

The State of Ebooks in Academic Libraries: 2022

How libraries are continuing the pivot toward
a growing array of digital resources



A survey and analysis that examines the current environment of ebooks in academic libraries and updates data collected in 2020

Executive Summary

Ebooks are now a major, established component of academic library collections. This study, conducted in the spring of 2022, through a collaboration between OverDrive Academic and Choice, provides a current snapshot of the growth of ebooks and audiobooks as components of digital collections. The report, based on a recent survey, quantifies budgeting issues, audience priorities, subject area allocations, and more as they relate to collection development practices. As colleges and universities reopen fully following the COVID-19 pandemic, digital books remain an essential piece of academic library collections—one that is growing, as this new survey reveals.

Key Findings

- The vast majority of academic libraries currently include ebooks and digital audiobooks in their collections.
- While curriculum support continues to be the dominant element in ebook collection development, survey results indicate that non-curriculum-based ebooks are a growing portion of academic library digital collections.
- Ebook purchasing in almost all subject areas is up, with a noticeable jump in popular fiction/nonfiction reading materials.
- Despite the budgetary challenges and service/material cuts of the past two years, a surprising majority of college and university libraries added digital resources to their collections including, most notably, ebooks and streaming media.
- While the desire to serve and accommodate the needs of students is a primary factor in determining institutions' distance learning approach, COVID remains an influential outside determinant. However, such initially pandemic-driven remote learning efforts are gradually shifting to support new academic initiatives.

About Choice

[Choice](#) is a publishing unit of the Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association.

Choice supports the work and professional development of academic librarians by providing tools and services that help them become more effective advocates for their patrons. Through its over-fifty-year history, it has established itself as an authoritative source for the evaluation of scholarly resources and as the publisher of trusted research in areas of interest to a changing academic library community. Today, Choice works to bring librarians, scholars, publishers, and the reading public together, facilitating a shared concern for the discovery, management, and preservation of scholarly information.

About OverDrive Academic

[OverDrive Academic](#) offers the industry's largest digital catalog of ebooks, audiobooks, magazines, video, interactive instruction and databases for college and university libraries worldwide. With the Libby reading app, named one of Popular Mechanics' 20 Best Apps of the Decade and the popular streaming video app Kanopy, we help extend the library to support students' academic needs and provide easy access to leisure reading anytime, anywhere on every major device.

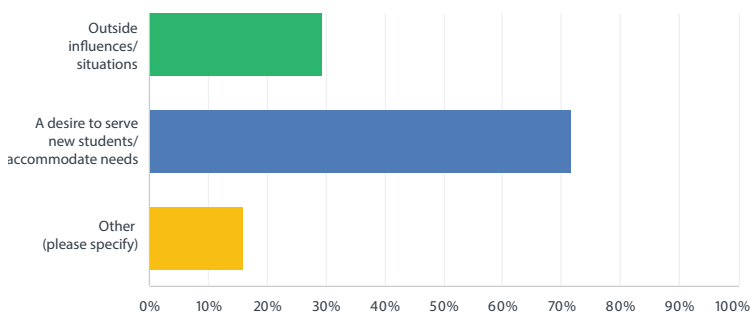
SURVEY RESULTS



Impact of Ebooks on Distance Learning

For most (71.65%) respondents (Question 3), the desire to serve new students and accommodate their needs is the primary driver of their institution's distance learning approach. Another 49.59% credit outside influences and situations, along with other factors. Most notably, the COVID pandemic that forced many institutions to transition to remote learning in the first half of 2020 remained an influential determinant. "The desire to serve students where they are was accelerated by recent outside events," says a library department head from a medium-sized (7,500-10,000 FTE) institution. "Covid greatly expanded our online options," notes a cataloging librarian from a small (fewer than 1,000 FTE) private college. "It was not a high priority until COVID-19,"

Question 3 – My institution's distance learning approach is primarily determined by:



“[Distance learning] was not a high priority until COVID-19, but students have indicated they like the flexibility of online classes.”

explains a Florida Southwestern State College faculty librarian, “but students have indicated they like the flexibility of online classes.”

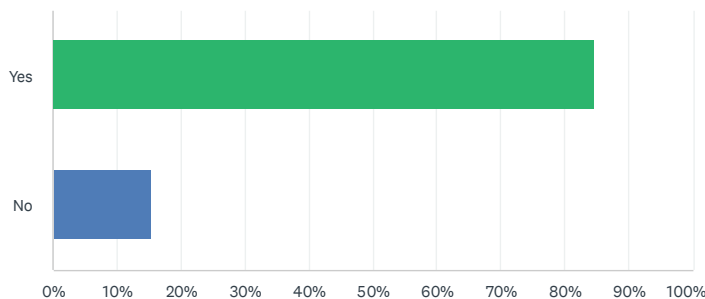
Two-and-a-half years later, as many academic institutions have resumed in-person classes, distance education efforts spurred initially by the pandemic are shifting to support new initiatives. One respondent indicated that distance education programs are now including MS programs that were recently launched or were in the planning stages. Another respondent's institution is using online education for outreach to underserved populations and to support hybrid courses developed during the pandemic. Other survey participants cite the need to generate new revenue streams and drive up declining enrollment for their institutions' remote learning approaches.

