

## Against the Grain

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# Biz of Acq-Student Attitudes Toward Academic Use of eBooks

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# Biz of Acq — Student Attitudes Toward Academic Use of eBooks

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## Introduction

A 1981 *Library Journal* article by **Nora Rawlinson** entitled “Give ’Em What They Want!” articulated the philosophy that librarians should provide their users with content they want, not what librarians think they should have.<sup>1</sup> The dramatic increase in patron-driven acquisitions programs makes it clear that the “give ’em what they want” philosophy has prevailed.

But what do college students want? Librarians and educators have been talking about the so-called millennial student or digital native for a decade now. The assumption is that students who grew up using computers want to use computing devices for everything, including their academic work. The recent media attention on increased consumer eBook purchasing and reading on Kindles, Nooks, and iPads has fueled the assumption that millennial students want eBooks rather than print.

Students, however, interact with academic texts differently than recreational texts. In helping students with their research assignments, it’s not unusual to hear traditionally-aged students say “But I want a print book,” even when the reference librarian offers a perfectly relevant and current eBook. To ascertain the prevalence of student preference for print books for academic use, librarians at **Schmidt Library of York College of Pennsylvania (YCP)** decided to gather some hard evidence rather than rely on assumptions and anecdotes.

## Literature Review

The past five or so years have seen a plethora of studies conducted on how students perceive and use eBooks. Among the attitudinal studies that cover a broad spectrum of disciplines is a 2007 study by **Walton** in which 56.3 percent of students in his small liberal

arts university stated a preference for hard copy for research.<sup>2</sup> **Gregory’s** 2008 study indicated 66 percent of undergraduates preferred physical books.<sup>3</sup> A more recent 2011 study at **University of California** found that 58 percent of the undergraduates preferred print over eBooks for academic use. The UC students cited the difficulty of learning, retaining, and concentrating while in front of a computer.<sup>4</sup> Would a survey at **YCP** reveal a print preference among a similar percentage of students?

## Background

**YCP** is a four-year institution with a professional curriculum in a liberal arts environment. **YCP** offers fifty undergraduate majors as well as graduate programs in nursing, business, and education. Of the 5,176 total student headcount in Spring 2012, 4,251 were full-time undergraduates, 678 part-time undergraduates, and 247 graduate students. The majority of students are middle class. With the exception of a newly developed Doctor of Nursing Practice program, **YCP** does not offer distance education; however, nearly a quarter of the students are commuters.

eBooks were initiated at **YCP** in 2001 with the purchase of **netLibrary** titles (now **EBSCO eBooks**). Since then, **YCP** has acquired eBooks from a number of sources, including **ACLS**, **Gale**, **Credo**, **SAGE**, and most recently a patron-driven model initiated with **Ebook Library (EBL)** in September 2010. By Spring 2012, **YCP** students had access to more than 94,000 eBooks, the majority of which were

