

ATG Special Report — Academic Library Survey on eBooks and eBook Readers



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Abstract

In Fall 2013, **Carmichael Library** at the **University of Montevallo (UM)**, Alabama's public liberal arts university, surveyed users about their current and potential eBook and eBook reader usage. The library has been cautious with regards to eBooks adoption, partly due to budgetary restraints along with a lack of knowledge about our users' eBook preferences. While the primary interest of the survey is in student use, faculty and staff were also surveyed so that all patron groups were represented. Undergraduate students were the highest responders, with staff and faculty closely behind. The results show that a healthy percentage of library patrons are currently using eBooks with varying frequency, offering a chance for growth of the collection. The time has come for **UM** to proceed with eBook collection development informed by research and survey results.

Introduction

While electronic books seem somewhat new, the technology was predicted decades ago. It took the creation of an electronic book reader to bring the eBook to prominence. As **Foasberg** points out, "The first generation [e-reader] was introduced...to little fanfare, in the 1990s."¹ The much more successful wave of eBook readers began in 2007 with the **Sony** reader; the **Kindle** followed one year later.² The introduction of the eBook reader has driven the market for eBooks by making "e-reading a convenient, comfortable, and relatively inexpensive activity."³ It was at this point that libraries started to enthusiastically purchase and lend eBooks. eBooks help meet an unfulfilled need for distant education students, commuting students, and students that have a preference for digital over print.

To what degree should eBook reader preferences and practices drive collection development? The literature landscape on eBook adoption in academic libraries is wide, yet there is room for scholarship delving into whether or not students actually use these resources, how they are used, and what kind of collections they need. Many libraries have invested a great deal of resources to provide access to eBook collections, while simultaneously struggling with flat budgets and rising database and serials costs. Oftentimes, a decision to spend money on eBooks means taking money away from the print collection. With the continued reliance on print by specific areas of study (i.e., art, history), academic accrediting bodies (i.e., NASW, NASAD), and the scholarly publishing model (i.e., print dissertations, university presses), redistributing funds from book budgets is a big gamble.

Literature Review

According to a 2012 *Library Journal* survey, "eBook adoption has plateaued in academic libraries, with 95% currently carrying eBooks. This has remained essentially unchanged in the last three years."⁴ Undergraduate libraries

offer an average of more than 80,000 eBooks in 2012, more than double the 31,000 offered in 2010.⁵ The survey also reveals that "339 U.S. academic libraries...have been offering eBooks for, on average, 5.2 years (i.e., since about 2007), with 19% saying they have carried eBooks for more than eight years (circa 2004)."⁶ Eight years offer fertile ground for research on the success and possible frustration of eBooks in academic libraries.

Seemingly, eBooks have become ubiquitous in academic library culture. However, as **Walters** points out, "most libraries have been tentative in their acquisition of eBooks, confining their selections to reference works, textbooks, or specialized...subject areas."⁷ The 2012 *Library Journal* survey corroborates this claim; "By far the largest categories of eBooks carried by academic libraries are general non-circulating reference materials and scholarly monographs."⁸ This illustrates a paradoxical leap into offering eBooks but not fully integrating them into the whole collection. By only offering certain types of eBooks in specific subjects, students and faculty are not being fully introduced to the technology. A student or faculty member could conceivably avoid eBooks altogether during their time at an institution of higher education. This lack of full commitment is also illustrated in library budget expenditures on eBooks which have slowed down from \$67,400 during the 2011-2012 academic year to \$65,000 during the 2012-2013 academic year. This represents "an average of 9.6% of academic libraries' total acquisitions budgets toward eBooks."⁹ Despite many predictions about a meteoric rise of eBooks in academia, the growth has been more tempered and nuanced.

According to a 2012 Pew Internet and American Life study, "the number of owners of either a tablet computer or an eBook reading device such as a Kindle or Nook grew from 18% in late 2011 to 33% in late 2012."¹⁰ It follows that as eBook availability increases in academic libraries, so would the loaning of eBook readers. This has been borne out in the research, but not at the same breakneck pace. **Damast** describes a pilot program in which **Amazon** distributed eBook Readers to students at seven universities around the country with the intent to replace heavy textbooks. Within a few months the students "reported that the Kindle was a poor replacement for a textbook, hard to use in the classroom, and difficult to navigate."¹¹

There is a plethora of anecdotal evidence about academic libraries piloting the use of eBook readers either on their own or in conjunction with teaching faculty (i.e., **Olsen, Kleivset, & Langseth**, 2013¹²; **Marmarelli & Ringle**, 2010¹³; **Welch**, 2012¹⁴; **Chen**, 2012¹⁵; and **Marques**, 2012¹⁶). During the 2008-2009 academic year, **Penn State University** Libraries secured a donation of 100 **Sony** eBook readers. The **Sony** readers were tested in a wide variety

of ways, from libraries lending them to patrons to professors using them in first-year and graduate courses. In addition, "some readers were also tested in support of disability services for students with learning and visual impairments, but met with absolute failure in that setting."¹⁷ Overall, the pilot program was successful, but not a "slam dunk" due to the personal nature of reading and the limitations of the format.

