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The Role of Audiobooks in Academic Libraries

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The decision by the library of LaGuardia Community College to add audiobooks to its collection led librarians to examine the scope and the nature of audiobook use at other college and university libraries. The author created, distributed, and tabulated a survey that recorded a number of traditional uses for these materials as well as a number of interesting new possibilities and challenges.

KEYWORDS *academic libraries, audiobooks, aural literacy, learning styles, library collections*

BACKGROUND

In 2007, the LaGuardia Community College Library decided to add audiobooks to its collection. LaGuardia is an urban community college with over 12,000 FTEs (full-time equivalent students). As a part of the City University of New York (CUNY), it reflects the diverse ethnic and economic characters of the borough of Queens in which it is located. As a new item, audiobooks were expected to draw attention to the library as well as provide a different mode of access to books for our very diverse population.

The decision to add audiobooks to the collection immediately confronted us with choices and questions: which format to buy? What would be the cost? How would our users access them? Initially, we wanted to investigate a commercial online company that offers downloadable books. Since one such company had a highly visible advertising campaign in the New York City transit system, we were familiar with it (Audible.com).

As they did not offer a service for libraries at that time, we began to investigate our options more fully. Regarding format, we worried that

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downloadable books might actually make the books less accessible, since the various formats such as mp3 and the mp4 format for iPods were not interchangeable and required a device we could not purchase or provide for our users. While some of our students already own such devices or have the means to acquire them, many of them do not. Furthermore, some are less sophisticated technologically and might be deterred by the process of downloading. In any case, we did not know which devices were predominant among our students. Clearly, we wanted something simple and easy to use.

At this time we found out that the company that provides us with a leisure reading leasing plan collection was starting up a Playaway list. Playaways are self-contained mp3 players, and they have many positive attributes. The device itself is loaned out with a single book loaded on it. Playaways are visually appealing, and, unlike a digital audiobook, they can be displayed. Anyone at all can have immediate access, and they can also be used in a car or through speakers with the use of a universal jack. The selection of Playaway titles is, however, somewhat limited. We decided to invest in a moderate-sized plan, and librarians and library staff met several times to work out circulation, cataloging, and display issues. We designed posters, wrote newsletter articles, and sent global E-mails to promote them to our users. The response was favorable, and early circulation statistics were promising. Short story collections, language learning, and a few bestsellers were among the most popular selections.

As a result of being faced with these decisions about format, use, and promotion, the author decided to discover how audiobooks were collected and used in other college libraries. A survey was developed and distributed via several listservs.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN AUDIOBOOKS AND LIBRARIES

Audiobooks for the general adult population have enjoyed growing popularity in recent years. Advances in technology that suit modern multitasking lifestyles have made audiobooks a part of the cultural landscape, available in bookstores and downloadable on commercial and free Web sites, as well as in various formats through public libraries. *Publishers Weekly* reported in 2008 (Download gains in 2007) that spoken-word audiobook sales were up 12 percent over the previous year based on the Audio Publishers Association's annual sale and consumer surveys.

Audiobooks are associated with libraries in at least three ways. The first way involves the use of audiobooks by the blind and visually impaired. Federal legislation passed in 1931 established the National Library Service (NLS) to serve blind adults with braille books. By the mid-1930s, advances in technology made talking books available through the service. This service

continues today and is described on the National Library Service Web site (2010): "Through a national network of cooperating libraries, NLS administers a free library program of braille and audio materials circulated to eligible borrowers in the United States by postage-free mail." The second is audiobooks for children in the form of children's books with tapes, or books with compact disc packages. These packages have long been found in the children's rooms of public libraries and in school libraries for use by the learning-to-read set and also by "young readers," approximately nine through twelve years of age. The third use is primarily recreational: the use of audiobooks borrowed from the public library by commuters or vacationers seeking self-improvement or entertainment to make time spent in the car more enjoyable. This last and most recent development solidifies the connection between audiobooks and leisure reading.

