Confessions of a Late Bloomer: Use and Acceptance of an E-books Program in an Undergraduate Library

Molly Olney-Zide and Laura Eiford

Abstract

Although e-books date back to the 1970s, the peak of academic adoption was in the early to mid 2000s. At the beginning of the 2012/2013 academic year, the Franklin & Marshall (F&M) College Library had roughly 500,000 print volumes cataloged and only 12 e-books. By the end of that year, the catalog contained approximately 120,000 e-books. In February 2014, the F&M College Library conducted a campus-wide survey about e-books. By comparing these results with F&M's usage statistics, the Library found practical suggestions on how to improve current acceptance and usage of e-books.

BACKGROUND

Franklin & Marshall College (F&M), a small, liberal arts college located in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, serves roughly 2,400 students. The F&M Library began collecting e-books in 2000, fairly early for academic libraries, but a more substantial and sustainable e-book program did not begin until the 2012/2013 academic year (Chart 1: "E-books at F&M"). In 2000, the Library partnered with PALCI (Pennsylvania Academic Library Consortium, Inc.) in an e-book pilot project to purchase NetLibrary (EBSCO) e-books. It was not until 2008 that new

1

installments of NetLibrary e-books were purchased. Although these e-books were available to view on the EBSCO platform, they were not available to library users via the Library catalog.
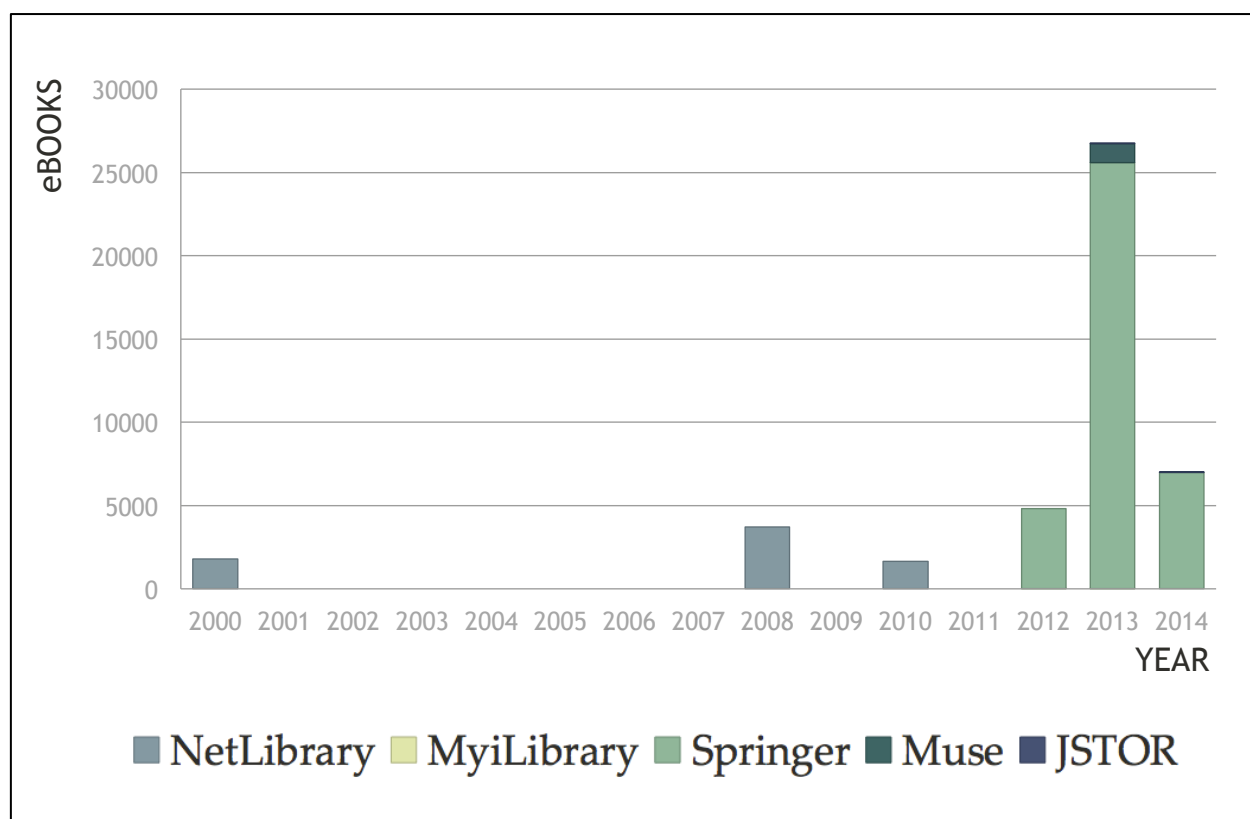

Chart 1: "E-books at F&M"

