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Assessing Large E-Book Collections: Is the Past a Roadmap for Developing Collections of the Future?

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Abstract

Many academic libraries rely heavily on massive prepackaged e-book collections from vendors such as EBSCO and ProQuest to support their research communities. This shift away from traditional collection development is seen as a budget-friendly strategy to provide current monographs across many disciplines. Librarians at Shenandoah University questioned whether their largest e-book subscriptions, ProQuest's Ebook Central and EBSCO's eBook Academic Collection, measured up to standard collection development tools. This study uses the Outstanding Academic Titles lists published by *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* as a benchmark to measure the quality of large e-book collections. By analyzing five years' worth of Outstanding Academic Titles in each e-book collection, librarians began to evaluate the relevance of large, prepackaged e-book subscriptions.

Introduction

In the current climate of dwindling book budgets, practices of collection building for many libraries now depend on purchasing e-book collections rather than individual print titles. Prepackaged e-book collections offer libraries less control over individual titles and the quality of those titles. During the summer of 2017, the electronic resources librarian and the information literacy librarian at Shenandoah University conducted an assessment of the library's major e-book collections using *Choice* Outstanding Academic Titles (OAT) lists.

The editors of *Choice* publish an annual list of best books, typically used as a standard in book collection practices. In this assessment project, the library's e-book holdings in ProQuest's Ebook Central (formerly ebrary) and EBSCO's eBook Academic Collection were compared to *Choice* OAT lists for five years, from 2012 to 2016.

Currently, the library holds approximately 300,000 titles in its ProQuest and EBSCO collections. Using the *Choice* lists as a standard for comparison, the goals of this project include:

- Evaluating the suitability of our major e-book collections.
- Identifying strategies for building high-quality e-book collections appropriate for the university's curricula.
- Determining e-book title quality.
- Reviewing collection development policies for relevancy.

As an initial step in this study, the SU librarians examined the professional literature to determine how other libraries are assessing their e-book collections and the challenges they face while engaging in this process.

Literature Review

Traditional best practices for evaluating collection relevancy and coverage do not always apply to massive e-book subscriptions. The volume of the collections, available staff hours, and necessary subject expertise discourage a title-by-title approach. Many schools rely on usage statistics to measure their returns on e-book investments, but curricular demands vary broadly from one school to another, so one-size-fits-all collections may offer students the wrong books for their programs.

The ubiquity of massive e-book packages in academic libraries of every size has been a source of both joy and consternation for librarians. According to Steven Shapiro (2016), the so-called "big deals" offer huge variety and volume, just like the enormous digital journal collections that preceded them by a few years (p. 287). Established providers like EBSCO, ProQuest, Springer, and others offer multidisciplinary collections designed to meet student needs at a fraction of the cost of hand-selecting monographs the old-fashioned way.

These "big deals" have certainly streamlined the acquisition process, which traditionally is managed one title or series at a time. Stephen Brooks (2013)

notes that librarians can now purchase thousands of e-books in less than an hour (p. 28). Ease of acquisition is complemented by simplified processing, since dealing with familiar vendors ensures that e-book package adoptions slip neatly into established workflows in many libraries (Brooks, 2013, p. 28). Thousands of titles become available to students overnight, without a librarian so much as glancing at most of their MARC records. According to Shapiro, those same titles can just as suddenly disappear when libraries decide not to renew their subscriptions (Shapiro, 2016, p. 288).

Libraries that rely so heavily on a vendor's discretion for a significant portion of their collection development have identified several deficiencies in both usage and quality of their large e-book packages. For example, libraries often negotiate digital rights management (DRM) at the vendor or publisher level. With one platform hosting thousands of books from dozens of publishers, however, libraries settle for limited negotiating space. To protect publishers' rights, vendors like EBSCO maintain a "least common denominator effect," wherein the bundled publishers' DRM restrictions must all be acknowledged, at the expense of library flexibility and patron use (Brooks, 2013, p. 28).

DRM concerns raise the question of whether libraries have surrendered the access and management of thousands of their titles to outsiders. Equally concerning is the degree to which librarians may have lost control of the quality of those collections. Vendors that aggregate so many titles command unprecedented sway over what students see and use, or never get to see at all. Students' options can even change over the course of a semester, because "big deal" collections can drop titles whenever their agreements with publishers change (Shapiro, 2016, p. 288).

