

Spring 5-1-2023

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Recommended Citation

Stoupenos, Viki and Woods, Christine E. (2023) "Visibility, Promoting, and Marketing of Electronic Reference Books in Academic Libraries," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 71: Iss. 1, Article 13.

DOI: 10.32727/19.2023.4

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol71/iss1/13>

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Visibility, Promoting, and Marketing of Electronic Reference Books in Academic Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Are electronic reference books visible in academic libraries? A survey administered to librarians at colleges and universities in the southern United States is used to ascertain the presence and promotion of electronic reference books in academic libraries. Findings reveal that electronic reference books are not as visible in academic libraries (both online and in library buildings) as traditional print reference is. Librarians surveyed indicate they promote electronic reference books more than print reference books. To gain an understanding of what needs more marketing, librarians should examine usage statistics. Librarians should employ a variety of ways to market and promote electronic reference books, and assess which methods work best to reach patrons. In addition, librarians and classroom faculty should work together in collection development and in endorsing the usage of electronic reference books.

KEYWORDS

electronic reference books, reference in academic libraries, marketing, promoting, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Moving through a traditional academic library building, one will encounter a section designated for reference with signage and volumes that support accessing basic information to begin research on many subjects. As colleges offer more distance learning courses and degrees online, and college libraries increase online collections by purchasing more electronic reference books, how visible are electronic reference books within the library and online library? Are electronic reference books marketed or promoted to potential users? The purpose of this study is to understand what ways academic libraries currently make electronic reference books known to users and what methods are used to promote the usage of electronic reference books. The significance of this is that the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) promotes a Framework for Information Literacy which includes the concepts that “authority is constructed and contextual” and that “searching is a strategic exploration” (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016, p. 8).

Reference books (including electronic reference books) are the building blocks of information in professions by providing background, historical, and foundation content on subjects. So, if authority is constructed and contextual and searching is a strategic exploration, what ways do librarians make electronic reference books visible? How do librarians promote electronic reference books for use as the building blocks in academic study in college and university libraries?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rolfe (2011) expressed concern about the overabundance of electronic reference books that may go unnoticed and unused in academic libraries because these are purchased and housed in a catalog that may require “multiple clicks and re-executing the search to get the material” (p. 22). He explained that the visibility of print reference books allows one to become familiar with the existence and placement of paper reference collections so that these may be utilized, but that the lack of physical presence for electronic reference books may result in libraries paying a lot of money for resources that are not utilized. A

review of the literature reveals that some academic libraries have considered the challenge of promoting electronic reference books and have found ways to address the issues of visibility and usage.

When the staff at the Dana Medical Library of the University of Vermont recognized a need to update the print reference collection, instead of weeding out titles that were available online, the print books were maintained for a shelf presence with labels attached directing patrons to the current online edition (Delwiche, 2004). Promoting the online versions of the reference sources also served as an opportunity to offer bibliographic instruction to those unfamiliar with navigating the online content. So, this intentional design to incorporate electronic reference materials on the physical library shelves through signage provides visibility to the online reference sources.

To make the electronic reference book collection visible at Kansas State University, the library website developer created a separate section on the library website. Patrons could search by subject, type of electronic reference book, and title (Ramaswamy et al., 2008). Similarly, at the University of Montevallo in Alabama, a virtual reference shelf was put together containing two electronic reference book collections, Gale and Oxford, and two databases provided by the state of Alabama (Wallis, 2014). Electronic reference books were listed alphabetically and by subject with images of the front covers to show that these were bona fide books to access online. Patrons were directed to the virtual reference shelf with signs placed in the print reference section and QR codes on book displays in the physical library. A future challenge, recognized by Wallis, was incorporating larger collections of acquired electronic reference titles to the virtual reference shelf.

Morris and Del Bosque (2010) asserted that labeling library guides “should clarify that the guide is a helpful way to connect with resources” (pp. 189-190). They went on to say that “subject guides must be linked on appropriate web pages where patrons would normally go for help” (p. 190). Past analysis of library websites shows that clarity in terminology and placement of content is vital to utilization. Kim and Decoster (2011) evaluated the organization of 50 academic business library websites to ascertain the presence of entry points and instruction links that aid patrons in maximizing usage of the content. They found that 42 libraries contained research guide links, sixteen contained course guide links, five had ebook links, and three linked reference resources. The research guides and course guides included instructional content on utilization of the sources, but the reference resources and ebooks were listed without description or instructions for utilization. Library web designers should evaluate the organization of content and to what extent the content “[serves] the expected function for that spot” (Kim & Decoster, 2011, p. 142). They asserted that descriptions or annotations describing the significance of a resource, quick access points to collections, and instructional content on utilizing the resources should be incorporated to serve patrons and maximize usage.

