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The Value of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Humanities E-Book Collection: Is It Worth the Cost?

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Introduction

Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM) is a regional university located in Montgomery, Alabama. The enrollment consists of 3,990 FTE undergraduate and graduate students (Auburn University at Montgomery, 2017). The library at AUM holds nearly 600,000 volumes, excluding government documents, along with more than 100 journal databases, which support student and faculty research. Over the past five years, the materials budget has decreased more than 30%, requiring collection reductions. Initial analysis determined that in addition to other items, one of the recommended products for elimination was the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Humanities E-Book project.

Started in 1999, this Andrew Mellon Foundation grant-funded project sought to produce 500 backlist titles and 85 new titles before 2002 (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, n.d.; Berger-Barrera). Titles covered in the project have publication dates ranging from 1895 to the present. (ACLS Humanities E-Book Collection – Overview, n.p.) The initial project included five learned societies (American Historical Association; Middle East Studies Association; Organization of American Historians; Renaissance Society of America; and the Society for the History of Technology) and ten university presses (University of California Press; Columbia University Press; Harvard University Press; Johns Hopkins University Press; the MIT Press; University of Michigan Press; New York University Press; University of North Carolina Press; Oxford University Press; and Rutgers University Press). To date, the ACLS E-Book project has published close to 5,150 titles (ACLS Humanities E-Book Collection – Overview, n.d.) After achieving financial self-sustainability in 2005, the project was renamed in 2007 as the Humanities E-Book (HEB) collection which allows “wide and unrestrictive access” without limitations on simultaneous access (Bullington, 2012, 32). The library did not wish to part with such a valuable resource like the HEB collection; however, financial reality required us to ask the fundamental question: is it cost-effective to continue providing access to this collection? To answer this question, the library 1) determined HEB titles with usage, 2) identified duplicated print titles of those HEB titles, and 3) analyzed the cost effectiveness of continued HEB subscription, or print title replacement. Using data-driven results, a proposal could be made to the library administration that both addressed financial reality as well as user needs.

Literature Review

It is a professional truth that collection development is one of the most essential operations in academic librarianship; however, as evidenced by the vast amount of existing literature, most academic librarians feel underprepared when tasked with managing a collection (Walters, 2016). This research adds to the literature to which individuals can refer when required to make difficult material reductions, specifically when handling print vs. electronic collections.

The first element to consider in analyzing collections, especially when required to make difficult choices, is the preferred format preference of their users (Littman & Connaway, 2004; Yuan, Ballegooie & Robertson, 2018; Christianson & Aucoin, 2005). While Littman and Connaway found in the early 2000s that e-book usage was “substantial” in comparison to their print counterparts, researchers are now noting that patron preference varies between print and electronic formats dependent on the user’s subject or discipline. Yuan, Ballegooie and Robertson confirmed other scholarship when they noted in their 2018 article that “scholars in the humanities expressed a preference for print books” as opposed to medical faculty who preferred digital access (Christianson and Aucoin, 2005; Carroll, Corlett-Rivera, Hackman and Zhou, 2016). User type also influenced the format preference with graduate students and faculty having a slight preference for e-books over the print equivalent. In preparation of this research, the authors reviewed literature that discussed the importance of evaluating usage statistics and cost-per-use data when analyzing print and electronic collections (Bailey, Scott, Best, 2015; Goertzen, 2016; Torbert, 2015).

Research Methodology

In the winter of 2018, a review took place of approximately five thousand titles in the Humanities E-Book collection with the titles’ usage statistics provided by the University of Michigan’s Digital Library Production. Next, identification of duplicate HEB titles were identified from the Library’s print collection with an analysis of usage. Using the library’s integrated library system, Voyager, monthly circulation reports for the print titles were compared to their twin e-titles usage statistics. In examining the circulations, care was taken to ensure that only the corresponding edition of a title was counted, and not later printings or editions. Lastly, a cost effective analysis divided the annual usage of the HEB titles by the

annual subscription cost. This was used to calculate the estimated print title replacement costs of identified HEB titles should the library discontinue the HEB subscription. Humanities E-Book collection subscription costs were current as of 2018, book vendor pricing were averages (Gobi, Baker & Taylor, etc.). Research findings provided the necessary information to strategically move forward in decision making.