Helen Georgas studied e-book titles that disappeared from ebrary's Academic Complete e-book collection at the library of Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. Georgas (2015) reports that in 2013 ebrary Academic Complete deleted approximately 3% of the titles her library had subscribed to (p. 887). It would be reasonable for an aggregator to weed outdated titles from rapidly changing disciplines; that is not always the case with large e-book collections. In Georgas's (2015) study, most of the 3,462 deletions were less than a decade old, and were pulled most heavily from social sciences, history, and internal medicine (p. 886).

Disappearing e-books are part of a larger concern over how reliable "big deal" collections are. As with their weeding policies, vendors are not always transparent about their selection criteria for their massive collections. In traditional collection development, librarians rely on their own expertise and consult experts to build their collections. *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* is one of the most widely used sources for collection building. Comparing recent bundled e-book collections to *Choice's* annual list of Outstanding Academic Titles offers insight into how similar the current "big deal" approach is to traditional collection development.

Is *Choice* a suitable collection development standard? Karen Carter Williams examined *Choice* OAT titles in Auburn University at Montgomery's collection. She determined that OAT titles did not circulate more frequently than other titles (Carter Williams & Best, 2006, p. 476). Michael Levine-Clark and Margaret Jobe studied *Choice* usage among librarians in eight Colorado academic libraries, and found different results among a larger pool of participants. They discovered books on the *Choice* OAT list were more likely to be purchased and, in some disciplines, more likely to be used "at least once" by students (Levine-Clarke & Jobe, 2007, p. 645). In a 2008 article by the same authors, Jobe and Levine-Clarke report that *Choice* OAT titles are not demonstrably more widely circulated, but are more likely to be used at least once (p. 302).

Description of Project/Methodology

Using *Choice* OAT lists as a standard, Shenandoah University librarians evaluated the quality of their two largest e-book collections. This was accomplished by searching each collection for five years' worth of OAT titles, 3,039 total titles. Five years was considered a sufficient sample size and a good baseline for future evaluations.

To ensure that no titles were missed, the OAT lists for 2014–2016, provided by *Choice* in Excel files, were modified to include fields for recording e-book collection information. Columns titled "Contained in Ebook Central," "Contained in EBSCO eBook Academic Collection," and "Contained in another library electronic resource, if so, which one(s)" were added to the original spreadsheets. OAT lists for 2012 and 2013 were not available as Excel files.

Based on recommendations from the circulation supervisor, reliable student workers were trained

and tasked with looking up each title from the OAT lists in both Ebook Central and EBSCO eBook Academic Collection. From July to September 2017 students searched e-book collections for *Choice* OAT titles. This process was overseen by the circulation supervisor, the electronic resources librarian, and the information literacy librarian, who was responsible for Public Services.

For each title, students recorded whether or not the e-book was included in one or both of the e-book collections. If the e-book was available as a different edition, that was documented as well. Searches were performed in each e-book collection platform to rule out inconsistencies in the library's discovery tool. The 2012 and 2013 OAT lists were printed out and holdings information was recorded on the paper lists beside each title. These paper lists were later entered manually into Excel files.

Results

During the project, 3,039 OAT titles were searched in EBSCO eBook Academic Collection and ProQuest's Ebook Central with 755 and 676 titles found in each collection respectively. In other terms, 25% of the OAT titles were found in EBSCO eBook Academic Collection and 22% of the OAT titles were found in ProQuest's Ebook Central. Table 1 shows the data gathered for each year and collection.

A comparison between EBSCO ebook Academic Collection and Ebook Central indicates that there was very little difference in the number of OAT titles

included in each collection. In many cases, the same Outstanding Academic Titles were included in both e-book collections, indicating very little unique content between the two collections for the purposes of this study (see Figure 1).

Figure 2 provides a better illustration of the relationship between the total number of *Choice* OAT titles and the percentage included in SU Library's two major e-book collections.

Analysis

While this study had a narrow focus, the data gathered provides a starting point for evaluation of the appropriateness of the library's large e-book collections. Based on the collected data, the number of *Choice* OAT titles included in the library's major e-book collections was never more than 29% per collection per year and has steadily fallen since 2012, down to roughly 12% per collection in 2016. Data indicated that there was significant overlap in titles between the two resources.