Starting in the fall of 2012, the Library made a first big push to add e-books to the Library catalog including the NetLibrary e-books and a small batch of DDA (Demand Driven Acquisition) e-books from MyiLibrary. In 2013, the Library began purchasing and cataloging new e-books including Springer, Project MUSE, and JSTOR (DDA). According to the Oberlin Group annual statistics (unpublished data), F&M became one of the 2012/2013 frontrunners for e-book purchases with roughly 50 e-books per FTE while the majority of the other member institutions had zero e-book purchases for the year (Chart 2: "Oberlin Group E-book Purchases, 2012/2013").
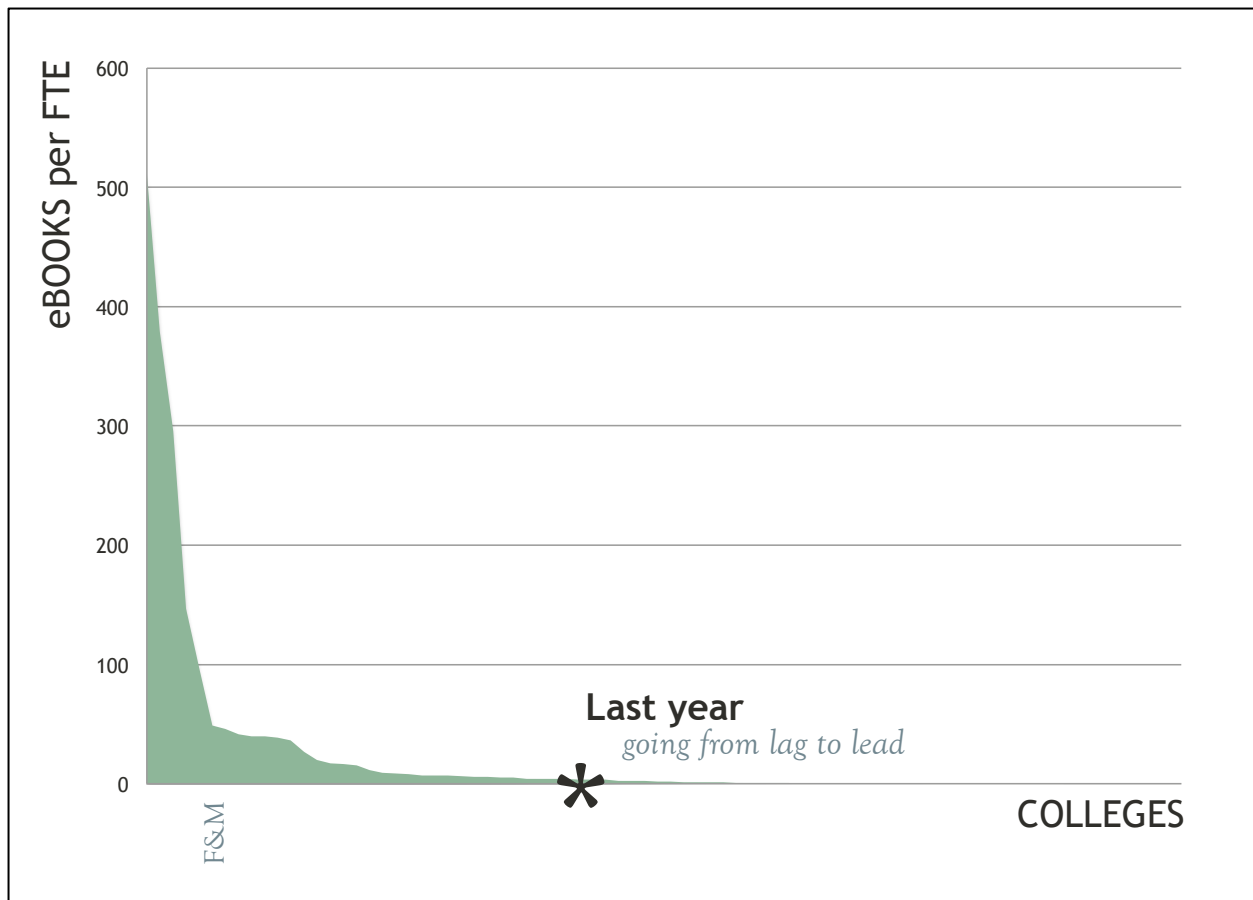
Chart 2: "Oberlin Group E-book Purchases, 2012/2013"

E-book access depends on both devices and e-books themselves. Although an institution can purchase e-books, device accessibility also influences usage and acceptance. F&M has adopted Apple products as the primary electronic devices on campus. Computers, tablets, e-readers, smart phones, and other devices all afford e-book access. In 2012, the F&M Library conducted a campus-wide survey to determine how many users owned these devices (Chart 3: "F&M Device Ownership") [3].
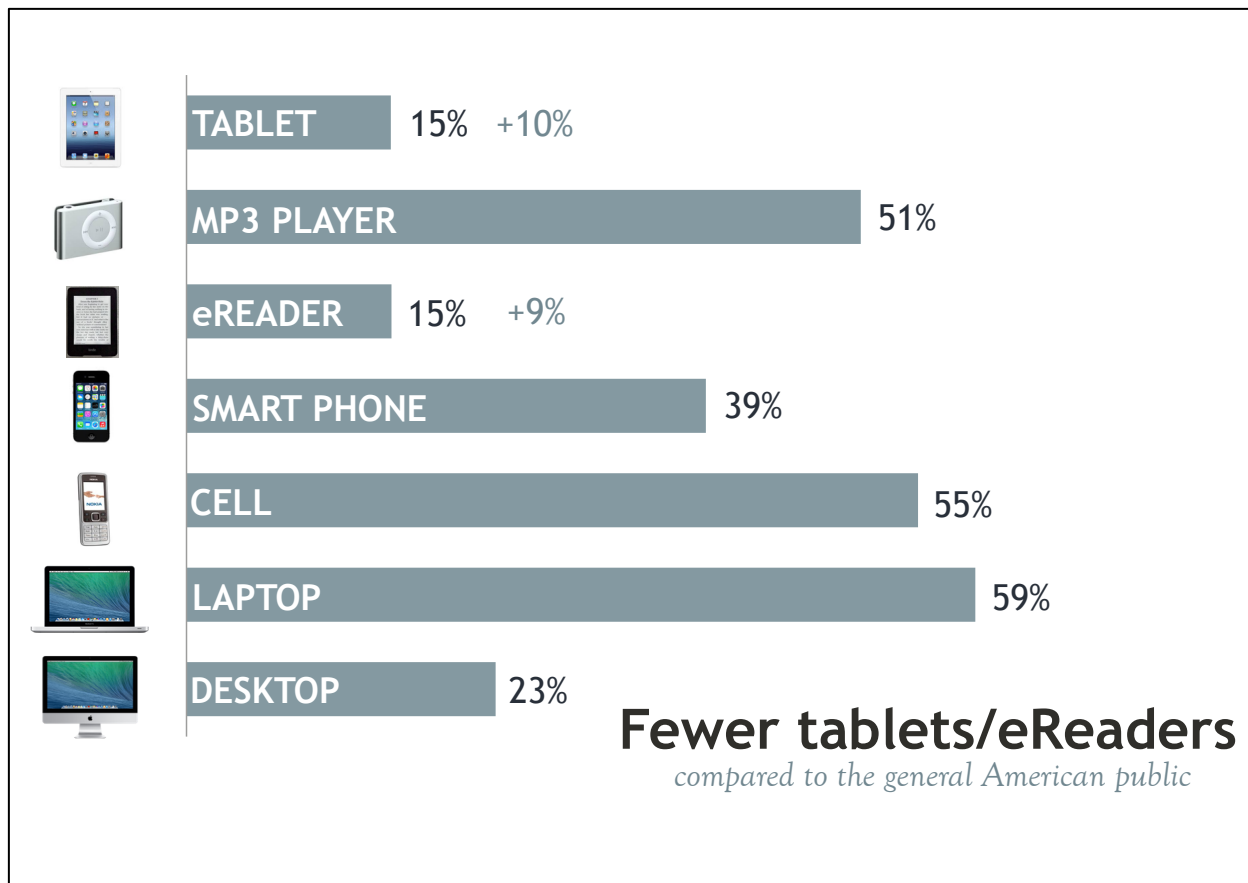
TABLET   15%   +10%