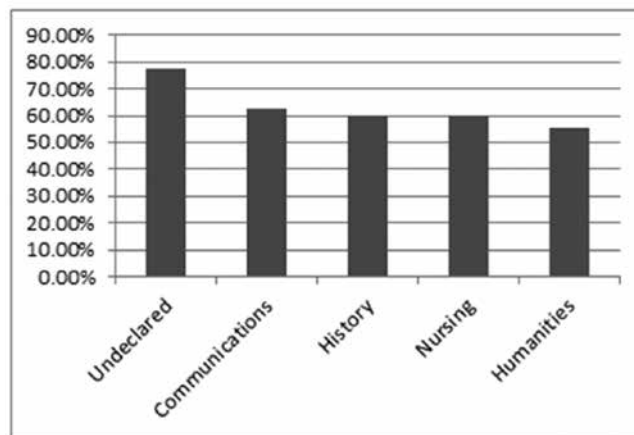


Figure 2: Majors Preferring Print

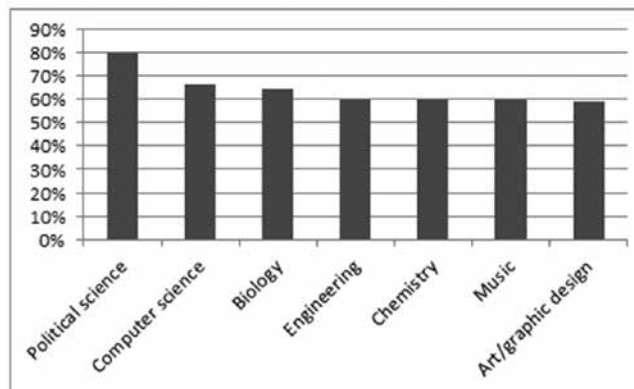


Figure 3: Majors Preferring eBooks

accessible from **EBL** via MARC records loaded in the library catalog as well as vendor links on the Library’s Web pages.

## Survey Methodology and Demographics

An online attitudinal survey was administered to the **YCP** student body to ascertain their preferences towards print books and eBooks. The survey was announced via the campus-wide portal and fielded from April 10 to April 28, 2012. The design was partially borrowed with permission from the **University of California** 2011 eBook study. A secondary goal of the **YCP** survey was to determine student preferences for reading devices. Locally designed questions were developed to ascertain whether students prefer using various types of academic material in print or on a desktop/laptop, tablet, ereader, or smartphone. Survey instructions asked students to consider use of

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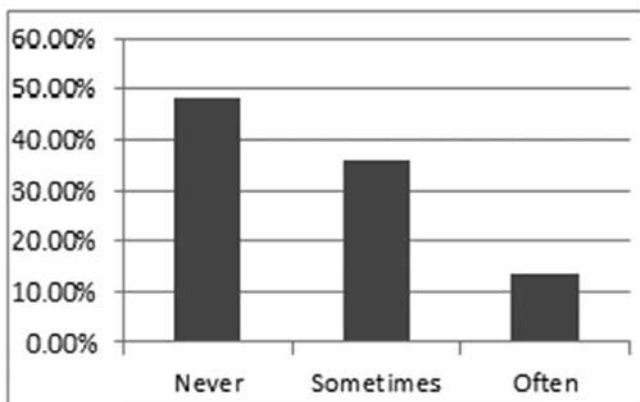


Figure 1: Use of eBooks

books for academic work only, not recreational reading. No incentives were offered. Of the total student headcount, 374 self-selected to participate, a response rate of 7.2%. Not all respondents answered all survey questions.

### Results

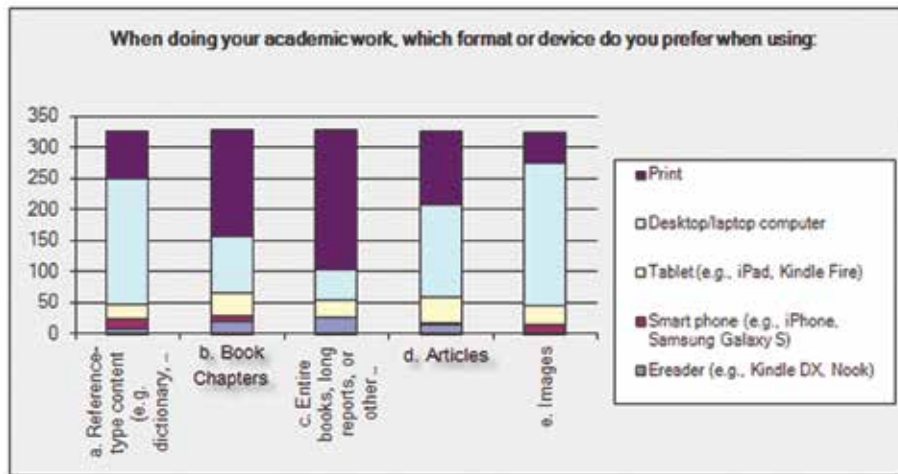
Of the 374 respondents, when asked if they used eBooks for their academic work, 48.4% said they do not use eBooks at all; 35.8% said they use them sometimes; 13.9% said they use them often; 1.9% said they weren't sure. See Figure 1. The subset that used eBooks were asked whether they prefer print or eBooks; 38.9% stated a preference for print, 43.3% preferred eBooks, and 17.8% had no preference.