Ebook and Audiobook Collection Characteristics and Budgeting

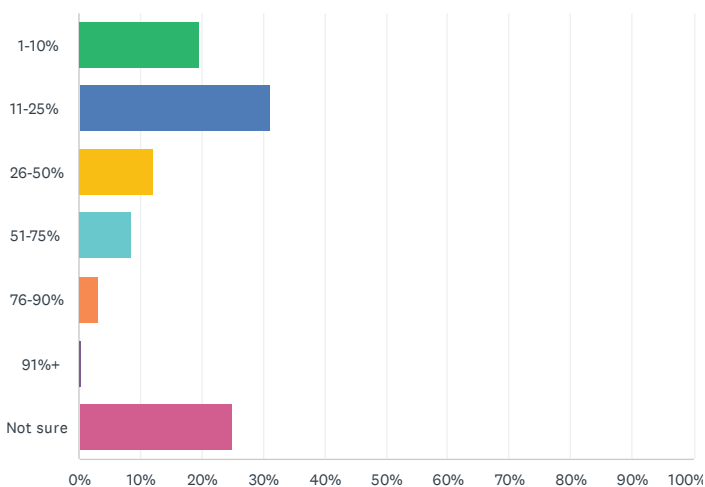
The vast majority (84.56%) of respondents (Question 5) indicate they currently include ebooks and digital audiobooks in their collections.

Slightly over 50% (50.8%) of survey participants (Question 6) report that ebook and digital audiobook spending is 25% or less of their total collections budget.

Question 5 – Does your institution currently have a digital collection that features ebooks and digital audiobooks?

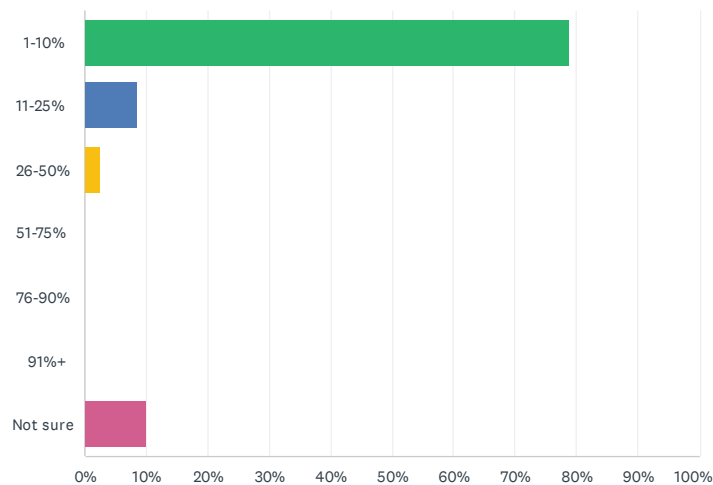


Question 6 – What percentage of your overall collection budget is allocated to ebook and digital audiobook purchases?

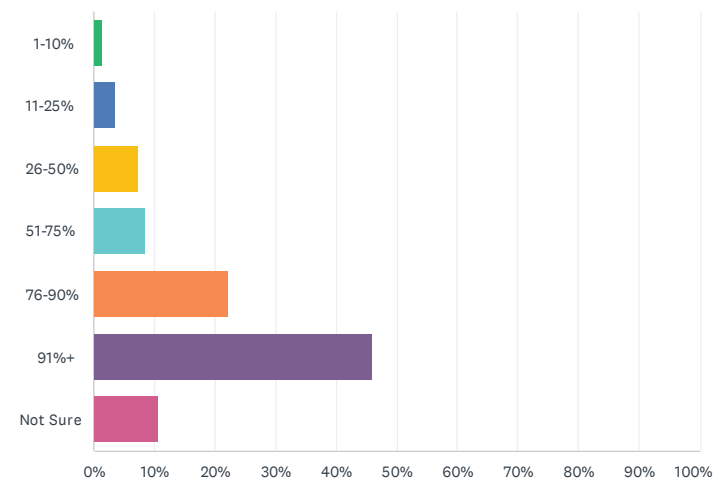


Popular reading materials remain a small but growing portion of academic libraries' digital collections, with 78.84% of respondents (Question 7) devoting less than 10% of their collection to pleasure reading. However, this is a 14.13% increase from the 64.71% who responded to an [OverDrive Academic/Choice survey conducted in 2020](#), indicating more college and university libraries may be acquiring nonacademic digital titles.

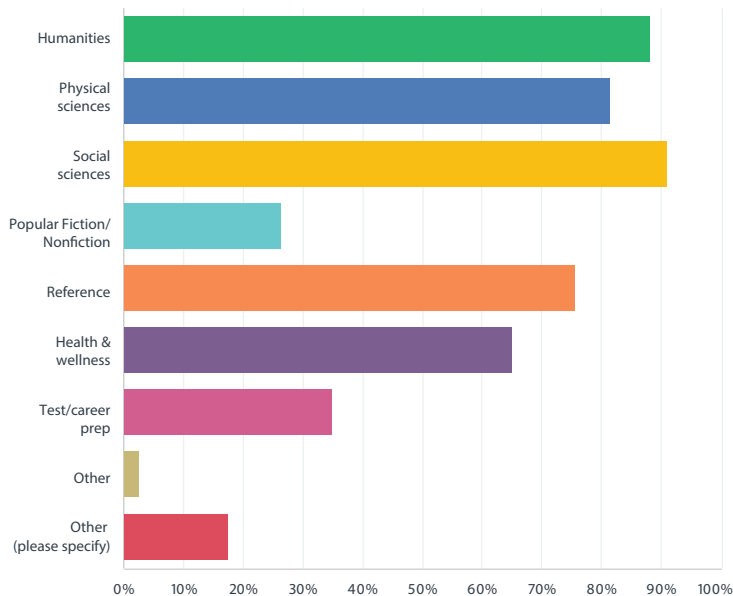
Question 7 – What percentage of your digital collection is for pleasure reading (trade fiction/nonfiction)?