MP3 PLAYER   51%

eREADER   15%   +9%

SMART PHONE   39%

CELL   55%

LAPTOP   59%

DESKTOP   23%

Fewer tablets/eReaders
compared to the general American public

Chart 3: "F&M Device Ownership"

Although some people owned multiple devices, 23% owned a desktop computer, 59% owned a laptop computer, 15% owned a tablet, 15% owned e-readers, and 39% owned smart phones. The Pew Report (2013) indicated that 25% of the general public owned tablets and 19% owned e-readers in 2012 [2].

With e-books and e-book devices considered, the final factor in e-book usage and acceptance is the reader. This survey was performed to match an informed understanding of user reading habits and preferences with the ongoing purchasing and marketing practices of the Library.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

4

In February 2014, the F&M Library conducted a campus-wide e-book survey. All students, faculty, and staff were asked to participate in the short survey, which was distributed as a Google Form (see Appendix). Questions were written to compare well to a survey conducted by Wellesley College in 2012. To boost participation, gift certificates for cupcakes were awarded at random to participants. Overall, the survey received 291 respondents.

RESULTS

Q1: In the past year, I have used at least one …

The first question asked participants to report book formats they read in the past year: print, e-book, both, or neither. As shown in Chart 4: "Book Format Usage," F&M was more likely to read in both print and e-book formats (57.9%) than read only e-books (4.8%); however, students (56.9%) were less likely than other groups (67.7% faculty, 73.8% staff) to read an e-book in the past year. Very few respondents reported that they had read neither format in the past year.
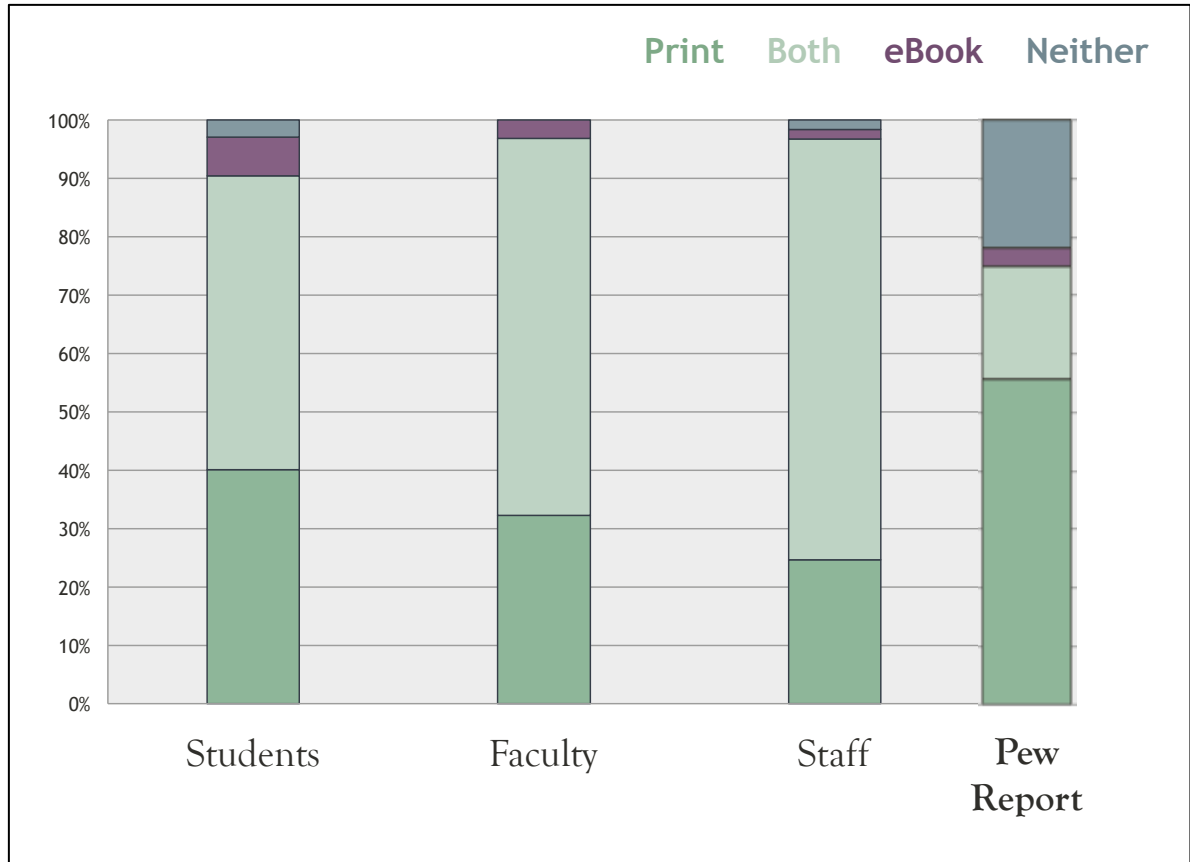
Chart 4: "Book Format Usage"