A study by **Ahlroos** and **Hahto** describes a pilot program "designed to investigate the application of e-readers in academic settings and to learn how teachers and students experience the use of e-readers in academic education."¹⁸ The authors point out that the eBook readers available today are tailored to leisure reading, instead of textbook or academic reading. Their findings are consistent with other trial data. Many "features such as browsing, PDF support and an Internet connection...need to improve before e-readers can enable efficient learning and researching in an academic setting...though many of the respondents still preferred the paper book, nearly all of them saw the e-reader as a future tool for studying."¹⁹ The Pew study on eBooks also reveals that "the number of those who read eBooks increased from 16% of all Americans ages 16 and older to 23%. At the same time, the number of those who read printed books in the previous 12 months fell from 72% of the population ages 16 and older to 67%."²⁰ From 2008-current, a large number of academic libraries have piloted and implemented eBook reader lending programs. Considering the limitations in accessibility, along with individual preference for print, it is unsurprising that eBooks have met some resistance with patrons. Even with the resistance, eBooks and eBook readers are certainly not going away.

To make an informed decision on eBook purchases it is imperative that we know *who* will be reading them and *what* they will be reading. A number of studies (e.g., **Lamothe** 2013²¹; **Li, Poe, Potter Quigley, Wilson**, 2011²²; *Library Journal*, 2012²³) have noted that the doctoral and master's students displayed the strongest eBook usage, with undergraduate students and faculty displaying the lowest eBook usage. **Li**, et. al. found the following variations in eBook usage: "Postdoctoral researchers reported the highest usage (68%), followed closely by graduate students (67%), undergraduate students (55%), and faculty and lecturers (57%)."²⁴ **Lamothe** found similar results: "doctoral students exhibited the strongest relationship with eBook usage, while undergraduate students showed signs of the weakest."²⁵ Faculty demonstrated the overall weakest relationship with eBook usage. The research confirms that undergraduate students are not using eBooks as much as their post-secondary peers.

Another consideration when selecting eBooks to meet students' needs is to determine which collections they are most likely to use.

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The first models that vendors introduced to libraries were generally big box models. These large packages of academic titles are the antithesis of collection development, especially at smaller libraries where limited budgets have to be used strategically to meet as many student needs as possible. There is an apparent connection between certain disciplines and the use of eBooks; “Respondents in the physical sciences and engineering reported the highest rate of academic eBook usage (68%), followed by those in the arts and humanities (57%), life and health sciences (57%), social sciences (54%), and business and law (47%).”²⁶ It is realistic to assume that eBook vendors tailor their collections to the institutions with the highest buying power. This business model is less than ideal for UM and other small teaching institutions that focus on the humanities and social and behavioral sciences more than hard sciences.

With 95% of libraries offering eBook content to their patrons, it is not surprising that a number of preference and usability studies are beginning to emerge. Although the eBook has been formally accepted in academic libraries, there are still many concerns about the format. **Behler** (2013) states that “Most respondents pointed out known issues with the devices: unsatisfactory battery life and difficulty recharging, slow refresh time when turning pages, glare on the page, and an expensive purchase price.”²⁷ The notion that eBooks would push out print as students’ preferred format has not completely played out. An investigation by **Lamothe** showed that the “size of an eBook collection was determined to show evidence of an extremely strong relationship with the level of usage eBooks experienced. Of all factors examined...it was the size of the collection that exhibited the strongest association to usage levels.”²⁸ It is commonsensical that size is a determinant of use; the more eBooks available in wide ranges of subjects increase their discoverability in library systems. The implications for smaller libraries are clear; less buying power equals lower use.

Another consideration in the adoption of eBooks is the agreement (or lack thereof) between publishers and libraries. According to the **ALA’s** State of America’s Libraries survey, “libraries and publishers of eBooks continued to seek some middle ground...the progress has been slow, as some publishers either still flatly refused to make eBooks available to libraries or made them prohibitively expensive.”²⁹ Perhaps the most frustrating issue that librarians face in eBook implementation is the lack of standardization; many eBooks have proprietary systems that will not work across platforms. There are a number of impediments to successful implementation, including “pricing, limits on multiple access, DRM, and discovery issues... potentially derailing or undermining the deeper use of much of this technology, regardless of how well-entrenched it may have become.”³⁰ While these restrictions are problematic, they can be overcome if vendors listen to librarians.

