



*Evidence Summary*

*Users' Awareness of Electronic Books is Limited*

**A review of:**

Levine-Clark, Michael. "Electronic Book Usage: A Survey at the University of Denver." portal: Libraries and the Academy 6.3 (Jul. 2006): 285-99.

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**Abstract**

**Objective** – To determine if university library users are aware of electronic books, and how and why electronic books are used.

**Design** – Survey.

**Setting** – University of Denver.

**Subjects** – Two thousand sixty-seven graduate and undergraduate students, faculty, and staff.

**Methods** – In Spring 2005, the University of Denver faculty, and graduate and undergraduate students were invited to participate in a survey about awareness and use of electronic books. A link to the survey was also posted on the library's home page and on the university's Web portal. The 19-question survey consisted of 11 questions to

get feedback about electronic books in general, five questions focused on *netLibrary*, and the remaining were demographic questions. Eligibility to win one of two university bookstore gift certificates provided incentive to complete the survey.

**Main results** – Surveys were completed by 2,067 respondents, including undergraduate students (30.1%), graduate students (39.1%), faculty (12.5%), and staff (11.8%). Results were reported by question, broken out by status (undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty) and/or by discipline (Business, Humanities, Nontraditional, Professional, Sciences, Social Sciences), and presented in tables or in the text. In general, most respondents (59.1%) were aware that the library provides access to electronic books. The library catalog and professors were the main ways respondents learned about electronic books. Approximately half

(51.3%) indicated they had used an electronic book. Of those who indicated that they used electronic books (1,061 respondents), most (72%) had used electronic books more than once. The main reasons mentioned for choosing to use an electronic book included: no print version available, working from home makes getting to the library difficult, and searching text in an electronic book is easier. When asked about typical use of electronic books, most respondents indicated they read only a part of an electronic book; only 7.1% of 1,148 respondents indicated they read the entire electronic book. In answer to a question about choosing the print or electronic version of the same book, 60.7% responded that they would always or usually use print, and 21.5% indicated they would always or usually use electronic. The amount of material to read, the need to refer to the material at a later time, and the desire to annotate or highlight text are all factors that influence whether users read electronic books on a computer or PDA, or print out the material. U.S. government publications and netLibrary were the electronic resources used the most by survey participants.

**Conclusion** – The results of this survey suggest the need to market availability of the library's electronic books. Problems associated with the use of electronic books are related to reading large amounts of text on a computer screen, but a reported benefit is that searching text in an electronic book is easier. Responses to the survey suggest that the use of electronic resources may not be generic, but rather depends on the type of resource (content) being used. The author notes that this finding should lead to further investigation of which items will be preferred and used in which format.

### **Commentary**

As the author points out, libraries spend a considerable amount of money on electronic

books with very little information about how they are used. An excellent literature review illustrates the need for research to discover this information. Unfortunately, this research is not methodologically sound enough to contribute much to answer the questions of how and why users use electronic books. It does suggest that at approximately 60%, university users' awareness of electronic books is not high. This number may be an overestimate since as the author points out, "a small but significant portion" of survey respondents' comments illustrated confusion between electronic books and electronic journals (289). User surveys are common research tools in libraries. It is a challenge to develop good survey questions and get a good response rate from a representative sample. This survey targeted the university faculty and students, but included responses from staff, which constituted 11.8% of the total respondents. It is not clear how the staff data fit into the analysis. A response rate was not provided, but using the student and faculty population at the time of the survey as the denominator and including staff (which overestimates response), the response rate was approximately 20% of the targeted population. The survey was voluntary and respondents self-reported their demographic information; there was no mention of verification or tracking of who completed the survey. This is typical, but not a rigorous survey implementation design.

Unfortunately, Web links to the survey questions and to some of the analyses are no longer valid, so information about the survey itself and results are limited to the published article. The question asked to assess awareness of electronic books was somewhat leading: "Are you aware that Penrose Library provides access to electronic books?" The response categories for the question "How often do you use electronic books?" were "One time only,"

“Occasionally,” and “Frequently.”  
“Occasionally” and “Frequently” are too open to various interpretations to be useful – once a week may be occasionally for one person and frequently for another (291).

Some data are reported by discipline, some are reported by status, some by both discipline and status. By the time the author reported subset percentages, it was easy to be confused. The stated purpose of the study was to determine awareness of electronic books and to discover how and

why they are used and the general satisfaction with the medium, but the analysis focused more on who was doing what with regard to electronic books. Since approximately only 10-12% of the targeted population indicated awareness of electronic books, it is difficult to draw significant, valid conclusions from this study. There is evidence, however, of the need for library promotion of electronic books and of the need for more research into the cost effectiveness of delivering content in this format.