The Pew Report showed that, unlike F&M, the general public had a large percentage of people who read neither print nor e-book in the past year. Roughly 55% of the general public relied only on print books [4]. In comparison, fewer F&M students, faculty, and staff relied only on print books (40.1%, 32.3%, and 24.6% respectively). Despite a difference in device ownership rates, F&M has more readership of e-books than the overall general public.

Q2: When reading in any format, I ...

In the next question, respondents were asked how they tend to read books: skim, read a few pages, read a chapter, or read the entire book (never, sometimes, always). The format (print or e-book) and type (personal or academic) were not specified; however, only 10.5% of

respondents reported that they always read the entire book, and 21.3% reported they never read the entire book (Chart 5: "E-book Usage Behavior").
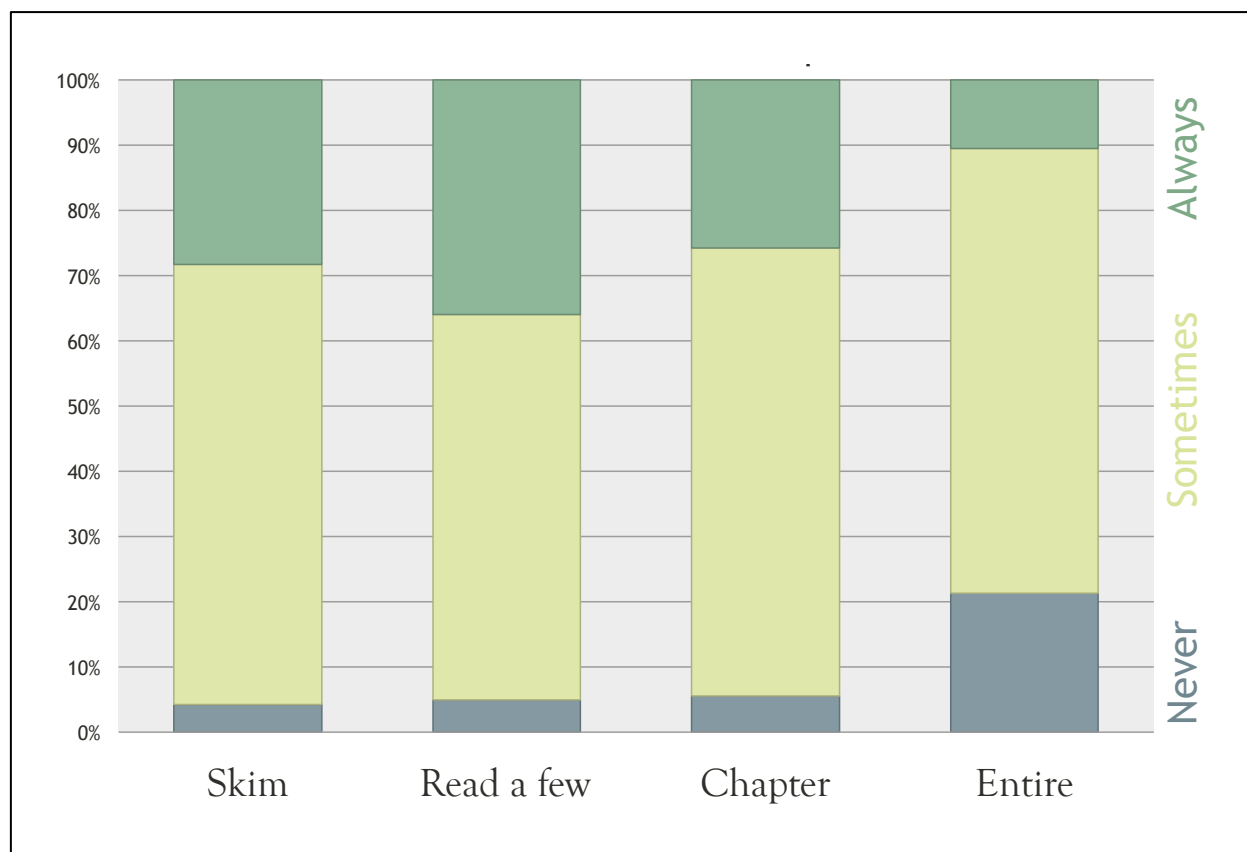

Chart 5: "E-book Usage Behavior"

Although the reported reading methods vary to some degree, the largest category for each method is "Sometimes" (skim 67.5%, read a few pages 59.0%, chapter 68.6%, entire book 68.2%), which indicates that no matter what the format or setting is, all of these methods should be supported.