Chow et al. (2014) examined 102 academic library websites. They found that 88% had straightforward navigation tools placed on all the pages, 85.3% were arranged logically, 92.2% contained headings that were easy to understand, and 49% of the headings were free of jargon. Only 9.8% of the academic libraries contained tag lines or annotations about what the library web pages do, and only 8.8% of abbreviations were spelled out or explained. In addition, after analyzing 1,469 self-reports from public and academic libraries across the United States, Chow et al. discovered that 72% did not include usability testing when creating their current website. To accomplish this goal of usability, user center design should be employed, which includes “a systematic process of analysis, design, and development that involves iterative testing with representative users at each phase” (Chow et al., 2014, p. 254). Chow et al. concluded, “that library websites could improve their general usability by more systematically working with users to design, test, and redesign their web information spaces” (p. 264).

A comparison study of academic library website users and academic library website designers showed that the designers perceived their websites to be exceptional (Kim, 2011). Still, only 55% of the library website users felt that they could complete their work with the online content. When designing the web pages, nearly 70% of the library web designers said, “that they consider[ed] users’ input collected via comments, feedback, and complaints” (Kim, 2011, p. 103). Like Chow et al. (2014), Kim (2011) stressed that academic library websites should be evaluated by the website users.

Usability testing was incorporated at Azusa Pacific University Library when redesigning their

library webpage (Stephenson, 2012). The web services librarian conducted a usability study to identify difficulties with the current website. The information gleaned from that study was used to guide the development of the redesigned library web page. The follow-up usability test after the redesign “revealed that the collaboratively redesigned site had greatly improved usability, with decreases in both the time and number of clicks required to locate information and resources” (Stephenson, 2012, p. 96).

Likewise, a series of usability tests were conducted at Hunter College Library to improve the design of the library website (Becker & Yanotta, 2013). Participants of the study gave their opinions of testing the present and proposed new website. Locating reference materials was the least successful user activity observed. No users could find reference materials on the current site, but there was a slight improvement when 7% of participants were able to find reference materials on the proposed new website. The link labeled “subject guides” contained the reference materials on the previous website. The proposed new website had the reference materials labeled “topic guides,” but the participants in the study suggested re-naming the link “research guides.” The website developer kept this suggested link name. The researchers determined that patrons accessed the link labeled “research guides” more than previous labels after testing was complete.

Augustine and Greene (2002) conducted usability tests to determine if the library website at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) contained clear language and was easy to use. Participants were asked to complete 20 tasks using the library website while the researchers observed the participants completing the tasks. For the questions on electronic reference, all participants could locate the electronic copy of the Oxford English Dictionary. Only 42% were able to find the online guide for women’s studies. The authors noted that participants performed better when answering questions that reflected the terminology used on the library website. The authors also noticed that participants “reverted to what appeared to be a familiar way of finding things online – using search engines rather than navigating through hierarchal order of web pages” (p. 364). Augustine and Greene asserted that “the implication is that the quality of the internal search engine and the wording of the metadata may be as important, if not more so, than the structure of the pages” (p. 364). They pointed out that “in this context, metadata refers to the descriptive text within the header of a web page” (p. 364).

Polger (2011) examined students’ preference for terminology used on library websites, and surveyed librarians to compare what terms librarians use on the library websites. He found that when it comes to the language used to locate books on the library homepage, 26% of students preferred “library catalog,” 40% preferred “find books,” and 21% preferred “book catalog.” Thirteen percent preferred something other than those terms. In contrast, librarians reported using “library catalog” 61% and using “find books” 14% of the time. Twenty-five percent said something other than the most reported terms. When Polger asked the librarians what words were used on the library website to indicate where the library guides were, the answers varied. Thirty-six percent of the students surveyed indicated that they preferred the terms “research guides,” 20% said “resources by subject,” 18% stated “research help,” 16% said “library guides,” and 10% stated “subject guides.” Based on the findings, Polger (2011) concluded, “students and librarians use similar language to access the library catalog” (p. 11). Polger noted that both librarians and students recognize the word “guide” as a label for resources. Polger asserted that it is very important to ascertain if patrons understand the meaning behind the labels on library websites.

Hulseberg and Monson (2011) assembled a student focus group to examine what terminology students use and understand. Participants indicated where they would begin to find items on the library homepage, such as an article, a specific database, the listing of a library-owned book, and a specific journal. After answering these questions, the researchers discussed the answers given by the students with the members of the focus group. The researchers discovered “that participants recognized library terminology within the links, but had differing interpretations of what content each link covered” (p. 365). The discussion also “revealed some confusion and frustration over the fact that several of the links seemed alike or related and that there are so many paths to the same resources” (Hulseberg & Monson, 2011, p. 366). Students expressed uncertainty knowing where to click. The authors also noticed that brand names of databases confused students when searching for content. Hulseberg and Monson divided the focus group into pairs and gave an assessment to test what terminology students understood and used. The

pairs were asked, “what do you need to be able to do through the library’s website?”, “what link names would you use?”, and “where would these links be placed on the library website?” (Hulseberg & Monson, 2011, p. 365). Each pair created a model poster of their preferred layout. A review of the mock-up library designs revealed that the students wanted to be able to search for library materials “by format and subject or course” (Hulseberg & Monson, 2011, p. 376). The designs also showed that students “want[ed] a clear path to the information or resources they need,” including links that indicate where to begin the research process (Hulseberg & Monson, 2011, p. 373).