Research Findings

Collection Review, Title Duplication and Usage Analysis

Research found that 88 Humanities E-Book titles had been used over 2,000 times – an average of 26 uses per title. Of these 88 e-titles, 39 had print duplicates. The usage analysis determined that of these duplicative items, the usage of the e-version far outpaced that of the print version: e-titles had 1,041 uses, an average circulation of 27 per title, while the print titles circulated 326 times, an average circulation of eight circulations per title (see Table 1).

Cost Effective Analysis

Research also concluded that based on the monthly usage and the annual subscription cost to Humanities E-Book collection the average cost per use is \$3.74. This was compared to the estimated costs for purchasing the 56 titles - the difference between the 88 HEB titles used and the 39 print title duplicates. Gobi pricing was used as a baseline, when pricing was available. If a title was not listed in Gobi, Alibris was used as a source. If a title was not available in either Gobi or Alibris, ABE Books was utilized (see Table 2).

In utilizing GOBI, the e-book title was matched against publication date, publisher, and editor (where available). A total of 48 titles were listed in Gobi, utilizing original retrieval prices. The average price for the Gobi print titles were \$51.24. With Alibris, five titles were priced, with an average cost of \$112.70. Only one title was listed only in ABE Books, with a cost of \$167.00. The two volumes of *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum: Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin translations and commentaries : annotated lists and guides* were not discoverable in any of the sites.

Reviewing the results of usage for both those group of titles which had print counterparts available, and those that did not, 95 titles of collection had 2,372 uses for an average of 25 uses per title. The total collection of ACLS books used represents only 2% of that collection, however, the use of the titles is significant.

Discussion

Research findings provided detailed information regarding this collection's value, better equipping subscription discussions with library administration. Findings show that amongst the duplicative titles, e-titles far outpaced that of the print versions; indicating a favorable usage pattern for

the Humanities E-Book collection. The cost analysis shows that it is more effective to continue the subscription than to discontinue and replace with print items. Having data that showed steady usage and reasonable cost per use for average cost per use gave support for continuing the subscription to the e-collection and provided the "ammunition" library administration needed to make the pragmatic decision for continuation of the subscription (Rogers, 2015).

In addition to the practical data offered, this study enriched understanding on the broader issues regarding academic libraries management of print and electronic collections. One significant issue encountered in this research was the inconsistent ways in which e-title usage is measured; usage can mean a hyperlink *click* and quick exit, a thirty-second site visit, or download. This inconsistent data can become problematic when compared with print title usage, which typically involves either borrowing data for circulating items, or other formal statistical record for non-circulating materials. This research further confirmed that though academic libraries consider finances – some more so than others – other motivators exist regarding print and electronic titles collections. First, some consider the issue of space; either they, or their institutions are limiting the library's physical facilities, and thus necessitating their transition from print to electronic (Bailey, Scott, & Best, 2015); Second, as evidenced in the literature review, several institutions must consider the format that their user groups preferred, which can really depend on the discipline of their users (Chrzastowski & Wiley, 2015; Yuan, Ballegoie and Robertson, 2018; Carroll, Corlett-Rivera, Hackman, & Zou, 2016).

Conclusion

After reviewing the data, the following determinations were made: 1) although a relatively small corpus of the titles available in the ACLS Humanities e-book collection has been used, the quality and subject areas covered are consistent with the curriculum offered at the university and are thus, a valuable resources; and 2) the average cost per use of the titles is small, and, given the costs of adding print versions of the titles the e-books used, quite inexpensive. The costs for cataloging and shelving the print copies acquired are not justifiable given the reduction in space that has taken place for library collections. Additionally, it was determined that the average number of uses per electronic titles (25) provides justification for maintaining the collection.

