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The Role of Print in Research Library Collections

Studies repeatedly confirm that, even in the intensely digital environment of research institutions, printed resources remain important for students and faculty. They depend on the library for both print and electronic resources and express a preference for a hybrid information environment, where electronic resources supplement print. In one study, respondents reported that while they go online first, almost all use printed books and journals in their work and consider them to be more reliable than electronic resources. In a study conducted in one large research university, seniors reported high use of print in the humanities, social sciences, and the natural sciences. Nationwide, library users report that their appetite for information resources continues to exceed their libraries' collections. These library users identify providing access to more information, *including comprehensive print collections*, as the highest priority for their libraries' improvement.¹

Research and experience also show wide differences among disciplines in how information is used, how new technologies and digital publications are embraced, and to what extent digital content substitutes for print. In many instances, print on paper is the preferred medium for concentrated reading and for real-time collaborative work. *The Social Life of Information* by John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000), and *The Myth of the Paperless Office*, by Abigail J. Sellen and Richard H. R. Harper (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002), point out the current value that knowledge workers such as air traffic controllers and World Bank employees still find in print and paper resources. Sellen and Harper, on page 13 in their book, say, "It seems that much of the information found on the Web needs to be printed in order for us to read it and make sense of it."

Responding to user expectations for easy searching and convenient access to an expanding array of information sources, libraries are spending increasing amounts of their materials budgets on electronic resources. While up to now many libraries have actually also maintained the print, where dual versions exist, recent budget and space constraints have led many to make a choice of the format they collect. The nascent state of strategies for preserving digital content makes some libraries reluctant to relinquish print editions. However, seeing that these preservation issues are now being addressed, and given the significant advantages of the electronic editions, many libraries have decided to collect electronic-only. Libraries are also offering printing services to meet users' expressed need for print. As professional print-on-

demand technologies become more cost effective, this option may offer, for users who require it, a way to generate high-quality bound printed editions from electronic information resources.

At the same time, libraries have not abandoned print. They continue to acquire print in disciplines that are not moving as quickly into the digital world as others and in formats, such as monographs, that are still published primarily in printed form. Thus, integrating print and electronic resources and making print resources almost as easy to access as electronic content are challenges facing libraries in this hybrid environment. Portal software is being designed to enable users to search library catalogs simultaneously with both open and licensed databases to find content regardless of format, thereby building a bridge between the library's print and digital collections. Timely, self-service resource sharing and other user-initiated services such as book renewals and book- and article-delivery are also making access to print resources much easier. In the future more information will be created, stored, delivered, and preserved digitally, but print--because of its physicality, flexibility, perceived reliability, ease of reading and sharing--will be used for reading and editing for some time to come.

Even as print retains importance, the library's physical space has increasing value for other activities, especially collaborative learning and research. Thus, to free up prime real estate, libraries are moving lesser-used print collections to storage centers (with rapid delivery service) and are exploring cooperative approaches to long-term *preservation copy* retention.

For now, research libraries' print collections continue to play a critical role for users even as that role and how users gain access to the material are changing. Given the rapidly changing environment, however, libraries are carefully monitoring the information-seeking and reading habits of their users to see how their use of print and digital resources changes or does not change over time.

Endnote

1. See "[Changing Patterns of Information Use](#)" in this report for more information on the research summarized here.

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