Klare and Hobbs (2011) interviewed and then observed students utilize the Wesleyan University Library website to understand how the library website could be improved. The interviews revealed that the students favored a website with “direct links to key resources rather than layered pages” (Klare & Hobbs, 2011, p. 104). Students also desired a “quick-search option” for the library catalog on the front page (Klare & Hobbs, 2011, p. 104). The interviews also revealed that the students “have no interest in reading lots of text on the library homepages” (Klare & Hobbs, 2011, p. 104). The librarians utilized this feedback to redesign the library webpage. Librarians considered the length of headings and titles, and the understanding of jargon vs. defining sections in understandable terms. A compromise was reached by including “standard terms but [added] pop-up boxes that would give brief definitions when library users moused over the labeled tabs” (Klare & Hobbs, 2011, p. 106). Librarians maintained a reference section on the new website through a single tab. A post-test of the redesigned library website revealed that students approved of the design, yet they still had concerns about the web page’s terminology. At the time of the publication of their research, the Wesleyan library learned that a university-wide redesign of their university website would take place soon, providing another opportunity to improve the design and terminology.

In addition to an intuitive library web page that facilitates use in finding needed resources, electronic reference books should be marketed to academic patrons. Both faculty and students need to know what reference books are available in their discipline that support the curriculum and research within the field. Young (2012) stated that “[to] effectively market any titles you first have to purchase titles that are in demand or have a direct link to the curriculum” (p. 48). Establishing relationships and collaborating with faculty will aid in collection development in deciding what titles to purchase and market. To increase awareness and use, librarians should convey to faculty the importance of endorsement and provide examples of utilizing electronic reference books. Wexelbaum and Kille (2012) found that “[f]aculty perceptions of library resources and services affect how and if they direct students to use library collections in support [of] their research” (p. 1).

In researching the marketing and promoting of electronic books, Vasileiou (2010) discovered that all academic libraries lacked a strategic marketing plan for online book collections. Still, all utilized numerous methods to promote electronic books. The library website, information literacy instruction, the OPAC, email, promotional posters, meetings, events, and online classrooms were some of the many entry points to promote electronic books reported among the librarians Vasileiou studied.

Rogers and Nielsen (2017) assessed the promotional strategy for marketing electronic resources. They found that the redesign of a library homepage coupled with a new section labeled “featured services” aided in increasing awareness and usage of the library electronic collections, including Mango Languages and Data Planet. An infographic and blog entries were inserted into the “featured services” link to bring attention to the interface and how each worked.

The literature reveals that some college and university libraries considered, planned, marketed, and promoted their electronic reference book collections, but how are academic libraries doing today with these tasks? The authors seek to find out if academic libraries own electronic reference books, have a space marked on the front of library homepages for these, and if the electronic reference books are marketed and promoted to users.

METHOD

To ascertain the presence and promotion of electronic reference books compared to print refer-