The literature reveals that students prefer print books over eBooks. The top barrier to

Please indicate the selection that best describes you:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Undergraduate Student	50.4%	126
Graduate Student	8.0%	20
Faculty	19.6%	49
Staff	20.4%	51
Other/Prefer not to answer	1.6%	4
answered question		250
skipped question		0

Figure1 (Q1): Status of all Survey Respondents

Please indicate the selection that best describes your field of study:		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Business	14.2%	34
Art	10.0%	24
Elementary and Secondary Education	9.2%	22
Other/Prefer not to answer	7.5%	18
Psychology	7.1%	17
History	6.3%	15
Mathematics	5.4%	13
English	4.6%	11
Social Work	3.8%	9
Counseling and Leadership	3.3%	8
Music	3.3%	8
Biology	2.9%	7
Communication Science & Disorders	2.9%	7
Mass Communication	2.9%	7
Foreign Languages	2.5%	6
Theatre	2.1%	5
Communication Studies	1.7%	4
General Studies (Undecided)	1.7%	4
Interdisciplinary Studies	1.7%	4
Political Science	1.7%	4
Chemistry	1.3%	3
Family & Consumer Sciences	1.3%	3
Speech-Language Pathology	1.3%	3
Sociology	0.8%	2

Figure 2 (Q2): Respondents’ Fields of Study.

eBook access is that users do not know they are available; however, this “has been on the decline for the past three years even as ‘users prefer print’ continues to climb.”³¹ A number of other studies have had similar findings (i.e., **Li et. al.**, 2011³², **Zickuhr, Rainie, & Purcell**, 2013³³, **Marques**, 2012³⁴). When students are

considering books to read for academic purposes, **Olsen et. al.** found that “54% preferred print, 28% a combination of print and e-reader, and finally only 11% were satisfied solely using an e-reader.”³⁵ As illustrated by all the many variables regarding and informing eBook

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purchases, the caution with implementation is much more understandable.

Background and Method

This eBook/eBook reader survey was conducted to inform purchase decisions regarding electronic books and electronic book readers. The fifteen questions were written with this intent in mind; with question topics ranging from current and potential eBook and eBook reader use, to what type of eBooks they would be most interested in (leisure, academic, etc.). The survey was approved by the Human and Animal Subjects Research Committee (HASRC), was built with **SurveyMonkey**, and was administered by a broadcast email to the official addresses of all students, faculty, and staff at **UM**. The University’s bookstore donated two Nooks to give away as an incentive to take the survey, which was open for 15 days in November, 2013. After the initial survey announcement email, I sent out two reminders; the date stamps reveal that the reminder days had the highest response rate.

Respondent Demographics

I created a simple survey tailored to the **University of Montevallo**; it included a question about employment status and another on field of study/discipline. For the sake of brevity, I did not offer the staff a break down by department. Because 51 staff responded but only 18 people marked “Other/Prefer not to respond,” I suspect the staff identified with the department in which they work, e.g., an administrative assistant in a college would identify with that college/discipline. There were 250 total respondents, the majority of which were undergraduate students, followed distantly by staff, faculty, and graduate students. The total student population of **UM**, both graduate and undergrad, had a response rate of 6%, which was significantly lower than the total **UM** faculty response rate (25%). The field of study question yielded some interesting results. The highest percentage of respondents was in the college of business, art came in second, and education third; business and education offer graduate programs at **UM**. The library’s print art collection gets some of the heaviest usage, so I anticipated a low interest in this survey. Demographics information and response were not tracked together, so it is not possible to connect discipline with specific responses. Of the 250 individuals that took the survey, 40 left rich, qualitative feedback in an open-ended comment box which will be included in the section results as appropriate. Figures 1 and 2 show the complete responses to the demographics questions.

Usage Results

The questions fell into three categories related to eBooks and eBook readers: usage, access, and ownership/interest. Patron usage was addressed by questions 3, 4, 6, and 7. The highest number of respondents, 59.6%, primarily read printed books, but will occasionally read an eBook. The next highest percentage was surprising, 21.6% rarely read print books and almost always read eBooks. (Figure 3, Question 3) This presents an opportunity for growth for the majority of respondents, 81.6% are either

How would you describe your eBook usage?	Response Percent	Response Count
I never read eBooks	18.4%	46
I mostly read print books but occasionally will read eBooks	59.6%	149
I almost always read eBooks and rarely read print books	21.6%	54
I only read eBooks	0.4%	1
<i>answered question</i>		250
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Figure 3 (Q3): How would you describe your eBook usage?

