



An Old Horse Revived? In-house Use of Print Books at Seton Hall University



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ABSTRACT

With limited library budgets and declining circulation of print books, it is important to demonstrate library value to multiple stakeholders and to make informed collection development choices. The aim of this one-year study was to gain a complete picture of print book circulation by identifying titles that were used in the library ("in-house") but not checked out. We found that almost 30% of circulation transactions were books that were used in-house. Medical and nursing books showed the highest rate of in-house use in both the reference and main (circulating) collection. A close examination of these subject areas indicated that 46% of potentially circulating medical books used in-house were checked out, and 19% of science books used in house were checked out. This suggests that libraries should not assume that titles used in-house are subsequently checked out, or that check out statistics represent the totality of book use. We recommend including in-house use statistics to obtain an accurate picture of total circulation and library value, and to inform collection development.

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INTRODUCTION

Declining circulation of print books at academic libraries over the past decade has led many librarians to question the value of maintaining large print collections in the hopes that they will someday be used. The prospect of removing dusty unused books and reclaiming space for computers and student-friendly work areas is enticing. However, the evidence for declining use of print books is typically based on circulation statistics that only capture books checked out of the library. Most librarians appreciate that print books may be used in the library without being checked out, and some libraries collect statistics on such use, but these statistics are rarely analyzed or published. If the use of print books and the physical library is underestimated, an important aspect of academic library value may be overlooked. In this era of declining library budgets, heightened scrutiny of library services and usage and increased reliance on electronic resources, it can be difficult to convince multiple stakeholders, particularly those responsible for library budget allocation, that the physical library and print books still have value for patrons. Physical book circulation is a traditional but still important aspect of library value, and may be positively correlated with academic success (Çetin & Howard, 2015). Declining checkout rates are "alarming to library managers, who fear reduced support for library buildings and print collections" (Allison, 2015, p. 30). Including in-house use of books can enhance traditional circulation statistics and demonstrate an often-overlooked use of the physical library.

In this paper, we examine in-house use of our print book collections with the aim of informing decisions about collection development, deaccessioning and space reclamation, and future book budget allocations.

Seton Hall University (SHU) is a private, Catholic diocesan university located in South Orange, New Jersey. It is the oldest diocesan university in the United States, and is classified as a doctoral research university with balanced arts and sciences/professions. As of fall 2014, SHU had an enrollment of 9627, including 5817 undergraduates and 3810 graduate students. SHU's Walsh Library houses various special collections as well as extensive collections of print books and journals. For the past five years we also have been investing heavily in eBooks, including two large leased collections, a patron driven acquisition collection and several small specialized collections. Currently eBooks account for 56% of the nearly 1,185,000 books listed in our catalog.

Circulation data for the period 2005–9 demonstrated low and decreasing use of print books (Rose-Wiles, 2013). There was variation among broad subject areas, but on average less than one quarter of print book holdings circulated in the five year period. However, the analysis did not include books that had been used within the library but not checked out.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several early studies of in-house book use examined the correlation between traditional circulation statistics (books checked out) and books used in-house. McGrath (1971); Harris (1977) and Hindle and Buckland (1979) found that broad subject areas with high rates of book circulation also had high rates of in-house book use, and concluded that

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circulation statistics could be considered reliable indicators of in-house use. However, these authors did not indicate that in-house book use should be overlooked, but rather that it could be estimated from circulation data and added to that figure to provide an estimate of total book use. McGrath (1971) found that in-house use accounted for about 34% of total use at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, with considerable variation by subject area. He proposed two methods to estimate total use: extrapolate from the ratio of books checked out to books used in house, or use a regression equation. Extrapolating from Table 1 data in Harris's (1977) study at Newcastle Polytechnic suggests that in-house accounted for almost 40% of total use, although the author notes that in-house use was probably under-estimated. Hindle and Buckland (1979) agreed that circulation data could be used to predict total use, but noted the data do not show whether books that circulate are the same volumes that are used in-house, and thus may not give adequate information to make decisions about weeding collections.

A comprehensive and widely cited study of the use of library materials was conducted at the University of Pittsburgh in the late 1970s. Bulick, Sabor, and Flynn (1979) reported that almost 40% of nearly 37,000 books acquired by the library in 1969 had not circulated during the subsequent six years. About half of the entire collection (552,674 items) circulated externally during the seven year study, with an average of about 205,000 transactions annually. The study included data for 30 "sample days" of in-house book use, based on recording the number of books "left on tables and other designated areas" on a randomly selected week day during Fall semester 1975 and Winter semester 1976 (Bulick et al. 1979, p. 26). During the 30 sample days, 29,098 books were used a total of 32,373 times, representing 5.3% of the entire collection and an average of about a thousand uses a day. The authors extrapolated from their sample data to estimate in-house use at about 363,000 transactions. Adding this to external circulation would increase total use by a factor of 2.75, to about 550,000 transactions a year (Bulick et al. 1979, p. 30).