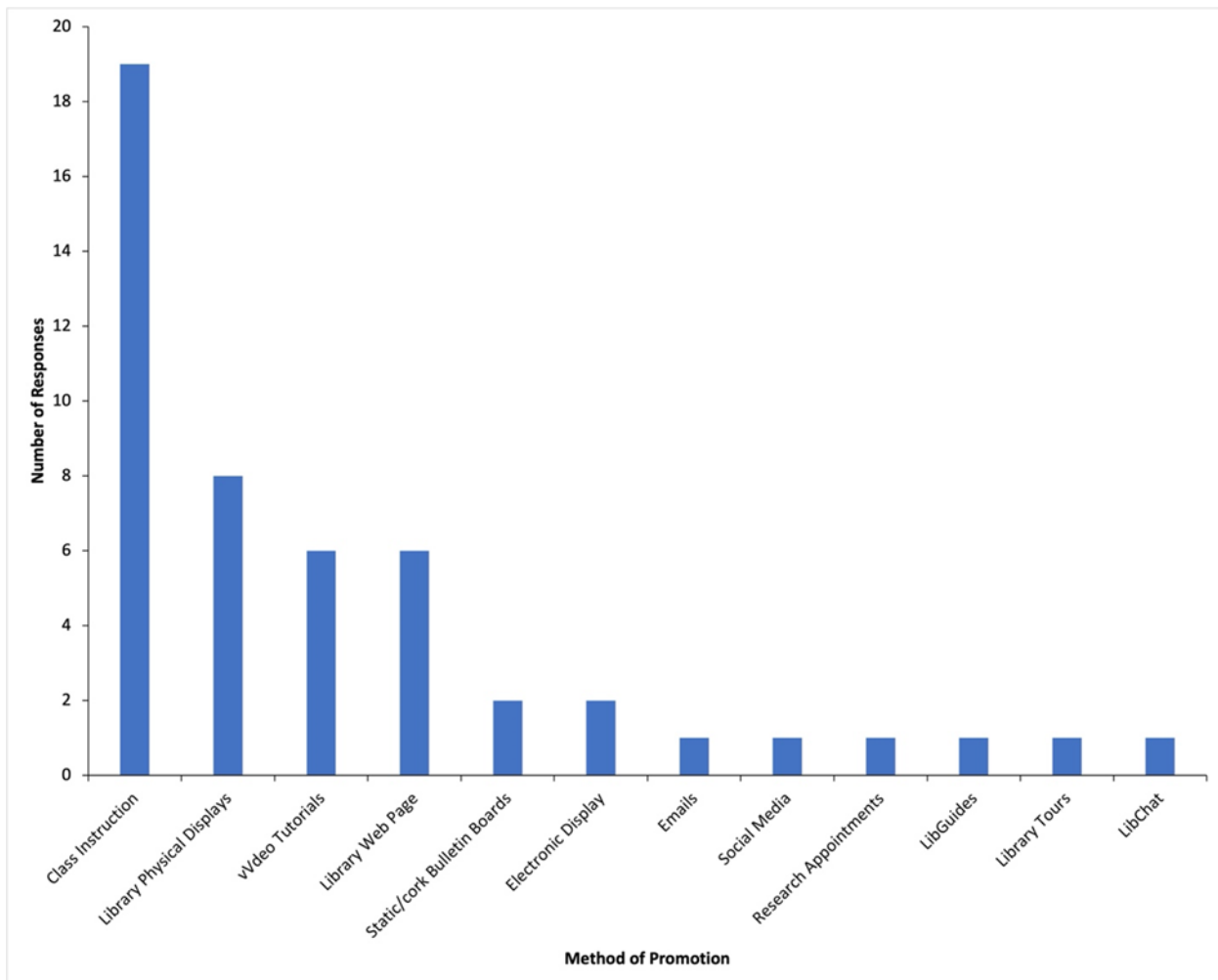
ence in academic libraries, a link to a Qualtrics survey (see Appendix), approved by Saint Leo University Institutional Review Board, was sent to 125 librarians at college and university libraries listed in the U.S. News and World Report’s 2021 list of “Best Regional Universities South.” The universities were in the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. We used this list because Saint Leo University, and schools similar in size and academic offerings to Saint Leo University, were on it. Participation was anonymous, voluntary, and no incentive was given for participation. The survey was open from the end of September 2021 until the middle of December 2021.

RESULTS

Forty-four responses were gathered for a response rate of 35.2%. Forty academic libraries had print reference books, and four did not. Of the 40 that did have print reference books, 32 (80%) have signage for the print reference collection labeled “reference,” and one respondent had the section labeled some other way but did not indicate what that label was.

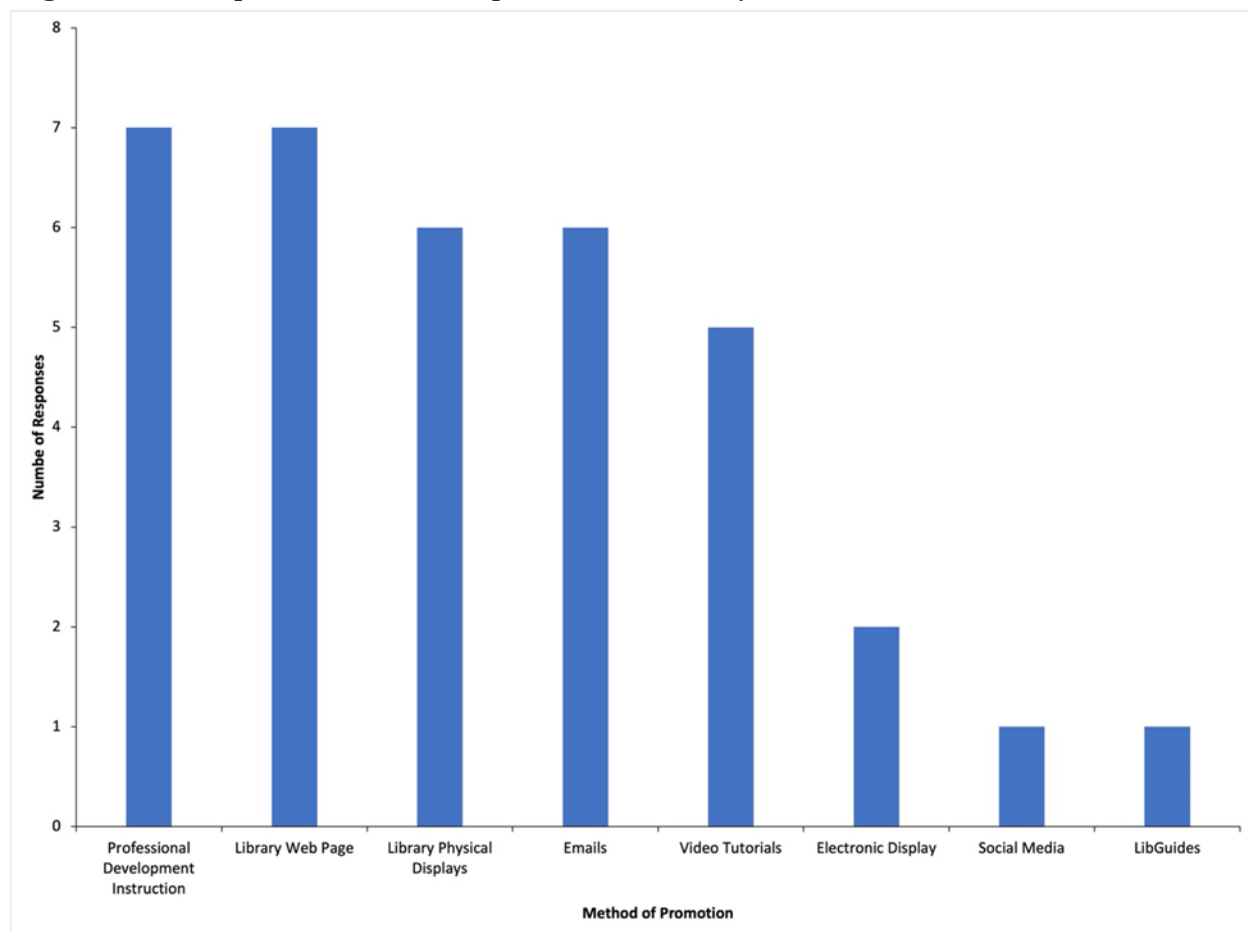
Of the 40 that had print reference books, 23 (57.5%) promoted these with students, and 17 (42.5%) did not. When asked how the print reference books were promoted to students, the majority of respondents, 19, indicated their collections are promoted during class instructions, followed by eight libraries that used displays in the physical library and six displayed on the library webpage (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: How are print reference books promoted with students?