Q3: When choosing a book, what is important to you?

Regardless of format preference, other features impact choice: immediate accessibility, readable font, searchablity, availability without Internet, ease of copying/printing, and cost to the

library. A strong majority, 95.9%, reported that immediate access is important when choosing a book. In addition, readable font (88.2%) and the ability to search text (86.6%) influenced book choice (Chart 6: "Important Book Characteristics and Influence"). Although print books can meet most of these criteria, the most important feature reported (accessible immediately) is only possible with certain e-book collections and not with print collections.
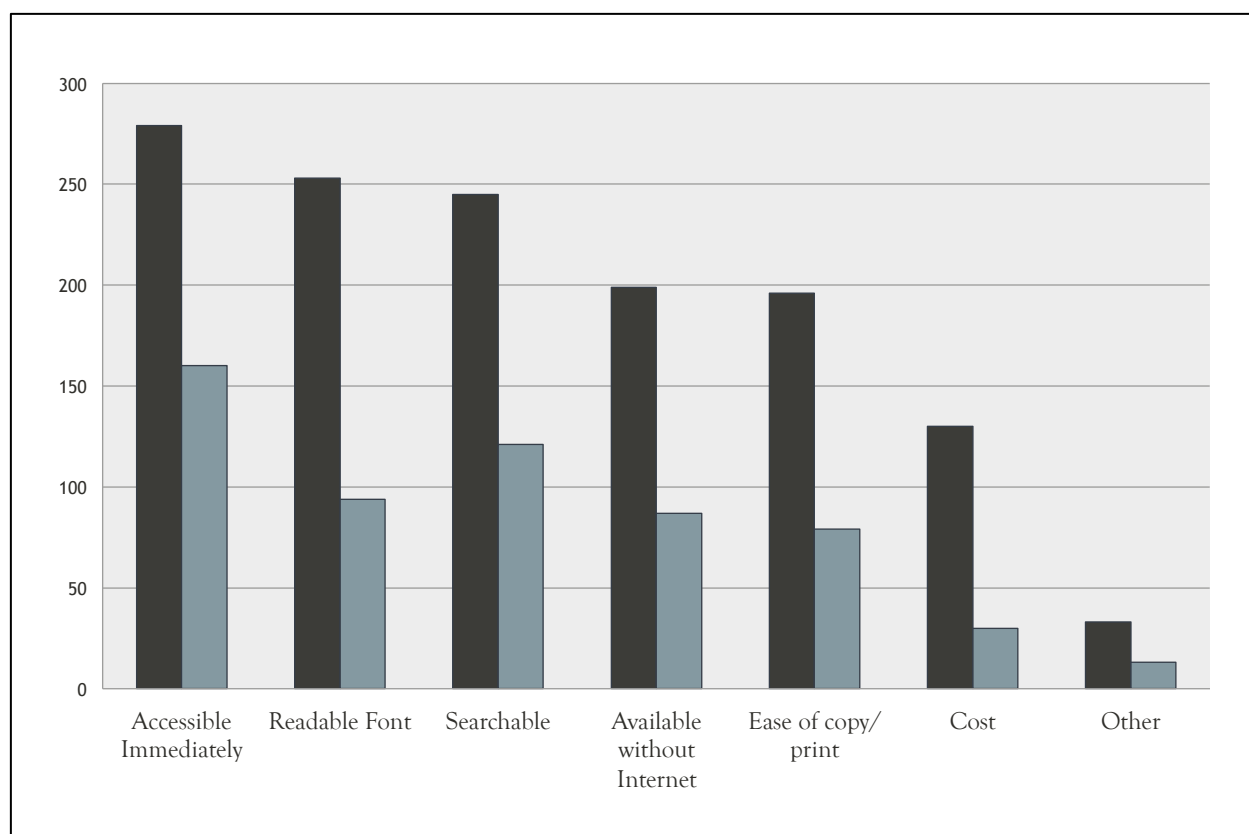

Chart 6: "Important Book Characteristics and Influence"

Q4: What format do you prefer to read?

In terms of general format preference, responses were mixed:

"I appreciate the usefulness of e-books, but for personal use will probably never read a

whole book on screen. Chapters could be useful online, like articles, but I can't

see myself reading a 200+ page book online. And it will be hard to beat the feel of

a paper book."

"While I really, really want to like eBooks, I just haven't found them as useful as print

books."

"It's a brave new world of reading!"