The heavy utilization of some titles is indicative of the research and instruction levels at the university, and demonstrates valuable support for the undergraduate and graduate programs in the humanities and social sciences, particularly in history, fine arts, political science and sociology. The ACLS Humanities e-Book collection is a worthwhile addition to the library, indicating students are concerned with access as compared to a specific format preference.

Table 1: E-book and print usage comparison of 39 duplicated titles

Title	ACLS E-Book Usage	Print Usage
Civil defense begins at home: militarization meets every day life in the fifties	363	24
The strange career of Jim Crow	139	26
Labor of love, labor of sorrow: Black women, work, and the family from slavery to the present	104	10
The murder of Charles the Good, count of Flanders	66	1
Righteous discontent: the women's movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920	56	5
Hellenism and homosexuality in Victorian Oxford	35	0
Origins of the new South, 1877-1913	28	7
Guatemalan Indians and the state, 1540-1988	27	5
White supremacy: a comparative in American and South African history	27	14
To the glory of her sex: women's roles in the composition of medieval texts	24	5
Mind-forg'd manacles: a history of madness in England from the restoration to the regency	18	1
When abortion was a crime: women, medicine, and law in the United States, 1867-1973	14	16
The Atlantic World, 1450-2000	13	0
Holy women of the Syrian orient	12	0
Margaret Fuller: an American romantic life	11	3
Populism to progressivism in Alabama	11	0
The encomienda in new Spain: the beginning of Spanish Mexico	11	4
Authentic fakes: religion and American popular culture	10	3
Strangers in the land: patterns of American nativism, 1860-1925	8	7
Women's silence, men's violence: sexual assault in England, 1770-1845	7	0
In search of history: historiography in the ancient world and the origins of Biblical history	6	2

Title	ACLS E-Book Usage	Print Usage
The Theatre in America during the revolution	6	12
American renaissance: art and expression in the age of Emerson and Whitman	5	8
Note-books and unpublished prose manuscripts by Walt Whitman	5	0
The politics of rage: George Wallace, the origins of the new conservatism, and the transformation of American politics	4	33
Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance	4	0
A world at arms: global history of World War II	3	5
The Alabama catalog: Historic American Buildings Survey: a guide to the early architecture of the state	3	0
The Columbia guide to the American Indians of the Great Plains	3	1
The wages of whiteness: race and the making of the American working class	3	6
America's forgotten pandemic: the influenza of 1918	2	6
Bibliography of English translations from medieval sources, 1943-1967	2	0
Medieval marriage: two models from twelfth-century France	2	9
Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave	2	19
Thayer's life of Beethoven	2	8
The medieval idea of marriage	2	6
Anatomy of criticism: four essays	1	12
Shakespearean negotiations: the circulation of social energy in Renaissance England	1	7
The Obama victory: how media, money, and message shaped the 2008 election	1	1
Total	1,041	326

Table 2: Pricing for e-titles used, but not held in print by AUM Library.

Title	E-Usage	Gobi Listed Cost	Alibris Listed Cost	ABE Books Listed Cost
Testing the chains: resistance to slavery in the British West Indies	316	\$35.00		
The Columbian voyages, the Columbian exchange, and their historians	108		\$77.43	
The old social classes and the revolutionary movements of Iraq: a study of Iraq's old landed and commercial classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers	82	\$135.00		
The Chetnik movement & the Yugoslav resistance	80	\$25.00		
Rethinking American history in a global age	74	\$60.00		
Byzantine mosaic decoration: aspects of monumental art in Byzantium	71	\$66.26		
Soul by soul: life inside the antebellum slave market	70	\$29.00		
The triumph of the moon: a history of modern pagan witchcraft	67	\$140.00		
Gay New York: gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 1890-1940	52	\$24.99		
Studying medieval women: sex, gender, feminism	51	\$15.00		
Roman homosexuality: ideologies of masculinity in classical antiquity	36	\$60.00		
Medieval handbooks of penance: a translation of the principal "libri poenitentiales" and selections from related documents	26	\$61.00		
Salvation and suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown	26	\$31.50		
Religious experience reconsidered: a building-block approach to the study of religion and other special things	25	\$26.95		
Buddhism after patriarchy: a feminist history, analysis, and reconstruction of Buddhism	24	\$49.50		
The chronicle of Jean de Venette	24		\$170.49	