Sixteen librarians (40%) out of the 40 who responded to the question indicated that they promoted print reference books with faculty, 23 (57.5%) did not promote print reference books with faculty, and one participant did not answer this question. The librarians in this survey admitted they promote print reference with faculty in more varied ways than they do with students (see Figure 2). When asked to check all the methods they used to promote print reference books to faculty, seven librarians promoted print reference books to faculty during professional development sessions; seven librarians also indicated that they promote print reference books to faculty through library webpage displays. Six librarians promote print reference books through faculty emails, and six librarians promote print reference books through physical library displays. Five librarians used video tutorials to promote print reference books to faculty (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: How are print reference books promoted with faculty?

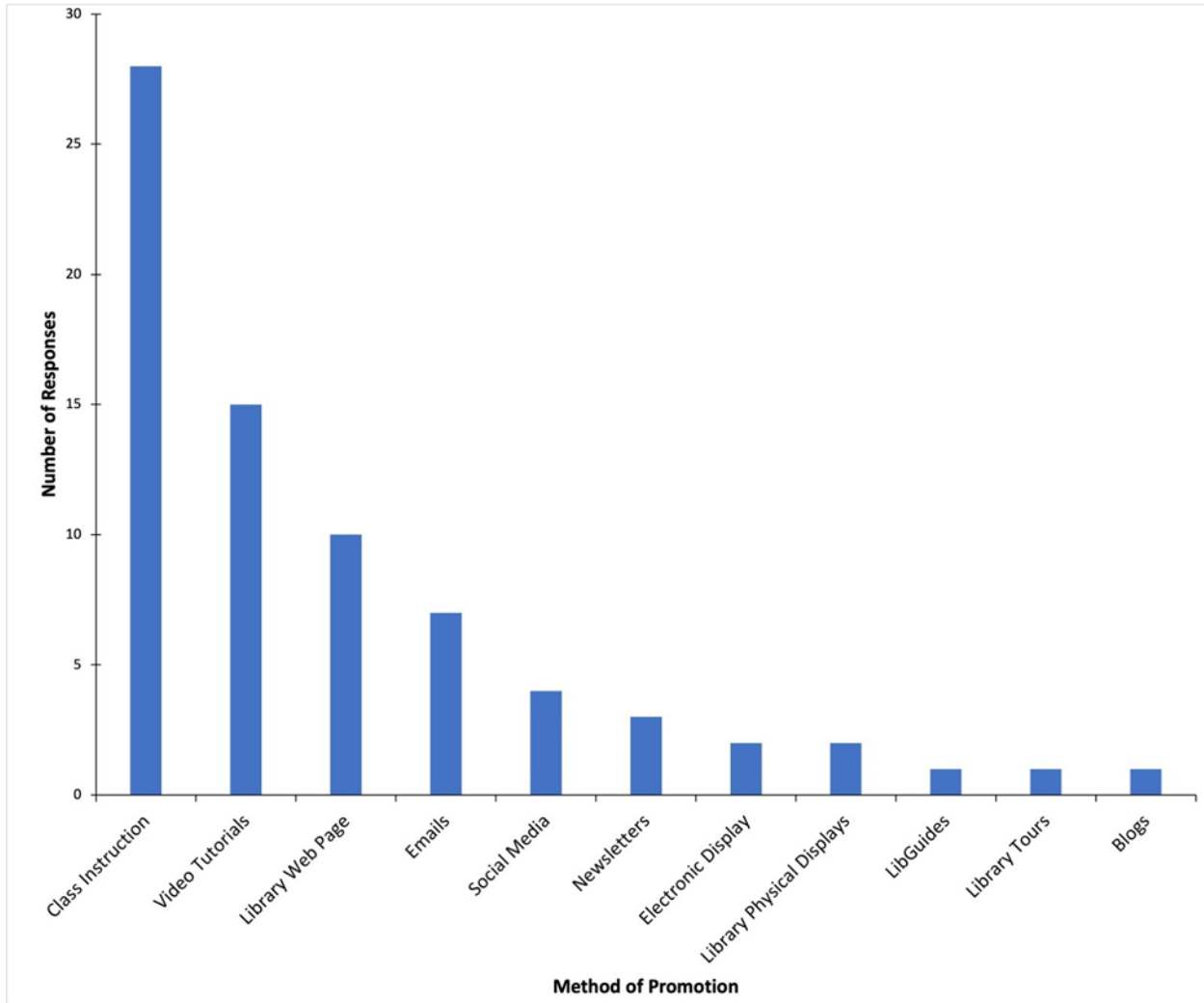


