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Allan Scherlen
Appalachian State University, scherlnag@appstate.edu

John P. Abbott
Appalachian State University, abbottjp@appstate.edu

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Are Midsize Academic Libraries on the Right E-Book Train?

Allan Scherlen, *Social Sciences Librarian, Appalachian State University*

John P. Abbott, *Coordinator, Collection Management, Appalachian State University*

Abstract

Librarians and their vendors were invited to a lively lunch discussion of the fate of books in midsize academic libraries. Do the monograph acquisition models advocated by many R-1 librarians at recent Charleston Conferences fit the needs of midsize academic libraries? These radical new models appear to assume almost full migration to e-books and include such strategies as wholesale movement to e-book-only approval; large leased e-book packages; and expansive DDA offerings of e-books in the catalog. Should midsize academic libraries, which are more often faced with unpredictable budget cycles, limited resources, and a different set of priorities, follow the R-1's lead, or should they find monograph acquisition models better suited to their needs? Participants had the opportunity to explore these issues with the moderators' guidance and to offer ideas on blending the best of the emerging R-1 models with the differing needs of midsize academic libraries.

Background for the Discussion

The presenters had attended an impressive number of Charleston sessions in 2012 that professed the importance of shifting academic libraries away from print books and toward e-books in dramatic new ways. Some of these sessions were led by librarians from major Research-1 (R-1) institutions where they were embracing these dramatic changes both in the format of their books and in the way they were acquired. These models included such strategies as wholesale movement to e-book only approval; large leased e-book packages; and expansive DDA offerings of e-books in the catalog. It seemed to us the whole congregation at Charleston, including many librarians from institutions with very different missions and budgets when compared to the R-1s, were jumping on board the e-book train without much question, concern, or thorough consideration for the needs and interests of their own academic users. Therefore, the presenters saw a need to host a discussion session at the 2013 Charleston Conference specifically for librarians from midsize academic libraries to voice their concerns about hastily boarding the fast moving e-book train in the same way as those daring R-1 library advocates. But before continuing, it is important to define midsize academic library as determined by the presenters. "Midsize" is not a measure of the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) students, but rather is better estimated by monographic budget

expenditures, in this case. For our purposes, midsize libraries are those with an approximate annual monograph budgets between \$150,000 and \$600,000 and which generally include universities most often classified in the Carnegie class Masters/L.

Libraries at Midsize Universities Are Different from Those at Research-1s

At the heart of the presenters' concerns is the difference between the needs of library patrons in midsize academic institutions and the needs of those in R-1 institutions. Librarians at midsize libraries are increasingly aware of these differences both in terms of their missions and in terms of their operations. Unlike R-1 flagship libraries, midsize academic libraries are more often constrained by unpredictable budget cycles and limited resources. They generally do not have luxury of buying the same range of e-resources as R-1s nor the possibility of purchasing both print and e-versions to accommodate users of different preferences. Midsize libraries, which are generally smaller institutions than their R-1 counterparts, may feel more often a greater urgency to respond to the specific wishes of their faculty and students, particularly when they express ambivalence about being moved to new formats. It feels particularly important to librarians at these more intimate institutions to get a clear understanding from their faculty and students regarding their resource preferences.

The Call to E-Books

One reason for acquiescence among some librarians to join the call to the mass e-book migration was an assumption that users were demanding the transition. After all, was it not announced that Amazon's Kindle sales had exceeded their print sales after April 2011 (Miller & Bosman, 2011)? And various indicators seemed to reveal that library users were ready for e-books: The *2012 Survey of E-Book Usage in U.S. Academic Libraries* indicates 94% of academic libraries offer e-books to users and 77% expect e-book use to increase. However, the presenters looked at user surveys and found some data that gave them pause in assuming everyone at midsize institutions wanted e-books for all uses. For example, a study at Wellesley College in conjunction with Springer, *E-Book Use and Acceptance in an Undergraduate Institution* (Lenares, Smith, & Boissy, 2012), examined the e-book preferences of faculty and students at one small institution (2,300 FTE). This study did not reveal an overwhelming preference for e-books by either faculty or students. At best, this survey indicated a willingness to accept the format, but not a demand for the e-book format. When the study looked at preferences by discipline, the number of users who preferred e-books was quite small, under 15%, across all disciplines.

Another study the presenters found interesting was the *Ithaca S+R US Faculty Survey 2012* (Housewright, Schonfeld, & Wulfson, 2013) which examined faculty satisfaction with monograph formats. It too did not show users expressing an overwhelming desire for e-books, but was interesting in that it showed that users preferred print for some types of book use and digital for other types of use. Essentially, the users appeared to prefer print for more extensive reading and electronic for searching and exploring references. Moreover, when asked in 2009 and again in 2012 if "within the next 5 years, the use of e-books will be so prevalent among faculty and students that it will not be necessary to maintain library collections of hard-copy books" fewer than 20% of the 2012 humanities, social sciences, or sciences faculty surveyed agreed strongly with the prediction (p. 34). Granted, the percentage had

increased from the single-digit percentiles measured in 2009. Similarly, Smyth and Carlin (2012) found undergraduates report they use e-books more often, but prefer paper books.

Do the Monograph Acquisition Models Fit the Needs of Midsize Academic Libraries?

As noted earlier, the presenters were interested if other librarians from midsize libraries had concerns about making radical shifts to e-book-only collection strategies. These strategies include: e-book-only approval, large leased e-book packages, and dropping large numbers of DDA e-books in the catalog. Part of this concern stemmed from problems librarians at midsize libraries have experienced with e-books thus far. These e-book problems include patron confusion about varying loan periods for different vendors (often shorter than for paper), barriers to interlibrary loan and resource sharing, inability to download or read some e-books offline, printing limitations, confusing download instructions for some platforms, and the frustration of differing interfaces. Added to these concerns were the facts that some titles are not available in e-versions at the same time as their print counterparts, leased packages are often backlist titles, and there is often a significantly higher firm order cost for e-versions over print for many titles.

The Discussion

The presenters expected disagreement from the audience during the lively lunch discussion and were fully expecting to be convinced that they must be missing key issues that attract so many libraries to take the e-book train, leaving print book back at the station. But the audience members contributed numerous concerns of their own. For example, one attendee noted her concern about changes in platforms as one e-book company is purchased by another and the possible associated cost of upgrading e-books purchased in the older platform. The attendee expressed apprehension about being left with yet another expensive obsolete technology to upgrade. Some audience members wanted to wait and see how the e-book market settled out, letting the better funded and staffed R-1's do the

experimenting first. One expressed concern about the shift to in-mass buying and the end of professional selection. One attendee observed that patrons often used e-books as an index to the paper book, which would then be checked out or interlibrary borrowed. There was concern that there would be no immutable copy of record in the e-book sphere. Another was concerned about the lack of interlibrary loan for most packages and

a possible end of resource sharing. And the final concerns of note were about continuing subscription or hosting fees and the extensive training overhead for patrons and library staff. All in all, the discussion created more questions than answers, but it did show that the matter of e-books, at least for midsize libraries, is far from settled.

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