



Evidence Summary

Print Book Circulation Longevity Dropping at a Small Canadian University Library

A Review of:

Belvadi, M. (2021). Longevity of print book use at a small public university: A 30-year longitudinal study. *Insights*, 34(1), 26. <http://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.562>

Reviewed by:

Jordan Patterson
Associate Librarian
A. P. Mahoney Library
St. Peter's Seminary
London, Ontario, Canada
Email: jpatte46@uwo.ca

Received: 6 June 2022

Accepted: 20 July 2022

© 2022 Patterson. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons-Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike License 4.0 International (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly attributed, not used for commercial purposes, and, if transformed, the resulting work is redistributed under the same or similar license to this one.

DOI: 10.18438/ebli30181

Abstract

Objective – To inform future collecting decisions by ascertaining the circulation longevity of print books within an academic library.

Design – Longitudinal data analysis of two circulation datasets.

Setting – Library catalogue of a small public university in Canada.

Subjects – 10,002 print books acquired between 1991 and 1996 with a first circulation year between 1991 and 2000 (part 1); 4,060 print books acquired and with a first circulation year between 2008 and 2011 (part 2A); 35,860 print books acquired since 1991 with a first circulation year between 2008 and 2011 (parts 2B).

Methods – The researcher established two datasets by selecting books with viable circulation data from the institution's holdings. Using each book's Library of Congress classification number, the researcher mapped each book to three other categorization schemes. The first scheme, Becher-Biglan

typology, categorizes books as belonging to either applied or hard and pure or soft fields of study. The second scheme, called in the paper “major subjects,” uses a traditional broad subject categorization (e.g. arts, sciences, health, etc.), and the third scheme categorizes books by the academic programs at the researcher’s institution. The researcher then analyzed the circulation data through the lens of these three categorization schemes.

Main Results – Part 1, which considered the collection’s older circulated books, found that books had an average circulation longevity of 10 years. About 14% of books circulated for only one year, and about 24% of books circulated for less than five years. Among the newer books considered in Part 2, 37% circulated for just one year and 64% had a circulation longevity of four years.

Conclusion – Books in applied and hard fields generally have greater longevity compared to pure and soft fields. Books in professional and STEM fields generally have greater longevity than books in the humanities and arts, contrary to conventional library wisdom. Print book circulation longevity appears to be dropping. Subscription and on-demand acquisitions options may prove to be a more efficacious use of resources than ‘just-in-case’ print collecting.

Commentary

As libraries continue their march into the future, perhaps no issue in academic libraries today is so centrally pressing as the usage of print books. The pessimist might ask, if print books are not used, why should libraries spend all the time, energy, and money required to purchase, process, catalogue, shelve, and store them? Or forego the opportunity of using that time, energy, and money space for another purpose? Beyond merely functioning as a potential net drain on a library’s resources, a focus on print books may actively hinder the library in providing services patrons need and desire.

Evaluated with Glynn’s (2006) critical appraisal checklist, this study satisfies accepted standards of validity. The sampling for this study had to be precise to obtain viable data, but the researcher’s inclusion and exclusion criteria limited her from providing a fuller picture of print book circulation at her institution. While the study compares circulation statistics for items across different disciplines, one important point of comparison is passed over in the researcher’s decision to omit from her study any figures for items that did not circulate at all. The researcher made this decision to avoid distorting the statistics with a large number of items reporting “0 years” of circulation longevity; however, without the number of comparable items that never circulated (within the same timespans the paper considers), the circulation figures presented in the paper do not convey their full potential significance.

The difference would be, for instance, a circulated print item’s longevity compared to a broader print collection, as opposed to a circulated print item’s longevity compared to other circulated items. It is eye-opening to learn that, of recent books that circulate, 64% do so for four years at maximum; it would be instructive to learn also how many books never circulate at all. Presented even briefly before proceeding with a finer analysis of circulated items, figures on uncirculated items would provide important context and bolster the researcher’s questioning of the value of ‘just-in-case’ print acquisitions. It’s a small quibble with an otherwise impressive and important study, and ultimately, non-circulating books were not the focus of this research. A comparison of circulated and non-circulated items could form the basis of a fruitful future study.

As the researcher demonstrates in her literature review, this is the only investigation into print resource longevity with a timeframe as long as thirty years. Given the importance of the question, more studies would be welcome. Libraries allocate more and more funds toward digital resources every year, at the cost of print, and this study makes a compelling case for continuing and even hastening that trend. Attractive and efficient e-book packages allow libraries to optimize their

resources toward the needs of the present, but any strategic choice requires sacrifices and trade-offs; librarians may well consider whether this option is optimized toward the needs of the future as well.

References

Belvadi, M. (2021). Longevity of print book use at a small public university: a 30-year longitudinal study. *Insights*, 34(1), 26. <http://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.562>

Glynn, L. (2006). A critical appraisal tool for library and information research. *Library Hi Tech*, 24(3), 387-399. <https://doi.org/10.1108/07378830610692154>