College libraries serve the same users who have traditionally been served by public library audiobook collections; they serve visually impaired and dyslexic populations, students needing to improve their reading in English, and young adult users who have grown up familiar with listening to books as they learned to read or in the car as a form of family entertainment. The needs of these students do not evaporate over the summer between senior year of high school and the following fall, nor do their habits change. Older adults may also enter or re-enter college with literacy and language skills needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the literature on educational uses of audiobooks examines their use in primary and secondary school settings. Articles in scholarly journals, professional magazines, and on Web sites address the value of using audiobooks for various purposes and populations, but primarily with school-age children. The use of audiobooks in teaching reading to second language learners as well as to native English speakers in first grade is discussed by Koskinen, Blum, and Bisson (2000). Chenfield and Haley address their use with seventh grade students with learning disabilities and how, by making the audiobooks available to all students, they "avoided singling out students with disabilities" (2005, 23). Chen discusses how audiobooks can help "motivate poor readers, reluctant readers or struggling readers." (2004, 23) Chen also writes, "The ultimate goal of using audiobooks with school children is to improve their reading skills and increase their reading interests." (22) A study involving secondary students with mild cognitive disabilities concluded that "[c]learly, greater access to higher-level material, specifically the audio textbook, holds great promise for students with mild cognitive disabilities" (Boyle, Rosenberg, and Connelly 2003, 213).

Web sites, such as the Books on Tape site, extol the use of audiobooks in primary and secondary schools and libraries. On that Web site, Pam Spencer Holley (Holley n.d.), past President of ALA's Young Adult Library Service Association, lists "ten reasons why teen listening is important beyond just the enjoyment factor." Among the reasons she cites are increasing vocabulary, speaking, writing, and listening skills. This last she calls "essential in this multimedia world." Her number one reason: "Listening is an important step for becoming a life-long reader." An article on the ReadingRockets Web site, entitled *Benefits of Audiobooks for All Readers*, again is oriented to K-12 students (Johnson 2003).

The traditional library connection to audiobooks is strong, and their traditional uses for language learning and as resources for the visually impaired remain valid. Yet, do changing technology, changing lifestyles, and changes in thinking about literacy indicate new uses for audiobooks in college contexts and a need for larger and/or more specialized collections in college libraries?

In 2004 (Fox), the subject of audiobooks in college and university libraries is given some attention. Fox asks the question, "Do Audiobooks Belong in Academic Libraries?" He conducted a survey within the University System of Georgia, and he concludes that there is indeed a place for audiobooks in academic libraries. However, are such collections being built?

Allmang (2009) reports on successful collection building at the National Institute of Standards and Technology Research Library, which is a research library. In this case, a very specific need ("We had wanted to offer downloadable audiobooks to permit staff members to build their managements skills 'on the go' since 2004") was "enthusiastically embraced . . . from its very first day. In its initial nine months, researchers checked out audiobooks six times more frequently than print books." Such a research library is serving a very high level and focused user, but it is interesting to note that the combination of motivation—users wanted to acquire certain skills—with the ability to multitask proved successful: "While [staff members] were motivated to extend their knowledge in these areas, and at times had job requirements to do so, they were greatly pressed for time with research and other responsibilities" (173).

Some current trends in education illustrate possible new uses for audiobooks. Since 1983, when Gardner (1983) proposed his Theory of Multiple Intelligences, educators have had heightened awareness of the variety of ways in which individuals can be differently intelligent. Morales and Moses of the EDUCAUSE Evolving Technologies Committee write,

Along with the theory of multiple intelligences go the learning styles; learning styles refer to the ways people learn, which then are categorized in three areas: visual, auditory and kinesthetic . . . Auditory learners learn best through verbal lectures, discussions, talking things through and

listening to what others have to say . . . Auditory learners often benefit from reading text aloud, *listening to audio books* (this author's italics), listening to music and using a tape recorder to record narrations or lectures. (2006, 2)

Parallel to the concept of multiple intelligences is that of multiple literacies. While students may have a preferred or dominant learning style, they are also in need of developing various literacies, which now include aural literacy, sometimes seen as a subset of media literacy. The report of the 21st-Century Literacy Summit provides this working definition of 21st-century literacy: "21st century literacy is the set of abilities and skills where aural, visual and digital literacy overlap. These include the ability to understand the power of images and sounds, to recognize and use that power, to manipulate and transform digital media, to distribute them pervasively, and to easily adapt them to new forms" (New Media Consortium 2005, 2).

Leisure reading itself has come to be seen as educationally valuable beyond its recreational value. While library missions vary widely, some libraries, including academic libraries, now regard leisure reading as an important part of their mission. A 2008 article concludes, "[Recreational] [r]eading programs in conjunction with public libraries, citywide reading programs, or campus-wide initiatives can help bring the library presence out into the campus community and will attract users that otherwise may not have any exposure to or interest in traditional library resources" (Bosman, Glover, and Prince, 56).

A recent government report on reading has connected the dots between student success and outside reading. The 2007 National Endowment for the Arts report, *To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence*, finds that "both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates. These negative trends have more than literary importance. As this report makes clear, the declines have demonstrable social, economic, cultural, and civic implications. (5) The mission of serving the whole student embraced by some college libraries receives support from these studies. Programs such as Porch Reads, a recreational reading program developed in 2005–06 by the Roesch Library at the University of Dayton, are founded on this thinking (Gauder, Giglierano, and Schramm 2007).