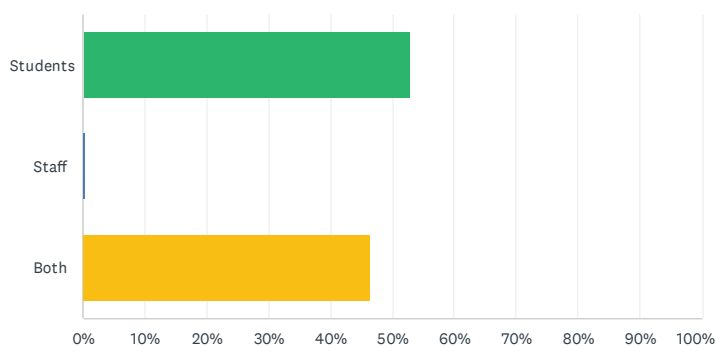
Question 8 – What percentage of your digital collection of ebooks & audiobooks is for curriculum support?



Question 9 – What primary subject areas do you offer ebooks in? (check all that apply)



Question 10 – Do you have a specific audience in mind when purchasing ebooks and digital audiobooks?



Interestingly, more respondents (26.46%) are acquiring ebooks and audiobooks in both popular fiction and nonfiction genres, an 8.04% jump from 2020.

When again comparing this survey’s results with the 2020 survey, there is yet another hint that non-curriculum-based portions (i.e., popular reading materials) of college and university digital collections are growing. In Question 8, a majority (68.25%) of survey participants report that 76% or more of their digital collection is dedicated to curriculum support, with 46.03% of respondents specifying that over 91% of their digital

collection performs this function. However, this latter figure is a 5.06% drop from the 51.08% of librarians in the 2020 survey who indicated that a dominant part (more than 91%) of their digital collection was determined by curriculum needs.

Academic libraries are buying digital books across the full range of disciplines (Question 9), with Humanities (88.36%), Social Sciences (91.01%), and Physical Sciences (81.48%) the leading primary subject areas. Purchasing in almost all subject areas is up from the 2020 survey results (Question 13). Interestingly, more respondents (26.46%) are acquiring popular fiction/nonfiction, an 8.04% jump in 2020.

While more than half (52.91%) of survey participants kept the students in mind (Question 10), 46.56% of the respondents were equally concerned about staff when purchasing digital materials. This may be due to direct faculty requests to support their own research or teaching needs, whether for in-person or hybrid classes.

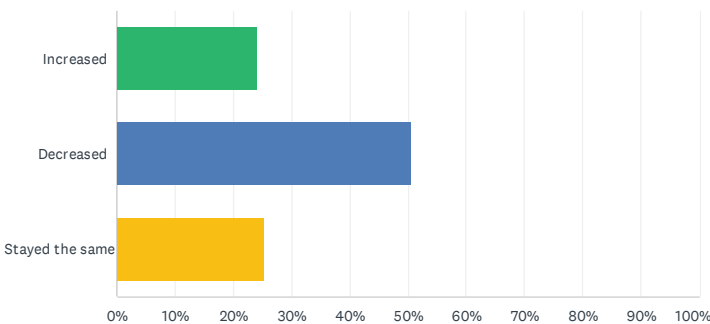
External Market Forces

Although a recent [Chronicle of Higher Education opinion piece](#) gloomily predicted continued pandemic-related declines in college and university enrollment, the responses to Question 11 offer a more nuanced picture. Survey participants are almost evenly divided between those who report their enrollment had declined (50.44%) and those whose enrollment numbers had either remained the same or increased (49.65%).

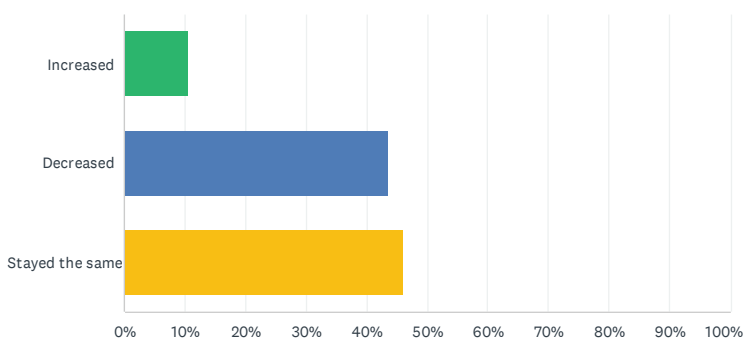
Despite anecdotal discussions of industry-wide downturn in budgets and staffing, survey results indicate a more mixed environment. More than half the respondents to Question 12 (55.58%) report that their overall library budgets remained stable or increased, while a sizable majority (62.28%) have not made staff cuts (Question 13).

A slight majority (54.54%) of survey respondents acknowledge having been forced to make cuts to their services/collection materials (Question 15), with most of the cuts (Question 17) coming from databases & journals (82.30%) and leisure materials & video/entertainment (55.75%). However, as a counterbalance, an impressive 90% of participants say they have added digital resources in the last two years (Question 19), including databases & journals (84.85%), leisure & video/entertainment (57.07%), and curriculum materials (38.38%).

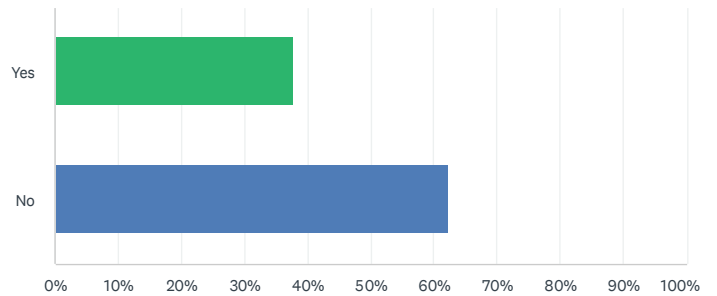
Question 11 – What is your institution’s enrollment status over the last two years?



