

## Comparison of Print Monograph Acquisitions Strategies Finds Circulation Advantage to Firm Orders

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Laura Costello

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*Evidence Summary*

**Comparison of Print Monograph Acquisitions Strategies Finds Circulation Advantage to Firm Orders**

**A Review of:**

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**Reviewed by:**

Laura Costello  
Head of Research and Emerging Technologies  
Stony Brook University Libraries  
Stony Brook, New York, United States of America  
Email: [laura.costello@stonybrook.edu](mailto:laura.costello@stonybrook.edu)

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**Abstract**

**Objective** – To compare usage of print monographs acquired through firm order to those acquired through approval plans.

**Design** – Quantitative study.

**Setting** – A public research university serving an annual enrollment of over 43,500 students and employing more than 2,600 faculty members in the South Central United States.

**Subjects** – Circulation and call number data from 21,356 print books acquired through approval plans, and 23,920 print books acquired through firm orders.

**Methods** – Item records for print materials purchased between January 1, 2011 and

December 31, 2014 were extracted from the catalog and separated by acquisitions strategy into firm order and approval plan lists. Items without call numbers and materials that had been placed on course reserves were removed from the lists. The authors examined accumulated circulation counts and conducted trend analyses to examine year-to-year usage. The authors also measured circulation performance in each Library of Congress call number class; they grouped these classes into science, social science, and humanities titles.

**Main Results** – The authors found that 31% of approval plan books and 39% of firm order books had circulated at least once. The firm order books that had circulated were used an average of 1.87 times, compared to approval plan books which were used an average of 1.47

times. The year-to-year analysis showed that the initial circulation rate for approval plan books decreased from 42% in 2011 to 14% in 2014, and from 46% to 24% for firm order books. Subject area analysis showed that medicine and military science had the highest circulation rates at over 45%, and that agriculture and bibliography titles had the lowest circulation rates. Subject area groups showed the same pattern, with books in the social sciences and sciences experiencing more significant circulation benefits to firm order purchasing.

**Conclusion** – Monographs acquired through firm orders circulated at a slightly higher rate than those acquired through approval plans.

### Commentary

This study centers on print collection development practices. The authors quickly and correctly identify that there is conflict in this genre, alongside a lack of generalizability because of differences in scope, sample size, and methodology. In accordance with this, the authors cite two studies that found circulation advantages for titles purchased via approval plan (Ellis, Ghose, Claassen-Wilson, Stratton, & Clement, 2009; Tucker, 2009) and another that found advantages to firm orders (Tyler, Falci, Melvin, Epp, & Kreps, 2013). Though the findings may vary for any given library, there is plenty of food for thought in this article. The study examined all of the public research university's print monograph circulation data within a relatively narrow range of years, so the findings are able to avoid some of the complications of assessing collections that have accumulated slowly over a long period of time (Fry, 2015).

The sample pulled out approval plan purchases with a note on the item record and firm orders represented the other print purchases, so it is difficult to tell exactly how the firm orders were collected. For example, some of the disciplines may have had more faculty involvement in requests, while others were selected entirely by the librarian. The study did find a particular advantage to firm orders that represented purchases outside of

the disciplines offered by the University or spanning multiple disciplines; this could suggest that the flexibility of human intervention over the fixed approval plan was part of the reason for its advantage. The authors also point out that librarians seemed to alter their firm orders in response to changes in their academic programs, while leaving their approval plans static.

Beyond the scope of the research question, the authors identify a low percentage of total circulations to purchased materials in both firm and approval orders, and a steeply declining circulation rate for all print monographs over the study period. The sample excluded serials and electronic materials, so it is not clear whether usage is migrating to non-print platforms, moving outside the library, or disappearing altogether.

This study is clearly outlined and very replicable as described in Glynn's critical appraisal tool (2006). It would be useful to replicate it in similar and different institutions to establish better baselines for print circulation statistics, especially since this study flagged a decline in print circulation rates over the past few years. If this is true of other institutions, deep changes should be in the works for collection development processes. This study only used descriptive statistics, so this type of work would help determine standards for the significance of collections data, which could help add meaning to statistics like these. There are many other methods for providing access to scholarly content; libraries would benefit from reputable collection usage benchmarks to indicate when change should occur in collection development strategies.

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