The percentage of respondents among undergraduate levels was fairly evenly distributed: 18% freshman, 24% sophomore, 28% junior, and 25% senior responded to the survey. Only 15 graduate students responded. There were no significant differences in the first three years as to eBook avoidance; 53.6% of freshmen, 50.5% of sophomores, and 50% of juniors indicated preferring print over eBooks. Among seniors, however, only 42.6% preferred print. The rate of eBook use among graduate students was even higher, with only 33% preferring print.

Significantly more females (71%) than males (29%) responded to the survey. Males indicated a greater preference for eBooks (56%) than females (47%). Ages of respondents ranged from 18 or younger (7.4%) to a majority in the 19-22 year-old range (71.4%) with the remainder being 23 or older (21.2%). Of those 22 years old or younger (295, or 79%), 50% indicated that they don't use eBooks at all, 37% use eBooks sometimes, and 13% often use them.

Respondents were asked to indicate their major. Percentage-wise, majors who most preferred print were undeclared (77.8%), communications (62.5%), history (60%), nursing (60%), and humanities (55.6%). See Figure 2. Majors that most preferred eBooks included political science (80%), computer science (66.7%), biology (64.5%), engineering (60%), chemistry (60%), music (60%), art/graphic design (59%), and behavioral sciences (53.4%). See Figure 3.

For students who identified themselves as eBook users, the survey asked what they wanted to do with eBooks during the course of their academic work. Of the 156 who responded, nearly everyone (94%) expressed the importance of being able to search for words or phrases within the book, with over 65% indicating searchability as a very important feature. The majority of students also wanted the ability to print relevant pages or chapters (83%), copy and paste portions of text (80%), highlight (79%), and annotate (75%). Significant numbers of students wanted to download chapters (76%) or the entire eBook (74%) to a computing device, or read it on a mobile device or ereader (69%). Fewer students felt



**Figure 4: Format and Device Preferences by Content Type and Computing Device**

that citation management (64%) or finding a print edition of the book (52%) were important, while only 35% thought sharing the content of an eBook was important.

The eBook users answered a question concerning satisfaction with certain aspects of eBooks for academic work. Overall satisfaction with eBooks was 59%. Sixty-eight percent were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of eBook content and 66% were satisfied with the ease of use. Satisfaction with availability of relevant subject content (52%) and ease of finding eBooks (49%) did not fair as well. A follow-up question on how students discovered eBooks showed general Internet searches engines as the top method (50%). The next most popular methods were the professor (36%), the library's Summon discovery service (35%), library Webpages (32%), library catalog (32%), and eBook provider Websites such as **EBL** and **Gale** (30%).

To delve deeper into the reasons students prefer one type of book over another, the survey posed an open-ended question about which format the student would choose if a book were available in both paper and eBook format. An analysis of the comments revealed categories of reasons for preferences. For students who preferred eBooks, the reasons revolved mostly around the book's physicality and accessibility/convenience. Physicality reasons were mainly the portability of an eBook, i.e., it's easier to "carry" books on a laptop or mobile device, but also included not having to worry about getting to the library, finding, losing, or returning a print book. After physicality, the most popular responses for eBook users fell into the 24/7 accessibility and the convenience of eBooks. Other reasons cited for eBook preference included, in descending order, usability (easy to search for keywords, copy/paste, tag pages), financial considerations (they believed eBooks were cheaper), preference for consolidating all academic work on one device, and environmental concerns (save the trees). It should be noted that while this survey was not intended to address textbooks, some of the comments indicate that at least some of the students had textbooks in mind as they completed the survey.