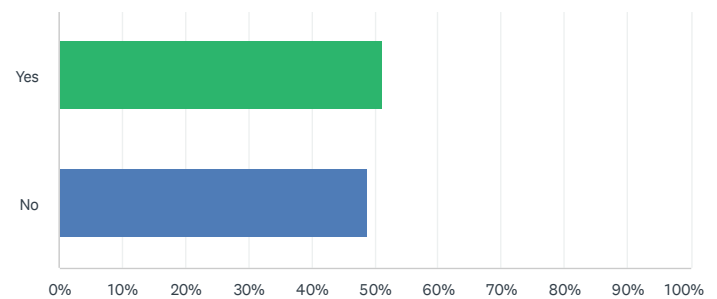
Question 12 – How has your overall library budget been impacted over the last two years?



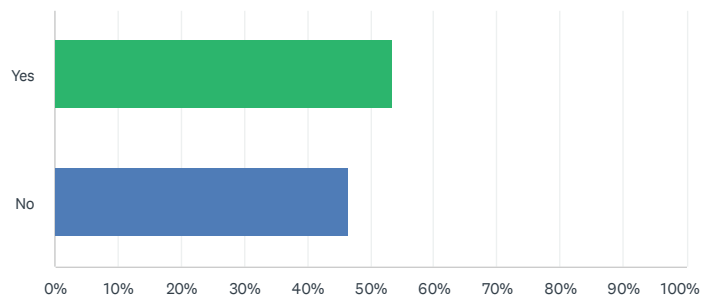
Question 13 – Have you been forced to make cuts to your staff?



Question 14 – If yes, do you expect this trend of staff cuts to continue?

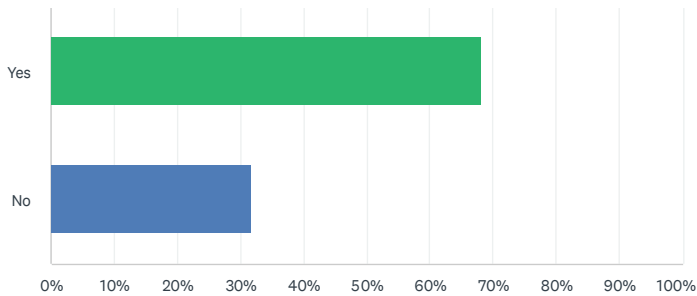


Question 15 – Have you been forced to make cuts to your services/collections materials?

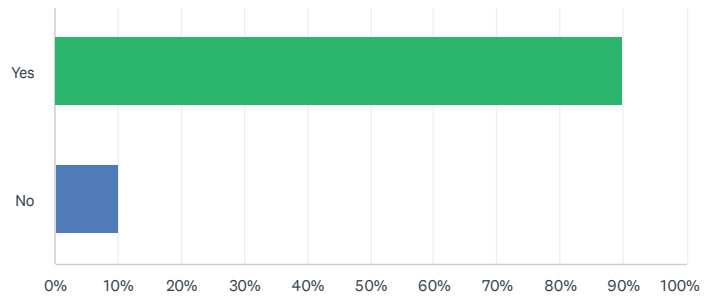


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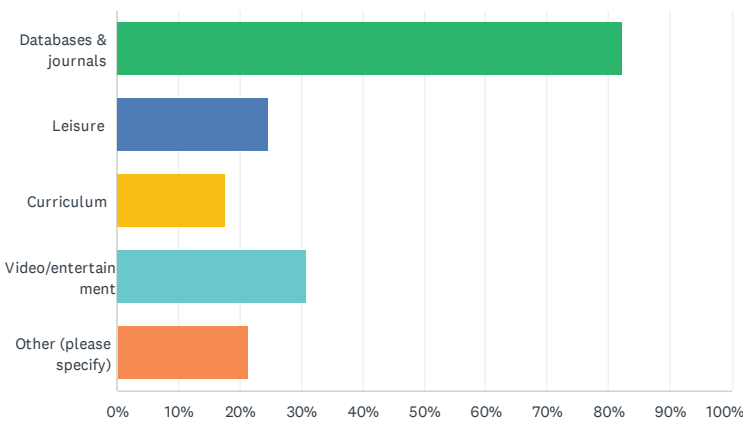
Question 16 – If yes (to Question 15), do you expect this trend of cuts to services/collections materials to continue?



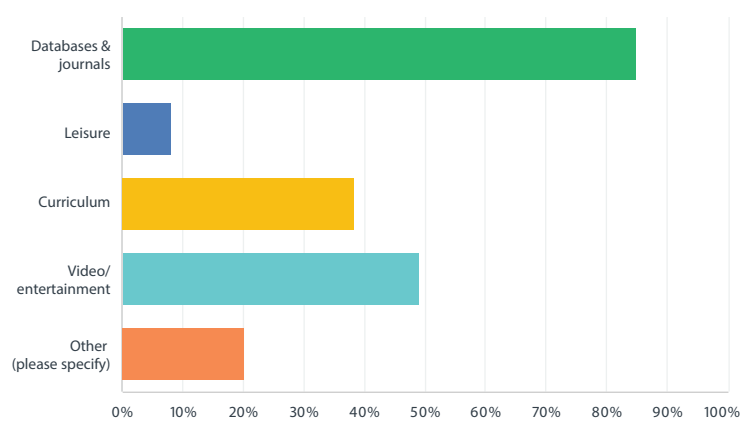
Question 19 – Have you added any new digital resources in your library in the past two years?



