Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Increased Size of E-Book Collection Positively Impacts Usage but May Reach Critical Mass

A Review of:
Lamothe, A. R. (2013). Factors influencing the usage of an electronic book collection: Size of the e-book collection, the student population, and the faculty population. *College & Research Libraries*, *74*(1), 39-59. Retrieved 12 July 2013 from http://crl.acrl.org/content/74/1/39.full.pdf

Reviewed by:
Eamon C. Tewell
Reference & Instruction Librarian
Long Island University, Brooklyn Campus
Brooklyn, New York, United States of America
Email: eamont@gmail.com

Abstract

Objective – To investigate the impact of collection size, student population, and faculty population on the use of an e-book collection.

Design – Longitudinal quantitative analysis.

Setting – Mid-sized public university located in Ontario, Canada.

Subjects – Data from 79,821 e-books related to searches and viewings; data regarding number of e-books held, students enrolled, and faculty employed at institution.

Methods – Numbers of e-books purchased individually and in packages were calculated, followed by the acquisition of annual student and faculty numbers through the University Institutional Planning Office. Searches for and viewings of e-books conducted via vendor websites were obtained directly from vendors. Data for all variables represent years 2002-2010.

Main Results – Very high Pearson's correlation coefficients of $r = 0.96$ for searches performed and $r = 0.91$ for viewings were found in relation to the number of e-books held. While the annual increase in number of viewings was at a rate similar to that of e-books available, a 7% decrease in searches and viewings occurred in 2010. In terms of user populations, doctoral students exhibited the strongest association with e-book collection

size followed by undergraduate students and faculty.

Conclusions – Based upon examination of correlation coefficients, the study concludes that the e-book collection size is closely associated with the level of e-book usage. The author notes that the data suggests use of the collection may possibly have leveled off, implying that additional large increases in the e-book collection could incur unnecessary expenditure. "Viewings per e-book" and "searches per e-book" ratios were highest when e-books were obtained on an individual title-by-title basis, though the author cautions that this does not necessarily prove that selective purchasing results in increased use. A deeper quantitative analysis into e-book usage and academic program size is considered for future research, as well as a comparison between electronic reference books and monographs. The author recommends that similar research be performed at other institutions of varying size to determine whether the study's results would be replicated.

Commentary

As patrons continue to utilize online resources, as libraries face challenges accommodating ever-expanding physical collections, and as electronic book access and interfaces improve, significant questions arise regarding maximizing e-book usage. Beginning in the mid-2000s methods for acquiring and evaluating e-books have been discussed in the literature with increasing frequency. However, library e-book collections are less often considered in relation to size, as Naylor (1987) first accomplished with physical collections by correlating the collection size of public libraries in New York with average circulation. The Lamothe study's unique contribution to the literature is that it considers e-book use in relation to the size of the collection offered to users.

This study of e-books benefits from a clear description of data collection methods and an extensive sample size. The results are thoroughly expounded upon and numerous visual indicators of the results accompany the text. The author's description of the historical development of the university's e-book collection and its phases of growth provide valuable context for practitioners. Appropriate tests for statistical significance were carried out and fully reported, minimizing the potential of random error.

Issues regarding the study's validity include a lack of research questions, a minor omission with implications for replication, and loss of potential data. The study's objective is not stated, possibly resulting in readers being unsure of the purpose for study. The addition of research questions could provide the study with a stronger framework and clear answers to stated questions in the conclusion. In respect to methodology it is not apparent whether the data was obtained retrospectively or from 2002-2010 as the e-book collection grew, which may be problematic for other researchers interested in replicating the study. Searches for e-books conducted via the library catalogue were not available, a considerable loss of potential data seeing that, by the author's admission, faculty and graduate students rely heavily on library catalogues to locate and access e-books. Despite these concerns the study's findings remain valid overall.

The author does not conclude with any implications for practice, limiting recommendations to future studies to be conducted. Evidence that e-book use is correlated to size of collection may be particularly significant for libraries with smaller electronic collections that are seeking to increase e-book adoption among users, yet many additional factors such as marketing (e.g., Torabi, 2011) and ease of access do not allow for decision-making based on evidence related to collection size alone. In the most recent year that data was captured for this study, the number of e-books purchased surpassed the number of searches performed for the first time in five years. This is an important fact that is only briefly speculated upon, and may have further implications for practice. When might an e-book collection's size outpace use? In what ways can librarians

determine how to best accommodate both print and electronic collections within their budgets? Further research could explore the effect of patron-driven acquisitions on e-book use, or comparing use of electronic reference materials to print. Additional qualitative studies on the adoption of e-books would lend much-needed user perspectives to this constantly evolving topic.

References

Naylor, R. J. (1987). The efficient mid-size library: Comparing book budget to population to collection size. *Library Journal*, *112*(3), 119-120.

Torabi, N. (2011). Academic libraries should consider a strategic approach to promotion and marketing of e-books. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, *6*(4), 130-133. Retrieved 12 July 2013 from http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP/article/view/11625/