Forty librarians (91%) indicated that they have electronic reference books in their academic libraries, two stated that they did not, and two did not answer this question. When asked if there is a designated space on your website such as a tab, tile, or separate page (other than the catalog/OPAC) specifically for electronic reference books, 31 (77.5%) said no, and eight (20%) said yes. One skipped this question. Of the eight that answered this question, the term, “electronic reference” is utilized by three libraries, “E-reference” is used by one library, two indicated “other,” and two did not specify a label.

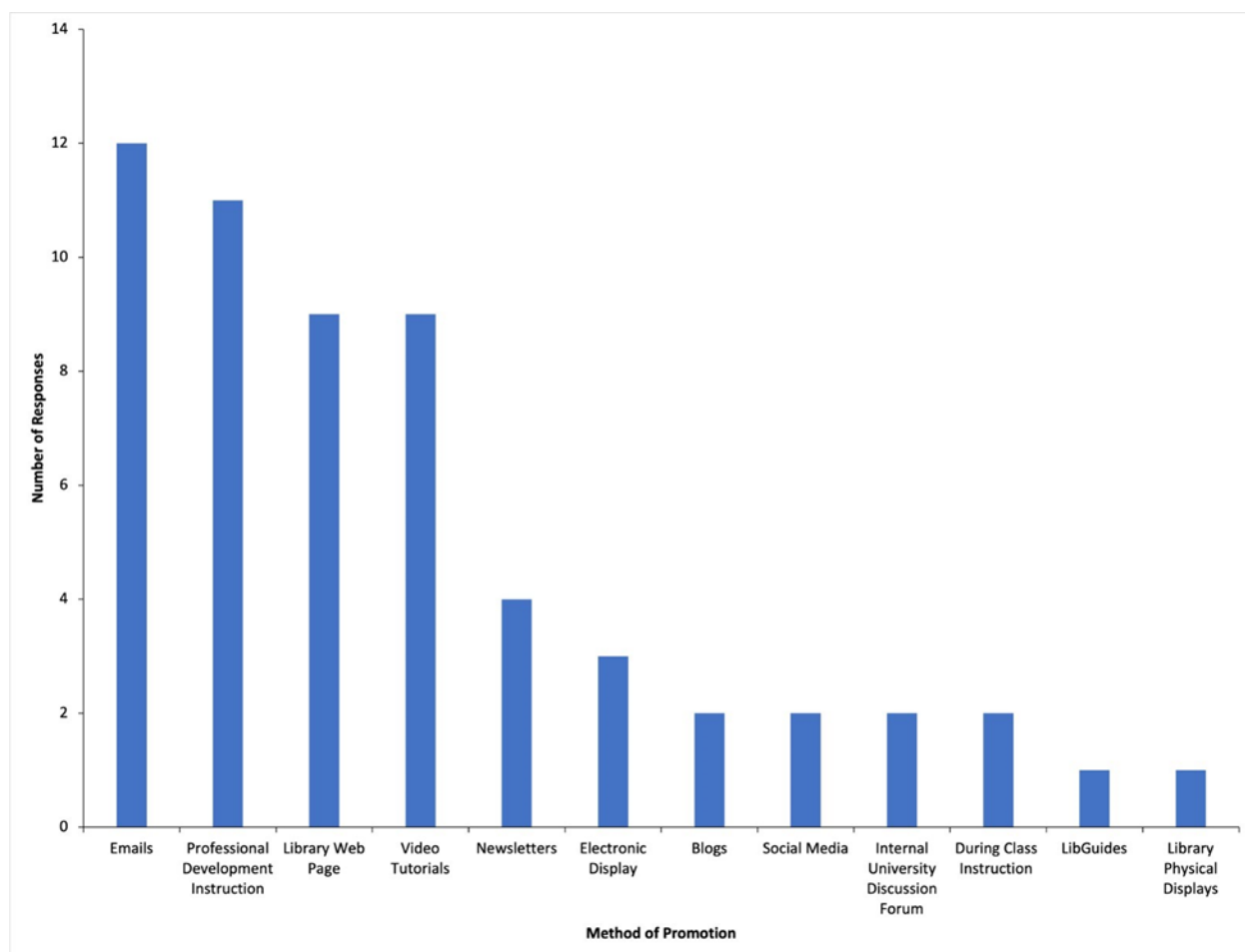
When asked if they had LibGuides or other subject or course guides on their library webpage, 39 responses were received, 100% indicated yes. When asked if there are links to reference books in these guides, 36 (92%) said yes, and three said no. Thirty librarians (75%) indicated that their libraries promote electronic reference books to students, nine (22.5%) said that they do not, and one person (2.5%) did not answer this question. Participants indicated how they promote electronic reference books to stu-