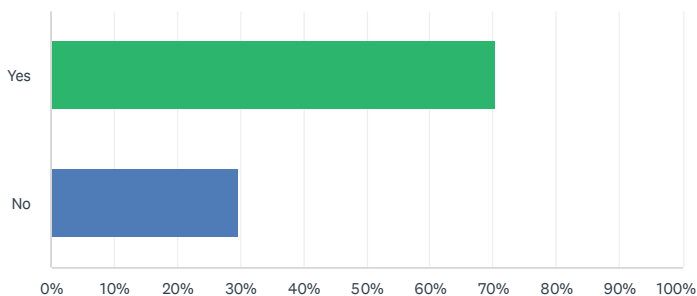
Question 17 – If yes, where have these cuts come from? (check all that apply)



Question 20 – If yes, in which areas have you added digital resources? (check all that apply)



Question 18 – Do you expect this trend of budget cuts and reduction in resources to continue?



“More expensive/unused databases have been cut to add new ones on a very limited basis,” explains one public university systems librarian. Other respondents note they are acquiring digitized primary source collections and are increasing ebook orders, including e-coursebooks and ebook versions of titles they own in print. An acquisitions librarian at a small public institution (under 5,000 FTE) reports that their library is cutting print books but adding digital leisure materials, including e-magazines. Survey participants also say they are purchasing streaming media, especially video.

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TRENDS IN ACTION: CASE STUDIES

A closer look at how three academic libraries are leveraging ebooks and audiobooks to meet the reading and learning needs of their students, faculty and staff provides additional insight into the current state of digital collections on campus.

Georgia Southern University

Georgia Southern University (GSU) is a public research university with an enrollment of 26,000 students across its main campus in Statesboro, GA, and two satellite campuses. A major component of the GSU library's leisure reading strategy over the last couple of years has been a shift toward ebooks and audiobooks.

For Acquisitions Librarian Jessica Minihan Rigg, connecting students with leisure reading during the COVID-19 pandemic was crucial, but not possible during lockdowns with traditional print resources.

"For us, it was important that we provided an escape," she said. "Everyone needs a break, everyone needs to relax, and leisure reading is a great way to do that."

"More and more of our content is moving online because we want to meet people where they are."

Rigg noted that a critical component of the library supporting the whole student is recognizing and acknowledging they have lives outside of the classroom. This means addressing their actual interests and needs, which is why GSU leisure reading collection development is based on requests.

"They're Georgia Southern students, but they're also people, and mothers, and soldiers," Rigg said. "Ultimately, I think our job is to help nurture their curiosity, and in a lot of ways, their empathy, too."

GSU's focus on ebooks and audiobooks hasn't been limited to leisure reading. The library has also expanded its digital resources to serve growing areas of study.

"More and more of our content is moving online because we want to meet people where they are. And where they are is usually on their laptop or phone," Rigg said.

McGill University

Consistently ranked one of Canada's elite universities, as well as one of the top universities in the world, McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, boasts an enrollment of 39,267 students from more than 150 countries.

Associate Dean of Collection Services Joseph Hafner reported a prioritization of digital course material over print.

"We have really transitioned away from as many print course materials as possible and encourage faculty to utilize online resources, including ebooks and audiobooks," he said.

"We have really transitioned away from as many print course materials as possible."

Hafner shared that when a title was requested previously, the library would put priority on purchasing a print copy, but now more students and faculty are specifically asking for digital. There is a faster turnaround between purchasing the digital titles and their being available for students and faculty, he noted. And it's not just for coursework: The McGill library also partners with various campus book clubs by providing the selected titles in ebook and audiobook format.

Hafner said the customizable nature of digital content makes it easier to support students' different learning styles. Readers can adjust the font size of an ebook, take advantage of dyslexic font and change the narration speed of an audiobook—these are a few examples he cited of how students can personalize their experience to better suit their needs.

In addition to ebooks and audiobooks, McGill has also introduced streaming video services, which have proven popular.

"Many of McGill's departments use streaming media as part of the course curriculum, especially as many students push back against traditional textbooks being the only resource available for a class," Hafner said.

Brunswick Community College

Located in southeast North Carolina, Brunswick Community College (BCC) serves a full-time enrollment of 1,000. Its diverse campus is home to many non-traditional, returning and older students, those beginning college transfer programs, and workforce development programs.

BCC was a founding member of the [Dogwood Digital Library](#), an impressive and growing collection of ebooks, audiobooks, magazines, and comics and graphic novels serving a consortium of 43 community colleges across the state.

For Librarian Liza Palmer, a primary benefit of the consortia model for digital content is the cost savings. Membership in the Dogwood Digital Library connects BCC with a far larger ebook and audiobook collection than it could afford on its own.

“Definitely, for smaller libraries, consortia are a lifeline,” she said.

Academic libraries are comfortable with the consortia model for other resources, Palmer noted, and she appreciates the spirit of collaboration – and networking – it promotes among members schools. This powerful collaboration allows for shared knowledge in collection development for the Dogwood Digital Library, taking the pressure off individual librarians from being an expert in all content areas.

“It does feel like you’re participating in a joint effort,” Palmer said. “It’s creating opportunities for engagement and conversations.”

Palmer reported that since the introduction of audiobooks through the Dogwood Digital Library, BCC has shifted away from its previous collection of physical audiobooks in compact disc format. Not only have the digital audiobooks proven more convenient and immune to being lost or damaged like their compact disc counterparts, the selection through the Dogwood Digital Library is also continuously updated.

“It just always feels like the pot is being replenished, so that is wonderful,” she said.

Ultimately, Palmer encourages other academic libraries to pursue the consortia model to offer a new—or more robust—digital collection. The cost savings, collection development support and sense of community make it an appealing option for schools of all shapes and sizes.

“I don’t feel like I’m alone, like I’m trying to create the ideal collection and I have to do it all,” she said. “I know that I’ve got back up, and other people are there (who are) committed to building an interesting, engaging collection.”