Given the results of the eBook Assessment Project, it was difficult to determine if the large e-book collections purchased by the library add quality to Shenandoah University's collections. While the *Choice* OAT lists provide a starting point for evaluation, the lists require further review to determine to what degree OAT titles support SU's curricular needs. The OAT lists are not the only collection development tool available to the library. Looking at subject-specific areas may provide additional information regarding the quality of the university's current e-book collections.

Table 1. *Choice* OAT titles in EBSCO ebook Academic Collection and Ebook Central, 2012–2016.

<i>Choice</i> Outstanding Academic Title (OAT) List Year	Total OAT Titles	OAT titles in EBSCO eBook Academic Collection	Percentage of OAT titles in EBSCO eBook Academic Collection	OAT titles in <u>Ebook Central</u>	Percentage of OAT titles in <u>Ebook Central</u>
2012	644	185	28.72%	187	29.03%
2013	639	185	29.95%	155	24.26%
2014	660	183	27.73%	157	23.79%
2015	599	135	22.54%	120	20.03%
2016	493	67	13.59%	57	11.56%

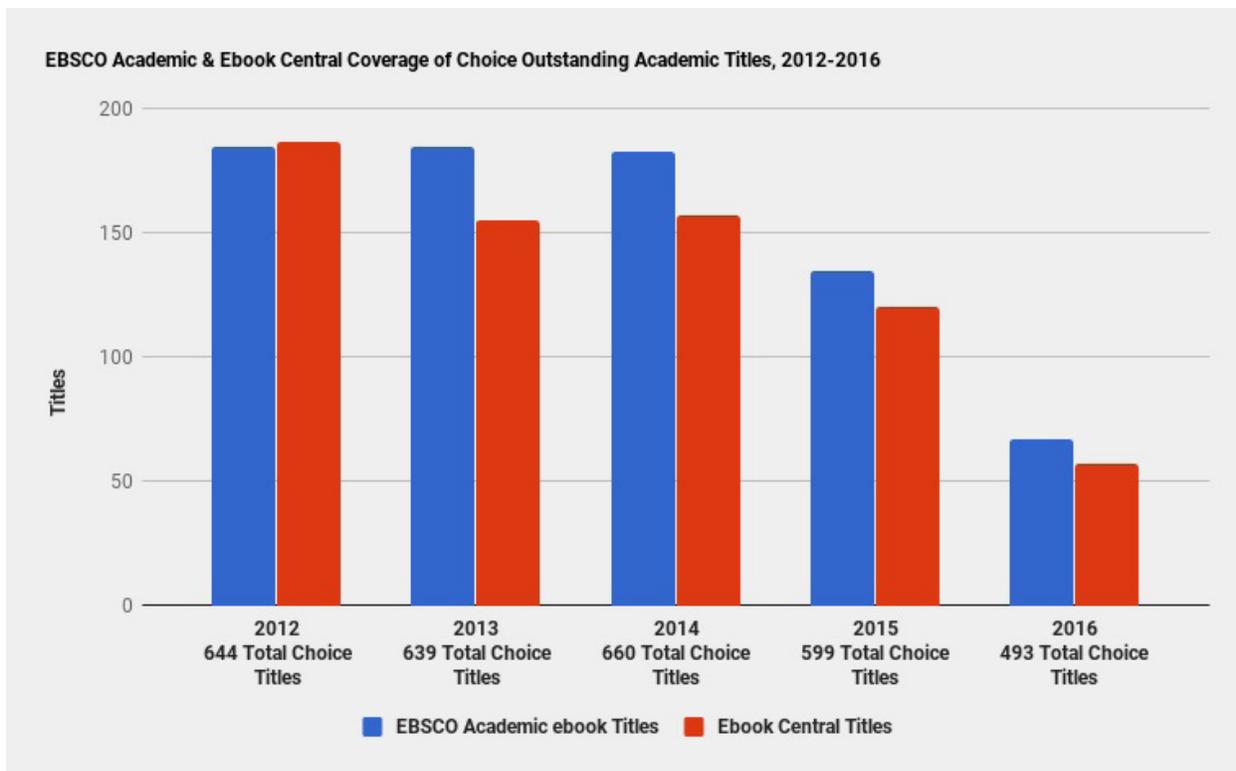


Figure 1. EBSCO Academic and Ebook Central coverage of *Choice* Outstanding Academic Titles, 2012–2016.