As shown in Chart 7: "Format Preference," despite unsure or negative commentary, only 18.6% of respondents reported that they prefer to read print books. The largest number of respondents, 56.3%, prefer print books, but they are comfortable reading e-books. Only 25.1% of respondents reported that they prefer e-books over print or have equal preference for both formats.
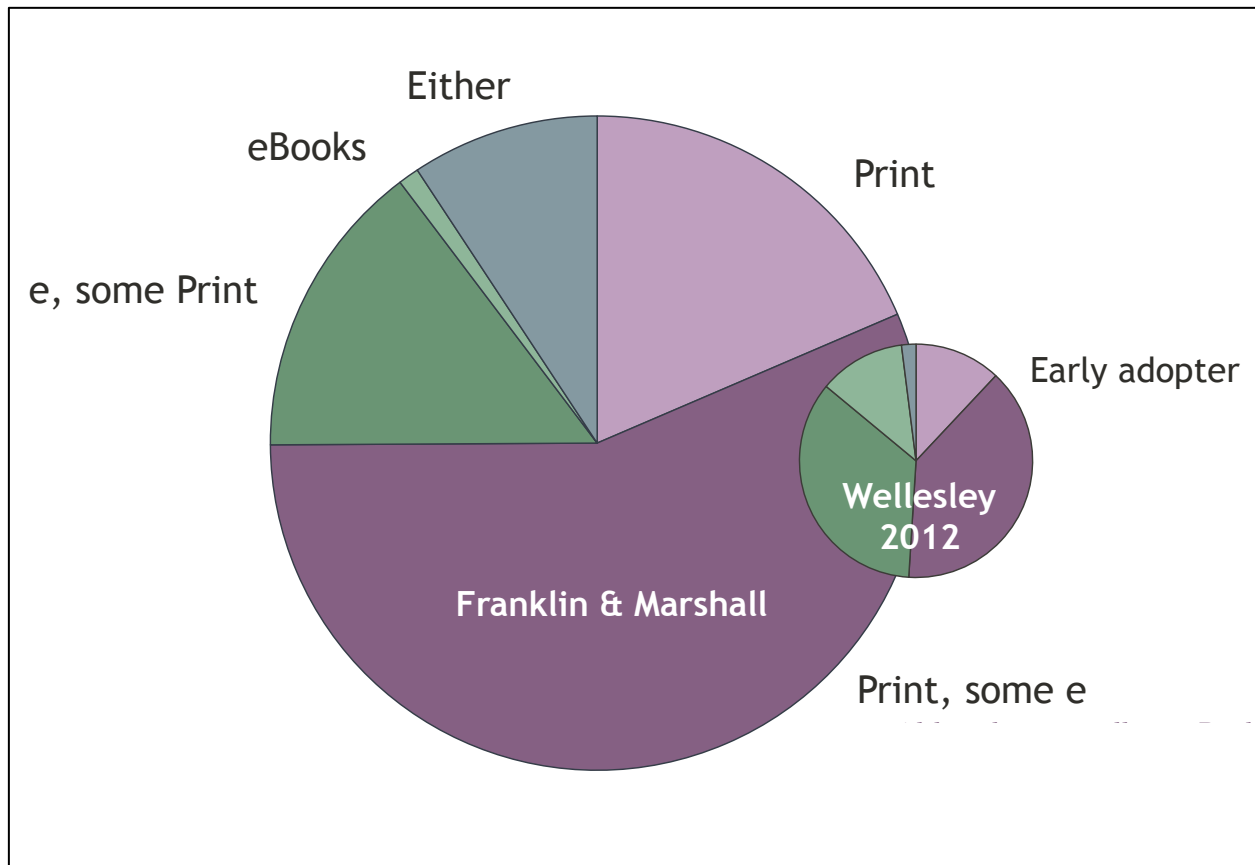

Chart 7: "Format Preference"

Wellesley College conducted a similar survey in 2012, and a comparison of their results to F&M's 2014 survey is very telling of F&M's acceptance level. Wellesley College, considered an early adopter of e-books, began building their collection in 2003 [1]. In Chart 7: "Format Preference," Wellesley reported that roughly 50% of respondents prefer e-books as their reading format, while F&M, a much later adopter, reported a 25% acceptance rate. Overall, the F&M community reports a 75% preference for print format. However, with 81.4% of the community at least willing to use or try e-books, the F&M community is certainly open to upcoming format changes.

Q5: Would any of the following change your preference?

For analysis, Q3 and Q5 were directly compared in Chart 6. The second columns in the chart represent the results of Q5. Respondents were asked whether important features would change their format preference. Similar to Q3, items that were accessible immediately, were searchable, had readable font, and were available without Internet would change preference from print to e-book or e-book to print. In fact, 55.0% would change preferences if a book was available immediately. Although F&M users may have general format preferences, specific book features, often available in e-book collections, can change user reading habits for a specific item.

Q6 & Q7: How would you like to receive updates? How have you encountered e-books?

About a third of respondents reported that they have never encountered e-books at F&M despite the fact that over 120,000 e-books existed in the online catalog at the time of the survey (Chart 8: "Marketing Preferences and History").
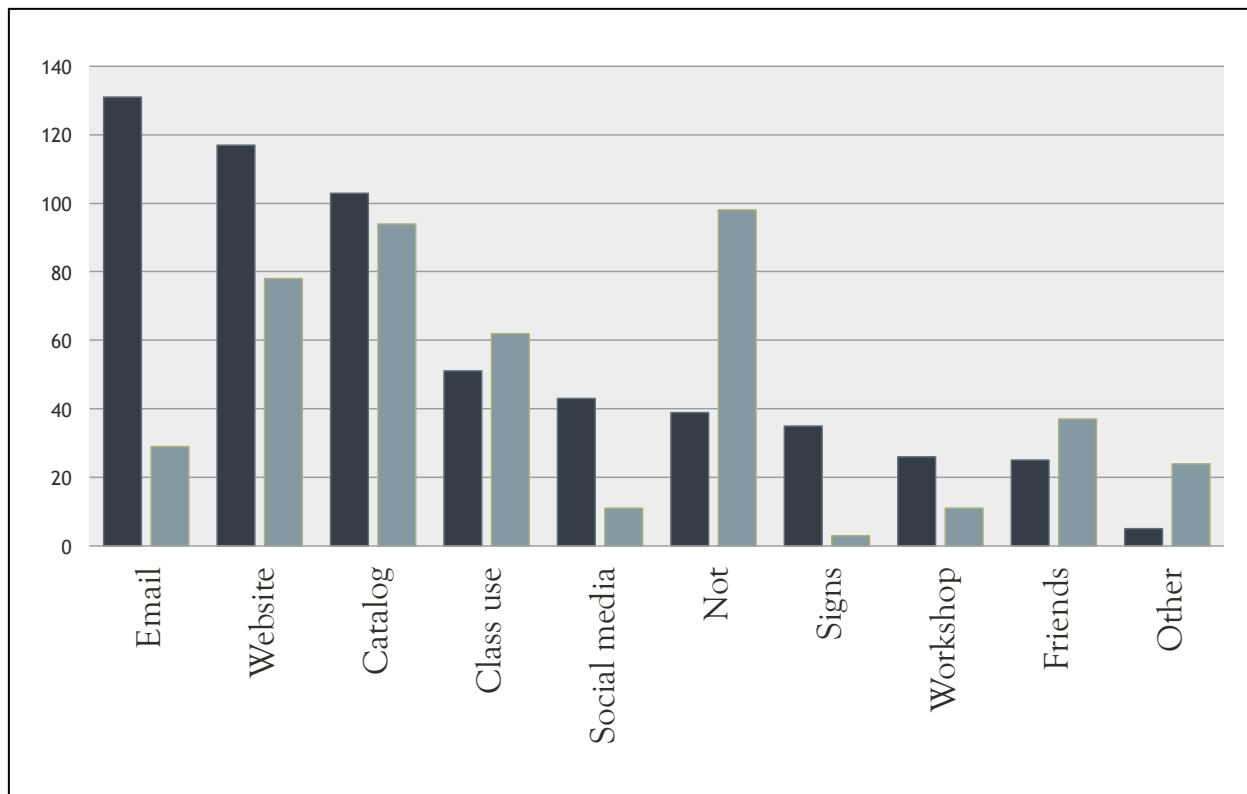
Chart 8: "Marketing Preferences and History"

