Institutional libraries have always been dedicated to making research and learning easier for faculty and students. Today’s watchwords for libraries are efficiency, discovery and access. Now, to accommodate changing scholarly habits, as well as new roles for the physical library space itself, librarians are exploring — or already undertaking — the transition from print resources to electronic.

No matter the size of the library, the process of curating collections is basically never-ending. While online journals have been prevalent throughout this century, and continue to grow in popularity, the move from print monographs to eBooks has not been as clear-cut. Even though the vast majority of the scholarly community prefers an online work environment, educators and students don’t always think of books being available or useful in that format. DRM has been a roadblock in many instances, and long-form reading has been more difficult using eBooks. But we have addressed these concerns to enable electronic books to contribute significantly to increasing the efficiency, discovery and access provided by libraries.

In a spring 2017 survey of more than 140 of our academic, corporate and government customers, nearly 72 percent say they are shifting to an electronic library to “meet user needs,” and 58 percent say they want to provide multiple user access to content. Many of those surveyed echo the same benefits to be gained from the transition to an electronic library: easy multi-user and remote access, reduced space requirements, the ability to do full-text searching, 24x7 content availability, expanded range of topics and more current content.
The greatest factor influencing the decision to move to an electronic library, identified by 61 percent of the respondents, is “reducing or eliminating library space.” Said Peter Kupersmith, Library Director at Delaware Valley College in Pennsylvania, “Space saving is one of the major benefits of transitioning to an electronic library.” He also cited convenience and off-campus access as additional advantages.

Syracuse University Takes a Hard Look at Patron Habits, Available Library Space

Like most colleges and universities, Syracuse University has seen a shift in the habits of its library patrons.

“I heard at a recent conference that libraries are transitioning from print repositories to ‘collaboratories’ to studios, and that really reflects our situation here,” notes Scott Warren, Associate Dean of Research and Scholarship at Syracuse. “Our patrons are not only coming in to find a physical product, or use an electronic service, but to create something new. To that end, we have to enable them to be more efficient by providing the right options.” Now some of the Syracuse library space is used for student success centers and classrooms — there has been a “significant repurposing” of areas that formerly held books or other resources. Nearly 40 percent of the Elsevier survey respondents say they are in the same situation, needing more communal or learning space in their libraries.

Syracuse has systematically converted Elsevier’s monographic series (including the standard series they continue to receive) and some of its major reference works from print to electronic, making them easier to access and search. “We took a hard look at the

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data, and what we thought would have the most use going forward — and what would achieve the greatest ROI,” says Warren. Staying in touch with contemporary research patterns also led Syracuse to move its indexes and abstracts from print to electronic mode. “We are seeing that eBooks work very well for short-form reading,” he adds.

While Syracuse still acquires many print volumes per year, and has millions of titles in its libraries, it has already physically downsized its reference collection, primarily in the physical sciences. The print reference books went into high-density storage — which the university has had for about five years — or found a new home in the circulating stacks. Warren says the overall use of reference books has been on the decline for years, thanks to good online databases that have replaced large index sets.

**The Print-to-Electronic Transition Is a Process**

Syracuse University’s Warren cautioned that each library faces its own challenges, and there’s no blanket solution dictating the timing and extent of a move from print to electronic. He emphasized that space, both in the library and in storage, will always be a major factor. Storage is a very expensive and time-intensive process, especially the metadata clean-up and the physical movement of books.

Joanne Doucette, Assistant Professor and Associate Director of Knowledge Management at Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, says they transitioned to eBooks years ago. “My perfect world is everything available with perpetual access and unlimited users,” she states. Other libraries indicated they have been moving from print to electronic over a period of time, some of them more aggressively during the past two years.

**The Value of an Electronic Library Is Worth Exploring**

Librarians need to ask themselves tough questions: What do my patrons want and need? Are we losing library space? Are budgets shrinking? Is our staff being reduced? We asked
these questions and more in our recent survey of more than 100 ScienceDirect users. 48 percent of those who answered our survey said budget pressure was influencing their decision to transition to electronic access, while 28 percent pointed to declining staff as their impetus to explore eBooks.

For institutions with large distance learning and online degree programs, substantial electronic collections become a critical requirement. Over 70 percent of those participating in our survey said distance learning is playing a role in their need for electronic resources. More than 20 percent are shifting to an electronic library due to multiple and/or global sites. Both distance and on-campus scholars are finding eBooks more appealing, with the advent of low or no DRM restrictions, unlimited users and ADA accessibility.

Elsevier's ScienceDirect platform, which provides DRM-free online scientific, technical and medical research from book chapters, peer-reviewed journals, articles and open access content, is showing users first-hand the value of access to eBook content... whether they are on campus or across the world.

“We like books on ScienceDirect because we can have unlimited users and easy PDFs to use, there are no DRM complications, and of course, the quality of the content of the books themselves,” according to Melissa Belvadi, User Experience & Collections Librarian at the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada. Many other librarians confirm that the academic value of the ScienceDirect content is excellent, and that it's reliable, up-to-date and easily discoverable with good search options. The survey respondents also praise our collaborative customer service and responsive technical support.

Libraries have taken on major new responsibilities within their institutions. As they evaluate their print versus electronic holdings, make decisions on what to keep, store, deassess, convert or add, and invest in infrastructure to support new options, librarians must first and foremost consider their commitment to the best possible environment and resources for faculty and students. There is strong evidence that moving from print to electronic books will enable their patrons to work more efficiently, enjoy greater discovery and increase their access to valuable content.