	Approximately how many eBooks did you read for leisure in the past six months? (Q4)	Approximately how many eBooks from Carmichael Library have you used for research in the past six months? (Q6)
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Percent
0	30.9%	79.0%
1	16.9%	9.7%
2	14.1%	5.6%
3	11.6%	2.4%
4 more	26.5%	3.2%
<i>answered question</i>	249	248
<i>skipped question</i>	1	2

Figure 4 (Q4,Q6): Leisure Books vs. Research Books

acquainted or completely comfortable with eBooks. For the remaining 18.4% that reported never reading eBooks, one obstacle is the lack of an initial positive experience with the technology. One survey respondent explained, “I personally feel like I learn better from print textbooks because you don’t have to turn on a device, be tempted to check Facebook, and then wait for a page to load. With a book, it’s just there.” If we can provide an opportunity for success, the right eBook at the right moment, it would engender more positivity. Another patron responded, “I think I will eventually begin using eBooks, but I have not done so to this point.” A number of people expressed a similar sentiment; they are open to the idea of eBooks, but not excited about them.

Figure 4, which combines questions 4 and 6, shows the extent of the differences in the population sample. The largest percentage of responders have read no eBooks for leisure over a six-month period, while the second largest number have read four or more. (Q4) Like question 3, these responses also show the polarized spectrum of eBook usage. Our efforts to reach users will need to be varied and nuanced, to reach the occasional and non-users. The data reveals that most users have read either none or 4+ leisure eBooks during the past six months. (Q4. For example, one patron expressed, “I

am on my third generation of **Kindle** — now the FireHD — and I love it...probably have 150+ eBooks...I have **Kindle** iPad and iPhone apps so [I] can read on any platform and on my laptop.” These patrons are likely getting their leisure books from other sources, as the collections we have are academic-centric. Answers to question 6 are more discouraging, with 79% of patrons using zero eBooks from the library for research in half a year. This is the place I see the most potential for growth in use of eBooks for research by students and faculty. Of the patrons that responded positively to using an eBook for research within the past six months (Q7), the majority (71.9%) reported reading the section of the chapter relevant to their research. If libraries can get more people to use eBooks, their experience will likely be positive.

Access

Patron access to eBooks and eBook readers was addressed in questions 5, 8, 11, and 12. Figure 6 illustrates the ways in which patrons access the books they read; not surprisingly, most use a store Website to purchase eBooks. This is congruent with question 10, covered later in the *Interest* section, which reveals that the **Kindle** is the most commonly owned eBook reader. One way the library can increase usage is to make sure that all of our current and future

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eBooks work with **Kindles**; we might also purchase **Kindles** to loan to patrons and either preload them with content or make content available to download to these devices.

Figure 5 (Q8) shows the respondents' answers regarding their likeliness to access an eBook from the library, after using one previously. The highest number of respondents (55.7%) answered "Not applicable/Don't know," which is likely correlated to the low percentage (15.7%) of respondents that indicated using **Carmichael Library** to access eBooks (Q5). As one patron put it, "I was not aware the library offered eBooks at all." The other results are heartening: most people (36.6%) are likely to access another eBook, which implies that they had a good experience.

When asked (Q11, Figure 6) about the format they use to access eBooks, the responses were varied. The fact that few users (14.3%) use a platform to access eBooks is significant. Most academic eBooks are available only through a platform, including two collections we have: **EBSCO** and **Springer**. These responses reinforce the notion that proprietary access is not ideal; the best eBook purchases are those that work with a large variety of platforms. We cannot assume all patrons have a dedicated device to read an eBook; as one respondent said, "I would love to try out reading eBooks, I just don't have a device in which to do so."

When asked why they had not used an eBook from the library in the past, most patrons (62.4%) responded "Not Applicable/Don't Know." (Q12) The rest of the responses were as follows: "I prefer print books" (24.9%), "I do not have a way to read eBooks" (16%), "I prefer Internet resources" (11.7%). Only 3.3% of respondents selected "I am not interested in eBooks", which is promising. (Q12) The curiosity is there, if not the drive, as evidenced by the following comment: "I would like to borrow eBooks from **Carmichael** but have not taken the time to figure out how to do it. That's my fault."