dents. The most frequently cited method was through class instruction, with 28 librarians reporting this method. Fifteen librarians said they promoted electronic reference books through video tutorials, and ten promoted through the library webpage (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: How do you promote electronic reference books with students?



When asked do you promote electronic reference books with faculty, 23 (57.5%) said yes, 16 (40%) said no, and one (2.5%) did not answer this question. Twelve indicated that email was used to promote electronic reference books to faculty, and 11 said that they were promoted during professional development sessions. Nine stated that the library web page promotes electronic reference books to faculty, and nine used video tutorials to promote to faculty. Four utilized newsletters to promote electronic reference books to faculty (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: How do you promote electronic reference books with faculty?

When asked if they thought it was important to promote electronic reference books, 29 (72.5%) said yes, 10 (25%) said no, and one (2.5%) did not answer. The reasons given varied and grouped categories represent the qualitative responses. Eleven of the 29 respondents (38%) indicated that it was important to bring attention to the library resources, including one person who said, “they [electronic reference books] are hidden from view, not easily discoverable.” Another respondent said, “if they [patrons] don’t know about a resource, they won’t use it.” Ten librarians (34%) said that online access is needed for distance students, and some even mentioned the Covid-19 pandemic as a reason that electronic access was needed. Five participants (17%) indicated that having electronic reference books was an important part of the research process to get background information, including one who said, “traditional reference titles provide a foundational understanding of advanced topics.” Three (10%) felt that the money spent on these resources should not go to waste, including one librarian who said, “they [electronic reference books] are often easier to acquire and more affordable (thru consortium), just very hard to display in a physical way.”

When asked if their library webpage had instructions on how to use electronic reference books (video tutorial, LibGuide, tip sheet), 21 (52.5%) said yes, 17 (42.5%) said no, and two (5%) respondents skipped the question.

The participants in this study shared additional information about electronic reference books and promoting electronic reference books. One librarian expressed concern that “electronic reference books replace older print titles.” Another librarian said, “we have a page on most LibGuides that says Dictionaries/Encyclopedias/Reference that include electronic and physical materials.” A third librarian indicated, “we don’t promote anything as ‘reference’ but rather promote any resource relevant to the top-

ic.” The librarian also said, “we’ve incorporated electronic reference into our circulating electronic material, i.e., people can check it out just like any other book.” This librarian also mentioned a desire to allow the print reference materials to be checked out and blended with the print circulating collection if there was enough space. Still, another librarian pointed out that “we’ve found the most effective way to promote them is at the point of need: when the student has an assignment that requires their use.” Finally, one librarian said, “I think we can do a better job at promoting them, but they are used. Perhaps it is because of our growing online only student population.”

DISCUSSION

Compared to traditional print reference collections housed in labeled sections in these academic libraries, there is clearly a disparity in having comparable online signage of the electronic reference books. Thirty-three (82.5%) librarians indicated a designated print reference section with signage versus only eight (20%) who indicated that their electronic reference collection was in a distinct labeled area online. It would seem that this common situation would keep electronic reference books hidden or at least not visible.

However, in this study librarians promoted electronic reference books more than print reference books to both faculty and students and did so in a variety of ways. In addition, 36 out of 39 librarians indicated that electronic reference books are housed in guides online. This reflects the ACRL Frame of Searching as a Strategic Exploration when patrons utilize guides to access content. It also demonstrates the ACRL Frame of Authority is Constructed and Contextual when librarians place electronic reference books in course-specific guides.

CONCLUSION

Besides using multiple ways to promote electronic reference books, librarians should examine what methods work best at their college or university. Librarians should stay abreast of the needs and challenges professors and students have regarding awareness of library resources that support the curriculum, including how to access and utilize the electronic reference collections. Librarians should stress to faculty the importance of participating in collection development. Faculty should also understand that it is important to endorse the electronic reference books to their students.