Although some of the respondents have never encountered e-books at F&M, only 13.4% were not interested. In fact, the majority of respondents would like to hear more about e-books from the Library. The most requested was e-mail (45.0%), a method that only reached 10.0% of all respondents historically. According to this data, in order to best communicate information about F&M's e-book collection to the institution is to focus preferred communication methods: e-mail, website, and the online catalog.

Usage Statistics vs. User Preferences

After gathering information about the F&M community's format and use preferences, the next step was to compare F&M's e-book collections. The usage statistics were gathered directly from the e-book publishers and vendors. The size of each collection was considered when determining the results. To give an unbiased approach to these e-book collections, publisher and

11

vendor names have been removed, they are listed in random order, and the e-book collections are judged only on their characteristics and actual usage by the F&M community. The preferences listed on the left of the chart are in order based the F&M user rankings (Chart 9: "Usage Statistics vs. User Preferences").
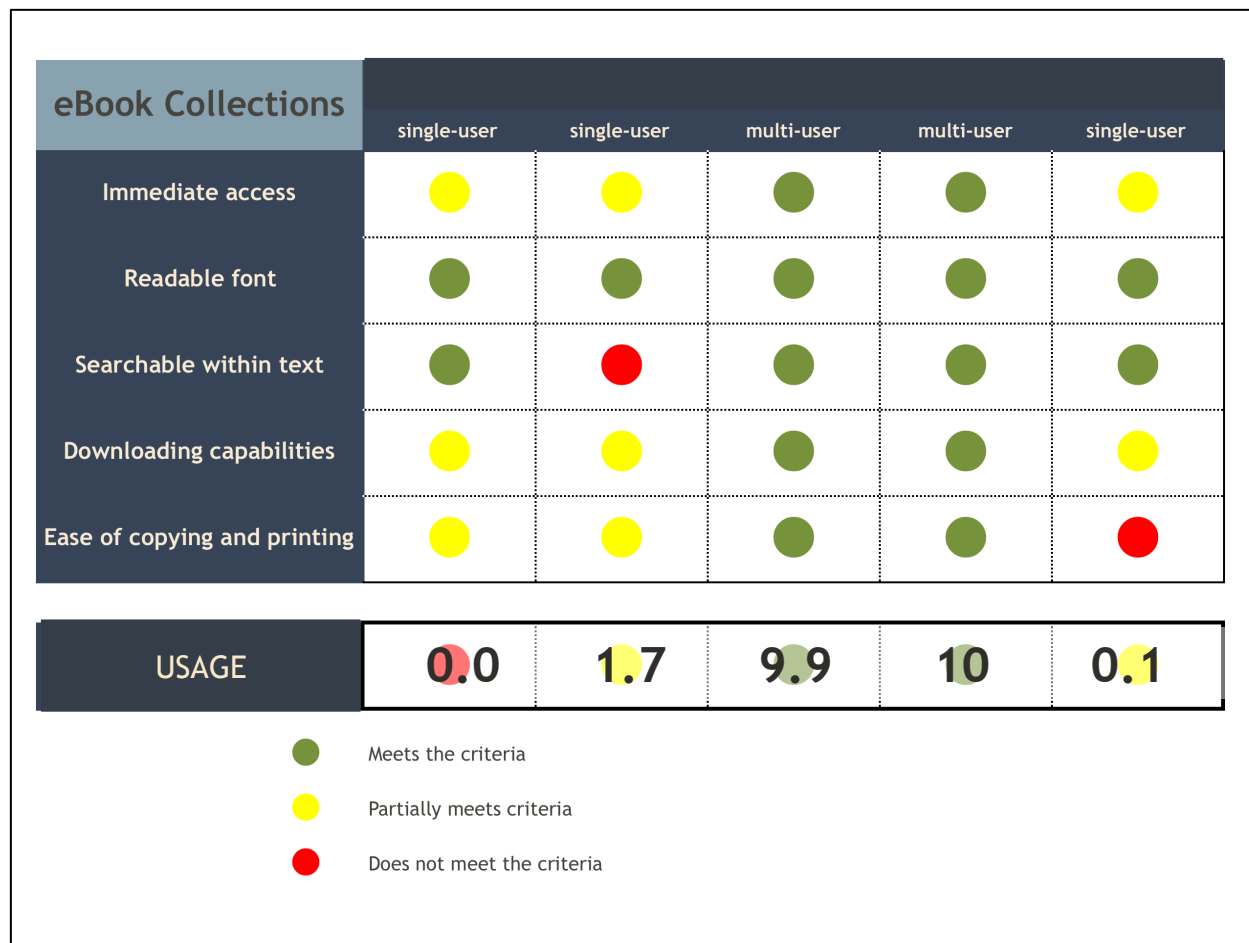
eBook Collections	single-user	single-user	multi-user	multi-user	single-user
Immediate access	🟡	🟡	🟢	🟢	🟡
Readable font	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢	🟢
Searchable within text	🟢	🔴	🟢	🟢	🟢
Downloading capabilities	🟡	🟡	🟢	🟢	🟡
Ease of copying and printing	🟡	🟡	🟢	🟢	🔴
USAGE	0.0	1.7	9.9	10	0.1