Interest

Finally, our patron's interest in eBooks and eBook readers was addressed in questions 9, 10, 13, and 14. Over half of the respondents (67.7%) own an eBook reader or tablet. (Q9). Of those, Figure 7 shows the breakdown of brands. **Kindle** and **iPad** lead the results, with a smattering of other brands. These results are mirrored later in the survey when patrons are asked what eBook reading device they would prefer the library purchase, with the majority of respondents choosing "eBook reader (**Kindle**, **Sony** reader, **Nook**, etc.)" over the second option "Tablet (**iPad**, **Google Nexus**, etc.)" (Q14) One patron expressed, "I was given my **Kindle** by my Brother for Christmas a few years ago, and I do like it a lot but [I'm] still drawn to **BOOKS** in print. I read 3 printed to 1 **Kindle**."

When asked about what kind of eBooks they would like the library to purchase, the highest percentage (71.5%) of patrons indicated "Leisure reading/bestsellers." The next highest responses were "Scholarly research/academic books" at 54.6% and "Textbooks" at 51% (Q13).

If you accessed an eBook through Carmichael Library, how likely is it that you will use another eBook?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Very likely	20.9%	48
Somewhat likely	15.7%	36
Neutral	6.1%	14
Unlikely	0.9%	2
Very unlikely	0.9%	2
Not Applicable/Don't know	55.7%	128
answered question		230
skipped question		20

Figure 5 (Q8): Likelihood of accessing another eBook?

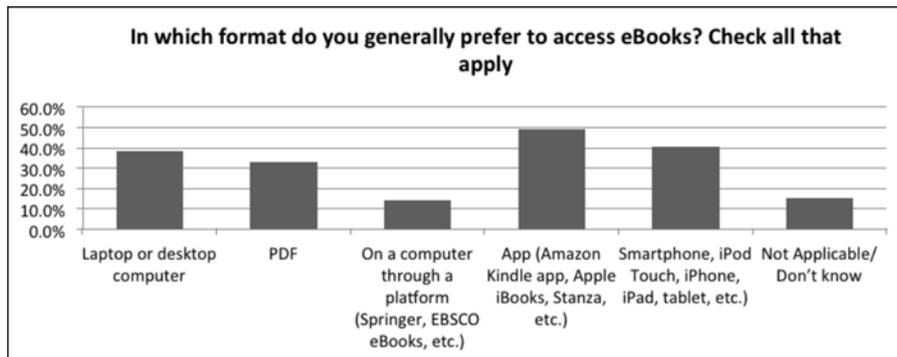


Figure 6 (Q11): In which format do you generally prefer to access eBooks?

If yes, what type of eBook reader or tablet? Check all that apply		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
iPad	27.1%	59
Nook	11.5%	25
Kindle	33.0%	72
Android	12.8%	28
N/A	1.2%	68
Other (please specify)		10
answered question		218
skipped question		32

Figure 7 (Q10): Type of eBook reader or tablet owned?

These results provide a collection development conundrum during a series of flat budget years. If the library allocates more funds for popular reading, that means less money could be used for academic titles. A judgment call will have to be made. One respondent made an interesting point: "I have used electronic versions of texts for research, especially dissertations and things that aren't available or are not widely available in print. I have also occasionally used Project Gutenberg and other online collections to access primary sources and literature. Though I have tried to read eBooks for leisure, I just don't like it."

Conclusion

The results of this survey may not be fully generalizable due to the small sample size. The questions rely on self-reporting, instead of direct observation and usage statistics, which could have skewed the results. Another limitation was that the demographics were not mapped to the survey responses, which makes it difficult to determine which disciplines are currently using eBooks and eBook readers. A larger sample size

and more intentional mapping of responses could result in more generalizable results.

Libraries operate as a driver of new technologies on university campuses. We try new technologies and implement those that serve an informational need and discard those that do not. The literature reveals an agreement in the market that print books are not going away in the foreseeable future. Many disciplines, such as art, history, and English still rely heavily on the medium. The feel and weight of a book still appeals to a number of readers. While the survey shows that our patrons are interested in bestsellers, this result may be skewed by the large number of staff that responded (20.4%). After reviewing the results alongside our collection development policies, it is clear that the purview of the library is not to provide bestsellers but to support the University's curricular needs. We maintain a small print browsing collection that we will rely on to meet the needs of our patrons and may consider an eBook bestseller collection if budget permits, but it will not be our primary focus.

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As any collection development librarian is aware, it takes time, thought, and much effort to grow a library's collection. UM does not participate in an approval plan, so other than a small number of standing orders, books are selected on a title-by title basis. As a result of this survey, we have decided to focus our collection development efforts on the humanities and fine arts. We will soon purchase a group of eBooks from Project Muse to implement a pilot program. This survey helped the UM Library to better understand our users' needs, interests, and expectations regarding eBooks and eBook readers. Hopefully it will do the same for other academic libraries.

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