Title	E-Usage	Gobi Listed Cost	Alibris Listed Cost	ABE Books Listed Cost
Catalogus translationum et commentariorum: Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin translations and commentaries : annotated lists and guides. Vol. 1	18	N/A	N/A	N/A
Power, caste, and law: social conflict in fourteenth-century Montpellier	15	\$26.00		
Spiritual marriage: sexual abstinence in medieval wedlock	15	\$52.50		
Burial and ancient society: the rise of the Greek city-state	14	\$42.50		
A spirited resistance: the North American Indian struggle for unity, 1745-1815	12	\$46.00		
Greek papyri: an introduction	9	\$16.75		
New religions and the theological imagination in America	9	\$25.00		
Matewan before the massacre: politics, coal, and the roots of conflict in a West Virginia mining community	7	\$27.95		
Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe	7		\$170.66	
On the future of history: the postmodernist challenge and its aftermath	7	\$59.00		
Prostitution and Victorian society: women, class, and the state	6	\$35.00		
Women, history & theory: the essays of Joan Kelly	6	\$18.00		
Holler if you hear me: searching for Tupac Shakur	5	\$24.00		
Re-inventing Africa: matriarchy, religion, and culture	5	\$65.00		
Surviving death	5	\$47.50		
Ilan Stavans: eight conversations	4	\$24.95		
No sweat: fashion, free trade, and the rights of garment workers	4	\$65.00		
Ritual and metaphor: sacrifice in the Bible	4	\$121.00		
The animal that therefore I am	4	\$80.00		

Title	E-Usage	Gobi Listed Cost	Alibris Listed Cost	ABE Books Listed Cost
The case for women in medieval culture	4	\$75.00		
Jim Crow New York: a documentary history of race and citizenship, 1777-1877	3	\$89.00		
Keepers of the game: Indian-animal relationships and the fur trade	3	\$29.95		
Lupus of Ferrieres as scribe and text critic: a study of his autograph copy of Cicero's De oratore	3		\$50.00	
October fifteenth: a history of modern Hungary, 1929-1945	3			\$167.00
Photography and the American scene: a social history, 1839-1889	3	\$13.95		
The sources for the early history of Ireland: an introduction and guide	3		\$94.95	
Arms and the woman: just warriors and Greek feminist identity	2	\$65.00		
Catalogus translationum et commentariorum: Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin translations and commentaries : annotated lists and guides. Vol. 2	2	N/A	N/A	N/A
Karl Popper, the formative years, 1902-1945: politics and philosophy in interwar Vienna	2	\$160.00		
Memoir of James Jackson: the attentive and obedient scholar, who died in Boston, October 31, 1833, aged six years and eleven months	2	\$37.50		
Natural particulars: nature and the disciplines in Renaissance Europe	2	\$58.00		
Re-dressing America's frontier past	2	\$23.95		
To 'joy my freedom: southern Black women's lives and labors after the Civil War	2	\$27.95		
Commerce and social standing in ancient Rome	1	\$29.50		
Ecotheology and the practice of hope	1	\$70.00		
Empire to commonwealth: consequences of monotheism in late antiquity	1	\$35.00		
Five films by Frederick Wiseman: Titicut follies, High school, Welfare,	1	\$65.00		

High school II, Public housing				
Inside Soviet film satire: laughter with a lash	1	\$60.00		
Linguistic means of determining the dates of Old English literary texts	1	\$32.00		
The revolution of the dons: Cambridge and society in Victorian England	1	\$52.50		
Total	1,331	\$2,459.65	\$563.53	\$167.00

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