“Definitely, for smaller libraries, consortia are a lifeline.”

Conclusion

Ebooks have long been an important component of an academic library’s digital resource collections. Collection development practices and budgeting, however, vary widely among different institution types. And in many cases, the COVID pandemic put ebook purchasing patterns into high gear. But as higher education returns to pre-COVID campus living and learning, ebook collection development continues to grow even as it shifts support to new academic initiatives. Purchasing is up across almost all subject areas, including non-curriculum-based subjects. This trend continues for many institutions even as budget challenges persist.

APPENDIX: SURVEY QUESTIONS AND RESULTS

Demographics

The majority of the 261 survey respondents represented public and private institutions. Public universities and colleges were the largest segment of the survey population, with 57.47% of respondents belonging to this group (Question 1). In terms of enrollment (FTEs) size (Question 2), 5,000 was the benchmark point that divided respondents into almost equal categories; 52.1% of the respondents came from small institutions with fewer than 5,000 FTE, while 47.89% represented medium-sized and large colleges and universities with FTE greater than 5,000.

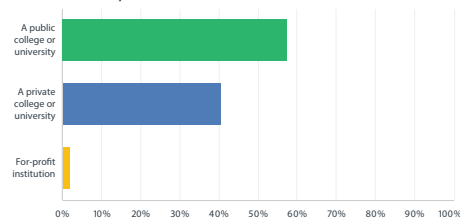
Regarding the primary job function (Question 4) of those who completed the 2022 OverDrive/Choice survey, most (75.47%) were either at the administrative level (library administration, library department head, director/dean of library) or worked in technical services (acquisitions, cataloging, electronic resources, systems). Administrators represented 43.67% of the respondents, while 38.1% respondents came from tech services.

Consortia Participation

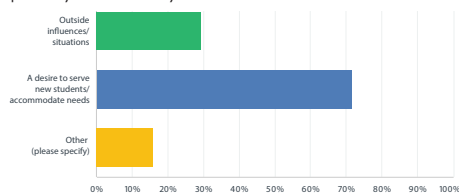
A majority (86.82%) of survey respondents say their libraries share resources or participate in a consortium (Question 21).

For 84.74% of the respondents, saving money is the primary benefit of a consortia membership (Question 22). Access to shared resources and data through the consortia (75.79%) and partnerships with and support for similar institutions (58.42%) round up the top advantages. Some of the other benefits (10.53%) noted by respondents include licensing assistance and opportunities for professional development and training.

Question 1 – My institution is:



Question 3 – My institution's distance learning approach is primarily determined by:



I don't know, but probably chasing enrollment because that's chasing the money.

Nationwide/global crises are the only time we offer distance learning

Covid

Focus as a residential campus

We don't do distance learning.

Outreach to underserved populations and hybrid courses developed during COVID pandemic.

Don't know; seems driven by money

Providing materials that might be used for distance learning is not the same as having forced distance learning.

Both of the above options are equally responsible

Mix of influences and to serve new students

A range of factors—student needs, faculty needs, programmatic decisions, etc.

We are not accredited to offer distance courses except during summer.

Desire to serve current students

Study abroad

Program specific but primarily in person (some graduate programs are online but no undergrad)

Mainly a residential campus, but with study abroad

Specific Departments

A desire to serve students where they are, accelerated by recent outside events.

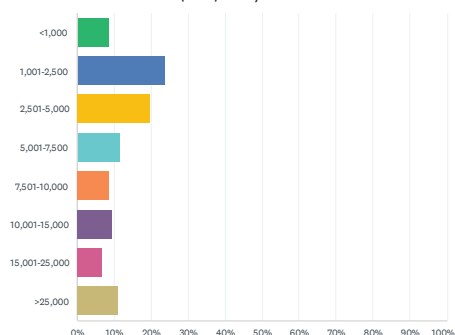
All instruction is in-person (with pandemic exception)

Support distributed nature of our institution/students

All of the above

My institution has very little distance learning offered

Question 2 – Enrollment (FTEs) at my institution is:



Question 3: Other (please specify)

Whether it will drive high enrollments

Not only to serve new students, but also responding to requests/needs of current students.

Reactionary due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was not a high priority until Covid-19 but students have indicated they like the flexibility of Online classes.

Industry demands

We require residence in our regimental leadership (on campus) system

Minimal usage to support syllabus, grading, and assignment information. Strong focus on in-person classes.

COVID

To generate new revenue streams as student demographics change

Competency training

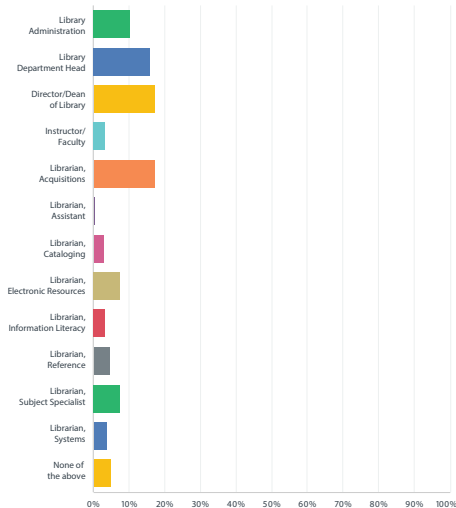
COVID greatly expanded online options

COVID dictated early movement; but new MS programs have been launched or are in planning stages.