EBSCO ebook Academic Collection & Ebook Central coverage of *Choice* Review Outstanding Academic Titles, 2012-2016

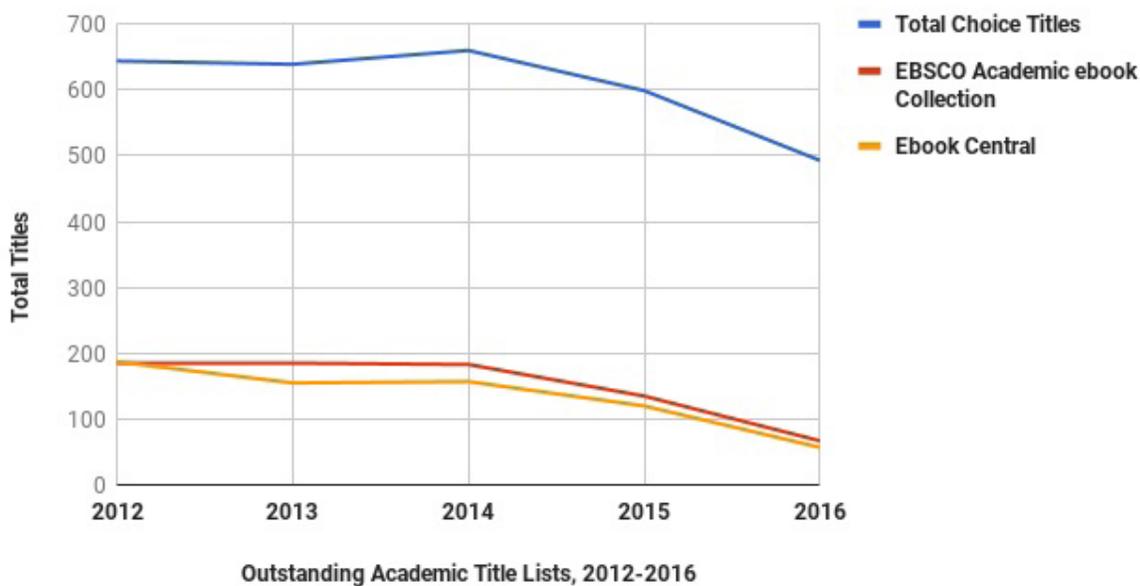


Figure 2. EBSCO ebook Academic Collection and Ebook Central coverage of *Choice*-reviewed Outstanding Academic Titles, 2012–2016.

The following list highlights areas for further study by the library.

- Review the Choice OAT lists to determine whether titles would support the curriculum at Shenandoah University.
- Repeat the assessment using Resources for College Libraries.
- Identify subject areas for further research.
- Investigate the overlap of titles between these two collections to determine the value of the unique titles.

In addition to identifying these areas of further research, this project revealed questions that the library should review as it continues to assess its collections and resources.

Conclusions

This evaluation is the first step in an evolving project to assess the library's e-book collections. The present research reveals that large e-book subscriptions may be compensating with quantity for lackluster quality. Additional collection development and assessment research will be needed to assist the Shenandoah

University Library in developing the best possible collections for the university community. Many questions remain, such as:

- Does the library's collection development policy accurately reflect the process of acquiring and maintaining resources?
- Is the purchase of large e=book collections the best way to support the university's curriculum?
- What consideration, if any, should be given to usage data or interlibrary loan statistics?
- Would citation analysis provide additional information to assist in building collections?

This project attempts to test a standard against which to measure the quality of large e-book subscriptions, so librarians can make careful, informed decisions. However, analyzing such collections after they have already been purchased strips libraries of their initiative and budget flexibility. Therefore, librarians engaged in collection analysis/assessment need to incorporate more than one standard as a measure of curricular support and take advantage of every opportunity to collaborate with teaching faculty to ensure relevance of the library's collections and resources.

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