single site acquisitions studies of this kind. More acquisitions research from consortiums and conglomerate data, like Michael Levine-Clark's work with combined EBL and Ebrary data (Levine-Clark, 2015) will contribute more significantly to our understanding of the way disciplines and acquisitions strategies impact use. The findings from the subject University are strongly in line with other studies of this kind so the conclusions made are appropriate for local application, even if they are not broadly generalizable.

The authors also relied on combined subject designations and use for each of their package collections. Because the authors used three broad disciplinary categories and did not consider large interdisciplinary packages, this likely did not significantly influence the results. Future studies approaching this question might use a common subject classification for all acquisitions strategies, especially when considering databases with general content. Future studies could also move beyond descriptive statistics for ranking and examine the statistical significance of differences in cost and cost per use.

This study represents an important contribution to the landscape of findings on this topic, particularly for collections and acquisitions librarians. The results of this article persuaded the authors to change acquisitions processes to favor more cost-effective methods. Further research, including more meta-analysis of acquisitions strategies, is needed before these results can be generalized to all libraries, but librarians assessing their own collections will find this a good template for comparison.

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