Students who stated a preference for print books cited usability as the primary reason. They believed print books are easier to navigate (using table of contents, index, and other visual cues) and interact with (highlighting, annotating, flipping back and forth, marking multiple pages). They felt that eBooks are not user friendly. After usability, the greatest number of comments fell into the physicality category, but for print users, the physicality of print books meant less strain on the eyes, fewer headaches (because of not reading from a screen), and the sheer tactile experience of using print books. Like the eBook-preferred respondents, print-preferred respondents also had an accessibility/convenience category, but the comments dealt with the ability to take a print book anywhere and not have to rely on an electronic device or Internet access.

A significant number of comments concerning learning style were mentioned by the print-preferred users. These students claimed it is easier to focus on the content and task at hand using print, and that electronic devices offer too many distractions. Some students also said they absorb and comprehend information better when reading it on paper rather than on a computer monitor. Other comments mentioned an increased ability to remember information from the printed page rather than from a computer screen. For several students, print also facilitates looking at multiple resources simultaneously to compare texts, charts, and images.

Several print-preferred students cited financial reasons, but in contrast to the eBook users who believe eBooks are cheaper than print, these students cited an inability to afford a tablet or ereader. Some students were more comfortable with print due to its familiarity and others disliked having to switch among multiple windows on a computer. Finally, several students mentioned the importance of the permanence and immutability of print so they can refer back to it later and not worry that the content has changed.

Some students had no preference between print and eBooks. These students said the choice between print and electronic depends on the task at hand. They prefer the ease of

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carrying eBooks and searching them for keywords, then finding a print copy for immersive reading. Some recommended that the library offer both print and eBooks.

### Format and Device Preferences

In addition to ascertaining preferences between print and eBooks, the survey also included questions about student preferences for computing devices. Students were asked which format or device they prefer when using various types of academic content. The content types included reference content (e.g., dictionaries, encyclopedias), small portions of books (e.g., book chapters), entire books or other extensive readings, journal articles, and images. The choices for format or device were print, laptop/desktop, tablet, smartphone, and ereader. Laptop and desktop computers were combined because they both offer full computing functionality and large screens. Of the 327 responses to this question, laptop/desktop got the most overall votes (725) in the five categories as well as the most votes for reference content (203), journal articles (250), and images (231). Print, with 638 overall responses, got the highest votes for reading entire books or other lengthy text (224) as well as shorter texts such as book chapters (171). Smartphones registered the least number of overall responses (39) and zero responses for reading entire books. See Figure 4.

When asked which computing devices they own or use regularly, nearly all (95%) students said they have a laptop computer. The next most common device was a smart phone (60%). Among the smart phone owners, all but 3.5% had Internet access for it. Thirty-eight percent of students had a desktop, 22% a tablet, and 19% an ereader.

### Discussion

The survey results provide evidence that student preferences are varied, nuanced, and unpredictable. Some students prefer print, some prefer eBooks, and some prefer print sometimes and eBooks at other times depending on the task at hand. The reasons for their preferences vary but have to do mostly with physicality, usability, convenience, and learning style. The responses ranged from students who wanted only print books, to those who wanted only eBooks, and many in between who wanted both print and eBooks, but for different reasons. eBooks are preferred for portability, convenience, and searchability. Print books are easier to use and interact with while providing fewer distractions such as checking social media sites. These results support Shelburne<sup>5</sup> and other recent studies in which a significant number of students say they want a combination of formats. Staiger provides a comprehensive synthesis of numerous eBook studies conducted in academic libraries between 2006 and 2011 capturing the

nuances of eBook versus print advantages and disadvantages.<sup>6</sup>

Technology affects how students interact with text. Many students commented that they do not use eBooks because they are too hard to use. Even among eBook users, only 66% were satisfied with their ease of use. The inconsistency in navigation, functionality, and DRM restrictions across the various platforms requires students to re-learn how to use an eBook on each platform, which they may not have the time or willingness to do. The same is not true with print, where using one book is the same as using another. Using an eBook is not as intuitive as print nor has it yet replicated the ease of using print.

