Usage Comparison of Print and Electronic Theses and Dissertations at The University of Southern Mississippi

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Research Questions

1) To what extent does online access through an Institutional Repository affect the usage of theses and dissertations?

2) Which category saw the greatest change from print to digital exposure?

Methods

This study is a usage comparison of print Honors Theses, Masters Theses, and Dissertations and electronic Honors Theses, Masters Theses, and Dissertations at the University of Southern Mississippi. Usage statistics for the print materials were obtained from III Millennium using the create list function to pull item records for all print Honors Theses, Masters Theses, and Dissertations in Cook Library holdings. Interlibrary loan statistics and non-circulating, archival copies housed in McCain Library and Archives were excluded from this study. The title, author, call number, item type, and total number of downloads were recorded for each item. Embargoed materials were excluded from this study.

Using Millennium’s Create List function, a query was performed to identify print theses and dissertations from the circulating collection in Cook Library. The screenshot below detail the Create List functions used and the information exported.

The screenshot below illustrated the exported usage statistics from Bepress, the hosting platform of Aquila, detailing the Honors Theses sorted by most downloaded.

Results

Honors Theses saw a 12,578% increase in usage from print to digital formats making the Honors Theses the greatest usage increase from online exposure. Honors Theses were the least used print collection, with only 1,648 total checkouts, but they are the most used of the digital formats with 208,933 downloads or 79% of the total material usage.

Masters Theses had a 978% increase in usage, once available in digital format. The print circulation statistics for the Masters Theses show 1,978 checkouts, while Bepress statistics show 21,106 downloads. The print Masters Theses make up 0.70% of the total material usage, whereas the digital Masters Theses make up 8% of the total usage.

The digital Dissertations are used 125% more than their print counterparts, increasing from 9,322 checkouts to 20,987 downloads. The digital Dissertations account for 8% of the total usage, while the print Dissertations only account for 3% of the total material usage.

In all, this study looked at 10,158 unique titles with a combined 263,954 checkouts and downloads. The publication dates range from 1948 to 2015. Overall, material usage increased 1,842% over physical checkouts in three years (from 2012-2015).

Overall, we can conclude that online exposure garnered a 1,842% increase in material usage with Honors Theses seeing the largest increase at 12,578%.

Additional research is needed to compare the rate of checkouts by year. The print materials have been available for decades longer than the digital formats, making an annual comparison difficult as III’s Millennium only tracks total checkouts and not checkouts by year. Moreover, a direct comparison of the same titles available in both formats is a data set worth exploring, but challenging as there is little overlap in these particular collections.

With digital ETDs gaining a 1,842% increase in usage in just 3 years, the case for adding ETDs to one’s IR is strong. The largest impact was seen in the usage increase between the print Honors Theses and their digital counterparts. As the Honors Theses are written by undergraduates, the worldwide exposure is beneficial to students at the brink of their career and research. The increase also enhances the reputation of the university and can be used as a recruitment tool, to recruit students, faculty, and donors.

The additional materials also serve to illustrate the staffing needs of an IR, as each year more and more departments are adding materials. Overall, we conclude the additional needed resources are outweighed by the positive impact.

History

Aquila, the Institutional Repository of The University of Southern Mississippi launched in 2011. Aquila, so named after the constellation of the eagle, has the capability to publish ETDs as well as serialized journals and other materials.

In 2012, the Honors College ceased printing physical copies of Honors Theses and began publishing through Aquila, to the cost and time saving benefit of the students as well as the institution.

The next year, the option was given for students to add their Masters Theses to Aquila. In 2015, the Graduate School started requiring submission through Aquila, and added the Dissertations to the system as well.

The print copies of the Masters Theses date back to 1948 when the college conferred its first Masters of Arts degree on 7 students. The first MA was bestowed on Saint Inez Hudson. Hudson’s thesis, entitled “A survival study of the Purvis High School class of 1948” resides in Cook Library.

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The first doctoral degree was issued to Eugene Miller Keebler in 1962. Keebler’s dissertation entitled “A study of the combination office of Dean-Registrar in institutions of higher education” marks the beginning of print Dissertations in Cook Library’s collection.

The University of Southern Mississippi offered its first Honors classes in 1965. By 1975, the program had evolved into a formalized Honors College, making it the sixth oldest public Honors College in the nation and the oldest Honors College in the state of Mississippi. The Honors Theses in Cook Library date back to 1968 starting with “A study: Jean Genet as playwright” by Frances Jean Stone.