An advantage of having electronic reference books over print reference books is that librarians can take advantage of technology to discover the extent of electronic reference book usage. Usage statistics can reveal the need for more marketing and promotion of certain materials. In this study, 29 (72.5%), librarians felt that promoting electronic reference books is important and gave some compelling reasons why. Only three mentioned the cost as an essential reason to promote electronic reference books, but this is often a significant consideration for librarians when budgeting. Most libraries do not have unlimited budgets. Showing utilization through usage statistics supports the request to maintain a purchase for another year, so there is continued access to a collection.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Study

This study was limited to colleges and universities in the southern United States. A larger widespread examination of the visibility, promotion, and marketing of electronic reference books will bring attention to the need to make these materials more noticeable and used. Students will benefit from using these scholarly materials to support their studies. Faculty should appreciate these electronic reference books available for their students and the professors to support research. Librarians will benefit by being able to justify the expense of purchasing access to electronic reference books. Maintaining access to scholarly electronic reference books will allow librarians to continue to connect users to applicable scholarly content.

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[work1.pdf](#)

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Appendix
Survey Questions: Are Electronic Reference Books Visible and Promoted in Academic Libraries

1. By completing this survey, you are indicating the following: You have read the above consent statement and have had an opportunity to ask questions to your satisfaction. You understand that additional questions should be directed to Viki Stoupenos, viki.stoupenos@saintleo.edu. You agree to participate in the study under the terms outlined in this consent statement. (I agree, continue to question #2, I disagree skip to the end of the survey.)
2. Do you have a print reference collection at your library? (If yes, continue to question #3, If no, skip to question #9)
3. If yes, is there signage for it? (If yes, continue to question #4, if no, skip to question #5)
4. If yes, how is it labeled?
 - a. Reference
 - b. Information
 - c. Other (write-in answer)
5. Do you promote print reference books with students? (If yes, continue to question #6, if no skip to question #7)
6. If yes, how are print reference books promoted with students? Choose all that apply.
 - a. Static/cork bulletin boards
 - b. Electronic bulletin boards (LCD/screen displays)
 - c. Emails
 - d. Class instruction
 - e. Video tutorials
 - f. Social media
 - g. Blogs
 - h. Internal (not public) university discussion forums
 - i. Library physical displays
 - j. Library webpage
 - k. Other (write-in answer optional)
7. Do you promote print reference with faculty? (If yes, continue to question #8, if no, skip to question #9)
8. If yes, how do you promote print reference with faculty? Choose all that apply.
 - a. Static/cork bulletin boards
 - b. Electronic bulletin boards (LCD/screen displays)
 - c. Emails
 - d. Professional development instruction
 - e. Video tutorials
 - f. Social media
 - g. Blogs
 - h. Internal (not public) university discussion forums
 - i. Library physical displays
 - j. Library webpage

k. Other (write-in answer optional)

9. Do you have electronic reference books at your library? (If yes, continue to question #10, if no, skip to the end of the survey)

10. If yes, is there a designated space on your website such as a tab, tile, or separate page (other than the catalog/OPAC) specifically for electronic reference books? (If yes, continue to question #11, if no, skip to question #13)

11. If yes, is the designated area for electronic reference books labeled on your website (other than the catalog/OPAC)? (If yes, continue to question #12, if no, skip to question #13)

12. What is the specific designated label on your library website for electronic reference books (other than the catalog/OPAC) that indicates these are for reference?

- a. E-Reference
- b. Electronic Reference
- c. Encyclopedias
- d. Other (write-in answer optional)

13. Do you have LibGuides or other subject or course guides on your library web page? (If yes, continue to question #14, If no, skip to question #15)

14. If yes, do you link electronic reference books to your LibGuides or subject or course guides?

15. Do you promote electronic reference books with your students? (If yes continue to question #16, if no, skip to question #17)

16. If yes, how do you promote electronic reference books with your students? Check all that apply.

- a. Static/cork bulletin boards
- b. Electronic bulletin boards (LCD/screen displays)
- c. Emails
- d. Class instruction
- e. Video tutorials
- f. newsletters
- g. Social media
- h. Blogs
- i. Internal (not public) university discussion forums
- j. Library physical displays
- k. Library webpage
- l. Other (write-in answer optional)

17. Do you promote electronic reference books with faculty? (If yes, continue to question #18, if no, skip to question #19)

18. If yes, how do you promote electronic reference books with faculty? Check all that apply.

- a. Static/cork bulletin boards
- b. Electronic bulletin boards (LCD/screen displays)
- c. Emails
- d. Professional development instruction
- e. Video tutorials

- f. newsletters
- g. Social media
- h. Blogs
- i. Internal (not public) university discussion forums
- j. Library physical displays
- k. Library webpage
- l. Other (write-in optional)

19. Do you think it is important to promote electronic reference books? (If yes, continue to question #20, if no, skip to question #21)

20. If yes, why is it important to promote electronic reference books? (write-in answer optional)

21. Does your library web page have instructions on how to use electronic reference books (video tutorials, LibGuides, tip sheets)? Yes or No

22. Please share any additional information about electronic reference books and promoting them at your library. (write-in answer optional)

Thank you for taking your time to complete this survey. Your responses have been recorded.

*The skip logic for this question in Qualtrics was not designed correctly. Responses for only those who responded yes to question #10 were reported for question #11 and #12.