🟢 Meets the criteria

🟡 Partially meets criteria

🔴 Does not meet the criteria

Chart 9: "Usage Statistics vs. User Preferences"

Only two collections purchased by F&M allow for multi-user and immediate access. Although single-user books can be immediately accessible, if available, most require password authentication or account setup and delay immediate access. As the chart progresses down the list of user preferences, the single-user e-books, more closely related to print books than multi-

user e-books, meet only a handful of the preferences users value most in a resource. In fact, the only collections that met every single criterion were multi-user e-books. Not surprisingly, these two e-book collections experienced a usage of roughly 10% while the other e-book collections experienced usage of less than 2% and sometimes 0%. Based on these findings, e-book collections that meet the preferences of the intended users have higher use.

CONCLUSION

Despite some discouraging news, copious amounts of positive knowledge were gained. This project did not begin with the question of if F&M should build an e-book collection but how it plans on proceeding.

Three-quarters of the F&M community still preferred print books during the 2014 survey; however, 81.4% of the community was willing to venture into e-books. Indeed, 62.8% of the campus used an e-book in the past year, but only 15.8% reported a preference for e-books. Similarly 93.1% used a print book in the past year, compared to 74.9% reporting a preference for print books. The dichotomy between reported preference and historic use suggests that although many prefer print today, use and acceptance of e-books may change.

Marketing may provide tools to shape practices from these preferences. F&M has failed to fully invest time and energy into consistent marketing efforts. More respondents reported that they want to learn more than had been contacted in the past. Email, library website, and catalog were listed as the most important ways to reach interested users. Communication is key when building any collection, but it is essential when the format is relatively new and not a physical, tangible item.

13

The collected information revealed a disturbing disconnect between expectations and existing collections with profound implications for usage. E-books with expected features were used; those without were not. E-books with limited or difficult access (i.e. passwords and logins) hinder ability to perform quality research, lead to discouragement, and reduce the overall acceptance of the format. User preferences must be considered before purchases if e-books are to be accepted within the F&M community or similar institutions.

This survey is only the first step in building a successful e-book collection. By comparing preferences to practice and expectations to collections, the survey illuminated opportunities to guide growth in e-books. Through marketing, we can adjust user preferences into practices and, through targeted collection development, we can adjust e-books to better meet user needs. Despite the current gaps between user and collections, F&M hopes to find a middle ground and shape user and product to the benefit of both.

References

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http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/01/16/a-snapshot-of-reading-in-america-in-2013/

Authors

Molly Olney-Zide

Content Services Librarian

Shadek-Fackenthal Library

Franklin & Marshall College

(Now at University of Delaware and can be contacted at mollyoz@udel.edu)

Laura Eiford

Science Librarian

Martin Library of the Sciences

Franklin & Marshall College

717-291-3843

laura.eiford@fandm.edu

Appendix

Franklin & Marshall College Library E-Book Survey -- February 2014

1. In the past year, I have used at least one ... (Check all that apply)

    Print book

    Electronic book (eBook)

    Neither

2. When reading in any format, I ... (Mark one: Never, Sometimes, Always)

    Skim/search

    Read a few, consecutive pages

    Read at least a chapter

    Read the entire book

3. When choosing a book, what is important to you? (Mark one per line: Not Important, Somewhat Important, Very Important)

    Readable Font

    Accessible immediately

    Searchable

    Ease of copying/printing

    Available without internet or software

    Cost to the library

    Other

4. I prefer to read: (Mark only one)

    Only eBooks

    eBooks, but I don't mind print books

    Print books, but I don't mind eBooks

    Only print books

    No preference

5. Would any of the following change your preference (eBook or print)? (Check all that apply)

   Readable font

   Accessible immediately

   Searchable

   Ease of copying and printing

   Available without internet or software

   Cost to the library

   Other

6. How have you encountered eBooks at Franklin & Marshall? (Check all that apply)

   Library catalog

   Library website

   Library workshop

   Class use

   Email

   Signs

   Friends or colleagues

   Facebook, Twitter, or Pinterest

   Never encountered an eBook

   Other

7. How would you like to receive updates about Franklin & Marshall's eBook collection? (Check all that apply)

   Library catalog

   Library website

   Library workshop

   Class use

   Email

Facebook, Twitter, or Pinterest

Signs

Friends or colleagues

Not interested

Other