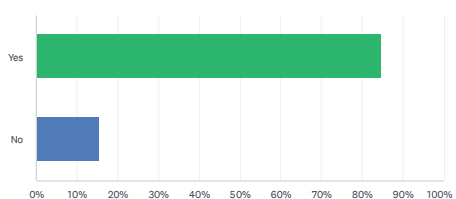
We only serve our current students in the summer

Focus on core strength of face to face teaching (thus, fewer online classes)

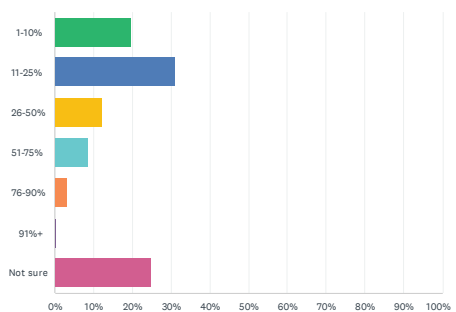
Question 4 – My primary job function is:



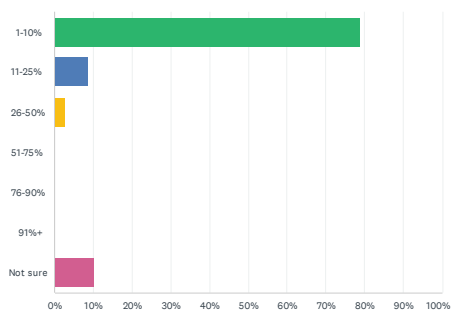
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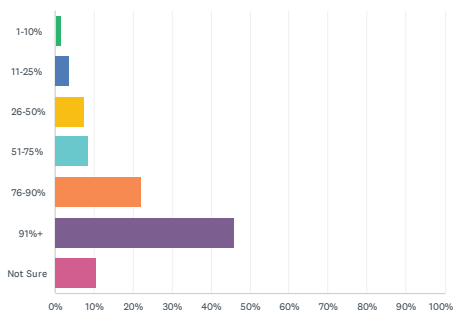
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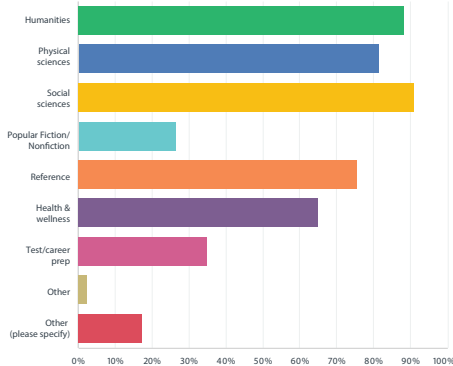
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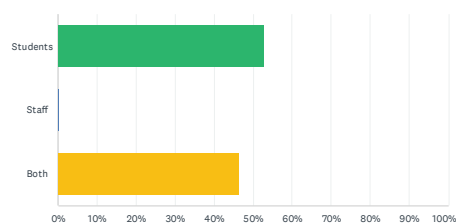
Question 9 – What primary subject areas do you offer ebooks in? (check all that apply)



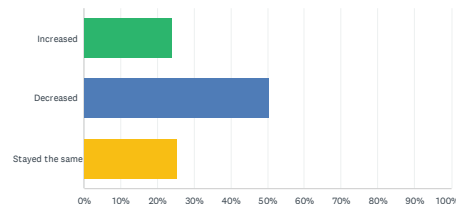
Question 9: Other (please specify)

- We are ePreferred
- Engineering
- Criminal Justice
- Criminal Justice and Legal Studies
- Marine Engineering, Marine Transportation
- Natural & Environmental Sciences
- Business
- Health sciences
- Philosophy, religious studies
- Visual Arts / Art and Design
- Is the determination of the bibliographer
- Engineering, Technical, Business, Medicine
- Business, Technology
- College Skills and Career Development
- Academic medicine
- multiple large interdisciplinary eBook collections
- Business, Education
- Engineering disciplines; Fashion; Graphic Design; Law; Hospitality; Aviation; Fire Fighting;
- Education, Business, linguistics, Multi-cultural, etc.
- Law
- Fine arts, graphic design, performing arts
- Depends on views of the librarians responsible for monograph selection for a particular discipline
- Education
- Applied sciences
- Vocational/trades
- Across the curriculum from what I can tell.
- Clinical Medicine & Public Health
- Stem/Steam fields
- Curriculum support
- On demand
- All Academic Disciplines
- Engineering, Nursing, Pharmacy

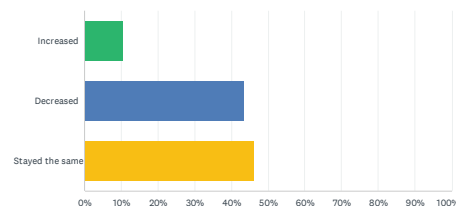
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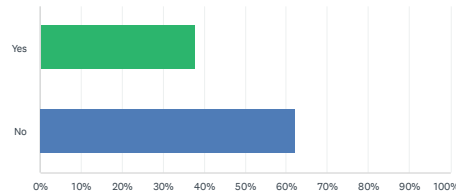
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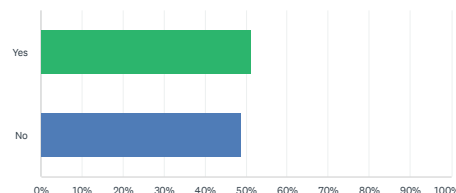
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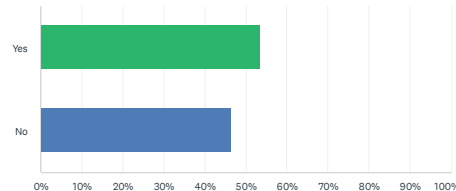
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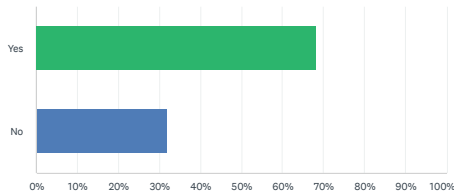
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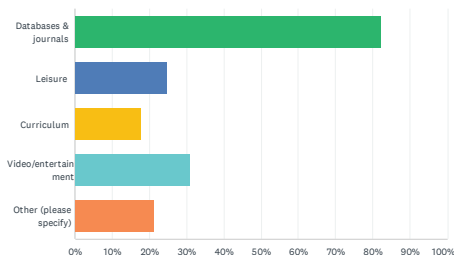
Question 15 – Have you been forced to make cuts to your services/collections materials?