The authors did not elaborate on the suggestion that in-house book exceeded external circulation, a possibility also suggested by Harris (1977). Possibly they were uncomfortable drawing this conclusion from a 30-day sample, but they also noted that "collecting in-house use data is more difficult and expensive [than collecting circulation data]; we would like not to have to do it" (Bulick et al. 1979, p. 27). Noting that at least three quarters of the books used in-house also circulated externally and that the overlap increased over time, they concluded that "in terms of whether or not a book or monograph is used, it is sufficient to examine the external patron circulation data" (Bulick et al. 1979, p. 29). Perhaps the need to estimate in-house use and add it to external circulation was assumed, but this was not made explicit in the Pittsburgh study.

To have more than half of a library's books circulate seems enviable to twenty-first century librarians, but in the 1970s many librarians and administrators feared that publicizing such "low use" of library books would lead to reductions in library budgets, and the Pittsburgh study was frequently criticized and rarely replicated (Hardesty, 1988). Voigt (1979) was particularly scathing in his comment that circulation primarily reflects book use by undergraduates and is a not an indication of research use by faculty, graduate students and other researchers.

However, in retrospect it seems surprising that so little attention was paid to the potentially high rate of in-house book use, particularly when the findings of the Pittsburgh Study corroborated those of earlier studies.

Hardesty (1981, 1988) conducted partial replications of the Pittsburgh study at two small liberal arts colleges, DePauw University and Eckerd College. At DePauw, 37% of 1904 books purchased for the circulating collection in 1972–73 had not circulated in the subsequent five years (Hardesty, 1981). At Eckerd, 33% of 1398 books purchased for the circulating collection in 1982–1983 had not circulated by late 1985 (Hardesty, 1988). Both studies also found that a relatively small number of titles accounted for a high proportion of use, following the "80/20 law" that 80% of usage can be attributed to 20% of the collection (Trueswell, 1969). In the Eckerd College study, Hardesty (1988) also examined in-house book use, based on a sample taken between December 1983 and January 1984. External circulation during that period accounted for about 60% of 1934 circulation transactions and in-house use accounted for almost 40%. The in-house use rate was lower than that suggested by the Pittsburgh study, but similar to that found in earlier studies (Harris, 1977; McGrath, 1971). Hardesty also found a strong positive correlation between in-house use and external circulation, with 77% of the books used in-house also being checked out, leading him to support the conclusion of Bulick et al. (1979) that external circulation data were sufficient and it was unnecessary to look at in-house book use.

Eldredge (1998) analyzed monograph circulation at the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center Library. He systematically examined records for almost 1700 books acquired during 1983 that reflected "each time an item had been checked out, used at a copy machine, or left in a study space such as table or carrel" (p. 497). Eldredge found that 84% of titles had circulated at least once in the four years after acquisition. He added that "an additional 9.34% (n = 91) of those items never checked out still experienced internal use" (p. 498). However, he does not note whether any books that were checked out were used internally or provide a total value for in-house use. Eldredge's finding that 36% of titles accounted for 80% of circulation is also a deviation from Trueswell's (1969) "80/20 law". The author concludes that the high circulation and reduced dependence on a small number of titles compared with previous studies may reflect institutional anomalies, or a well-selected collection that meets user needs.

Ridley and Weber (2000) estimated browsing behavior – a form of in-house use – at Ferris State University and Christopher Newport University libraries. They presented "browsing opportunities" by placing small slips of paper ("telltale") in selected volumes. Based on the proportion of telltales displaced, the authors concluded that browsing rates were low, ranging from 2 to 4% in Management monographs to 7–8% in Social work. However, it is unclear how accurately browsing a sample of titles selected for the study represented in-house use overall.

More recent circulation analyses confirm that many books purchased by academic libraries are not checked out, although many reported variation among subject areas (e.g. Bleicic, 2000; Dinkins, 2003; Ochola, 2003; Knieval, Wicht, & Connaway, 2006; Grigg, Koestner, Peterson, & Thibodeau, 2010; Cheung, Chung, & Nesta, 2011; Wiley, Chrzastowski, & Baker, 2011; Rose-Wiles, 2013; but see Ladwig & Miller, 2013). However, none of these more recent studies included statistics for in-house use.

Martell (2008) collated data from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) supplementary statistics reports from 1995 to 2006. The data included some statistics for in-house use as well as external book circulation. He noted that "statistics for in-house use of library materials are not widely available [but they] offer valuable assistance in monitoring the utility of a library's collection" (Martell, 2008, p. 402). Circulation declined substantially during the decade long study period. In addition, median in-house use declined by 57%, and in-house use declined by about 75% at the University of Maryland and California State University system. However, examining the data provided for the

Table 1
All circulation transactions for print books by patron group, May 2013–2014.

Patron group	# transactions	% of total
Undergraduate checkouts	5236	20%
Graduate student checkouts	3909	15%
Faculty checkouts	2291	9%
Other SHU user checkouts	1470	6%
Interlibrary loan	4508	17%
Alumni & others with borrowing privileges	1023	4%
In house use (patron group unknown)	7510	29%
Total circulation transactions	25,947	100%

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