Preferences broken out by major supported some assumptions while negating others. For example, that 60% of history majors do not use eBooks but 68% of computer science majors do was expected. That 80% of political science/international relations majors use eBooks, however, was not expected. Likewise, the occasional use of eBooks by 45% of humanities students was higher than expected. The biggest surprise was that 60% of nursing students do not use eBooks at all. Of the 40% of nursing students who use eBooks, half prefer print. Tentative plans had been made to expand eBooks in the area of nursing due to their short shelf-life and to support a new Doctor of Nursing Practice program, much of which requires remote access to Library resources. Those plans must be re-evaluated in light of this evidence.

The results showing that 67% of graduate students use eBooks suggest a greater use of eBooks among graduate than undergraduate students. While only a small number of graduate students responded to the survey, other studies support the fact that graduate students use eBooks more than undergraduates do. Both Levine-Clark<sup>7</sup> and the 2011 University of California Libraries study found that graduate students use eBooks at a greater rate than undergraduates. Could it be that the 24/7 convenience of eBooks trumps any awkwardness in their usability for graduate students, many of whom juggle full-time jobs and family responsibilities with their studies? Perhaps eBook use for them is a necessity rather than a preference.

There was a discrepancy in student desire to use mobile devices for reading. In Question 7, eBook users were asked what they wanted to do with an eBook once they found it. Sixty-nine percent wanted to read the book from a mobile device or ereader; however, in Question 12 when asked about device and format preferences for different types of content, no one indicated wanting to read an entire book or extensive text on a smartphone and only 8% each indicated wanting to read on a tablet or ereader. Question 7 was directed toward only the eBook users (print preference users bypassed this question) while all respondents had an opportunity to answer Question 12. This, however, doesn't explain the zero

response for reading on a smartphone. Did students interpret "mobile device" as including a laptop? Providing definitions of terminology in the survey instrument may have eliminated this confusion.

One of the surprising results was the relatively high number of students who stated a preference for using print reference content and print periodical articles. The instrument defined "reference" as dictionaries, encyclopedias, directories, statistics, and other similar types of content. Periodicals were defined as "journal or magazine articles." While the laptop/desktop option garnered the most votes for both reference and periodical articles, print was the next choice for reference (23%) and articles (37%), well above the tablet, e-reader, and smartphone options. These stated preferences are not supported by actual use of the library's print reference and periodical collections, which is extremely low. Overall, in terms of device preferences, the full functionality of laptops and desktops appears to be the favored student method for using academic material.

An intriguing discovery from this survey is the potential link between learning styles and print versus eBook preference. More than a few comments indicated that reading from print enhances the student's ability to focus, comprehend, and retain information. One student said, "I personally get more out of what I read when it's printed in front of me. Physically underlining or highlighting helps me to instill that information in my brain." Another student commented, "Reading the printed document also stays in [my] memory longer, easier to remember." Additional research is required to determine if there is a substantial link between a particular learning style and the geospatial aspects of reading from print.

### Conclusion

These survey results provide evidence that a student's choice between print and electronic books is complex. Age does not seem to be a factor nor does one's comfort with technology, as the majority of the respondents grew up using computers. Usability of eBooks is certainly a factor and points to the need for standardized eBook platforms and functionality. eBooks need to have the same functionality (highlighting, annotating, downloading, printing) across platforms but also be interoperable across a multitude of computing devices. Until these usage and standardization obstacles are overcome, eBook adoption by students most likely will not increase beyond the current level. NISO and other industry stakeholders must continue to address eBook usability standards to make eBooks easier and more attractive for academic purposes. Until then, there will be no tipping point from print to eBooks.

In the meantime, the hybrid environment with both print and electronic books will continue for the foreseeable future. Libraries will need to divide their limited budgets and find a balance between the two formats. As one student aptly commented, "I think that there should be access to both print and online resources for all academic reading for the needs of all different students." 🌸

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