Question 16 – If yes, do you expect this trend of cuts to services/collections materials to continue?



Question 17 – If yes, where have these cuts come from? (check all that apply)



Question 17: Other (please specify)

Stopped all book approval plans and EBA/DDA plans in 2020. Also stopped all firm orders unless Required for a course or PhD/ dissertation research. Just reinstated approval, EBA/DDA, firm Ordering mid-April 2022. DD started returning to a

All reference materials except for databases/journals/ebooks

Books budget

Books and ebooks

Discretionary print acquisitions

Operational expenses and supplies

Overall book budget, travel, conferences, supplies

Hours library is open reduced (less student workers available)

Non-essential items; cutting back on books/eBooks big time as usage & circulation has declined While journal usage & primary sources have soared

print books and serials (so far)

People. Our resources budget goes up and down without a pattern.

print books

Books and periodicals

Print books

One-time purchases of physical and electronic books

Monographs

Physical materials budget

Monograph budgets/discretionary spending

library hours, staff

Books, all kinds

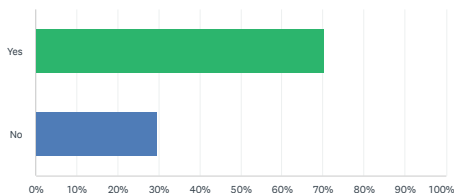
library hours

Journal subscriptions but not databases

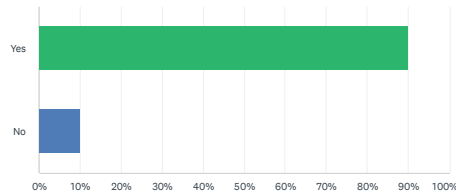
Print books and serials

Operations/hours

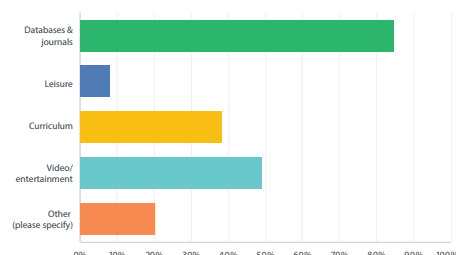
Question 18 – Do you expect this trend of budget cuts and reduction in resources to continue?



Question 19 – Have you added any new digital resources in your library in the past two years?



Question 20 – If yes, in which areas have you added digital resources? (check all that apply)



Question 20: Other (please specify)

Lots of streaming video; little if no audio; we have a renowned writing program so buy a lot of Fiction, poetry

We dropped something and picked up something else with the remaining funds

Streaming media

Online primary source archives/databases. (One time purchases; no new subscriptions.)

Open access content

Ebooks

Digital collections of primary sources

Digitized Primary Source Collections

Streaming audio

Ebooks

Streaming media to support classes

Streaming video services

Streaming has cost us a huge amount of money over the past couple of years as have Standards

Ebooks

More expensive/unused databases have been cut to add new ones on a very limited basis

Off-campus access via RemoteXs

Video/instructional

LibGuides

Emagazines

Monographs in humanities, social sciences, physical sciences, medical sciences

Virtual reality, streaming media, health sciences

Ebook packages

Overdrive through our university system

Data sets

Discovery Layer

Archives (one-time purchases)

E-coursebooks

Esp streaming video

Ebook collections

Greatly increased ebook ordering

Streaming videos

Ebooks

Just not as much additions as cuts

Additional resources to digitize our own special collections

Video to support specific curricular needs

E-book versions of materials we own in print

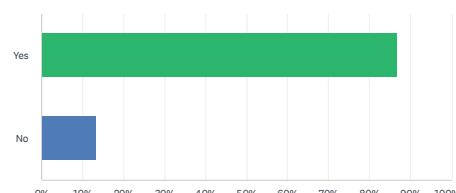
Primary sources historical newspaper collection

Streaming films, ebooks

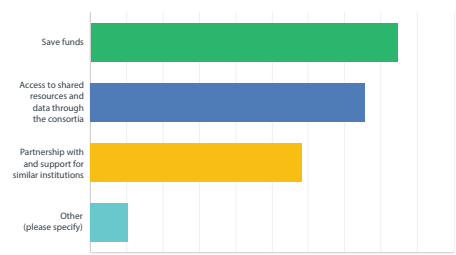
Ebooks

Ebooks but NOT audiobooks

Question 21 – Do you share resources and/or participate in a consortium?



Question 22 – If yes, what are the primary benefits of your consortia? (check all that apply)



Question 22: Other (please specify)

Shared processing

Shared bibliographic records and resource sharing

Easier renewal process

Simplified invoicing

Shared Library Services Platform (SISP- ExLibris' Alma/Primo)

Shared ILS and related resources

Shared catalog/ILL/technical support for staff/collaboration

ILL, developing digital resources together, reduce duplication of workflows

Maintain our statewide ILS

Training and development

Assistance with licensing, systems, professional development

Shared library management system (save money)

Access to resources we don't own; filling holes in our collection due to budget cuts

Professional development opportunities

Access to (some of) the flagship's resources

Training

Operational support provided by the consortium

Licensing

Experts to provide advice.

Our participation in library consortia reduces local staffing costs.