Leisure reading has earned a place in efforts to advance overall literacy among students, and audiobooks as leisure reading are credited with expanding students' vocabulary and interests, which may prove an especially good match for auditory learners. This begs the question: is listening to audiobooks "real reading?" Wolfson (2008, 106) states, "The benefit of audiobooks for improving reading skills is similar to that of reading aloud." Ann Kirschner (2009, B16), dean of the Macaulay Honors College at the City University of New York, read *Little Dorrit* using her old paperback, an audiobook version, her Kindle, and her iPhone. She writes, "It is the sustained and individual encounter with ideas and stories that is so bewitching. If new

formats allow us to have more of those, let us welcome and learn from them.”

THE SURVEY METHOD

The survey was developed and distributed via E-mail in June 2009 to one local (CULIBS-L) and two national listservs (ERIL-L and collib-l) using Survey-Monkey.com. It contained twenty questions for those libraries with audiobooks in their collections and seven for those that lacked them. In addition, there were spaces for additional comments for both groups. The survey was intended as a means to gather information about the collecting and use of audiobooks in college libraries. The survey questions are included in an appendix to this article.

Respondents

Two hundred and seven individuals responded to the survey, and they represented at least 145 institutions. All regions of the United States were represented, including Alaska. Respondents also came from Lebanon, Canada, and Australia. Respondents from public institutions represented 53.7 percent, while those from private institutions constituted 46.3 percent of the respondents. Four year colleges represented 41.1 percent of all the respondents, universities 39.1 percent, and two-year colleges 19.8 percent.

Slightly more than one-half of all respondents (54.6 percent) reported that their collections contained audiobooks. Of these, 52.2 percent said they collected audiobooks at the request of their patrons. Interestingly, 75 percent of those with the newest collections, i.e., those started within a year of the date of the survey, said they had begun the collections in order to increase use of the library.

Of libraries that reported no audiobooks in their collections, the most frequently selected reason (43.7 percent) was that they had “never considered them.” “Audiobooks do not fit in with our library’s mission,” and budgetary reasons were also common responses.

An overwhelming majority of respondents purchase audiobooks outright (87.9 percent) as opposed to using a leasing plan, while nine libraries use both methods. Only 14.3 percent of respondents’ libraries have a separate budget line for audiobooks. These separate budget lines come from internal budgets for popular reading, sound recordings, or media, from “funds left at the end of the fiscal year,” or from external funding through a statewide consortium. Some of these funding sources might be construed as laying the foundation for collection building, in particular the consortial effort, but other comments indicated less a systematic approach to collection building than a catch-as-catch-can approach. For those without a separate budget line,

new additions to the collections were often the result of donations. To the question of how often new titles were added to the collection, 40.2 percent of those with no separate budget answered “infrequently,” while 50 percent of those with separate budgets answered “more than once a year.”

Public university libraries on residential campuses tended to be the ones with the largest number of audiobooks (over two hundred). These collections are updated frequently, and respondents are aware of multiple uses for them: in the classroom, in language instruction, in learning disabilities programs, and in programs for the visually impaired. A not unexpected 82.6 percent viewed collecting audiobooks as worthwhile. No doubt larger collections are both a result and a cause of success, with visibility and expectation leading to growth and vibrancy. These libraries may also have larger budgets in general.

Four-year colleges responding were mostly private, and 50 percent were residential; over half of them said they had no audiobooks in their collections. Of those that had them, 48.4 percent had collections smaller than one hundred, and 22.6 percent held collections between one hundred and two hundred.

Community colleges were like large universities in that over half of them have audiobooks in their collections (61 percent), but they typically have smaller collections; only 25 percent had collections with over two hundred audiobooks. Also like those in university libraries, the community college collections were updated frequently (more than once a year). It is interesting to note that 78 percent of the community colleges responding are public commuter colleges, confirming a link between audiobooks and commuter listening.

Traditional Uses

The association of audiobooks with commuting remains strong, representing both leisure and course-related reading. One respondent wrote, “We purchase audio business books. Many are used while commuting.” Of the seventy-four respondents who selected driving as the primary means of students getting to college, 62.2 percent had audiobook collections, as opposed to 53.7 percent overall. CDs were by far (92.9 percent) the most popular format. These commuter college libraries had also been collecting for at least five or more years. However, the collections were small and updated infrequently. One possible explanation is that the audiobooks were collected originally in response to patron requests, but were seen as nonessential items, neither curriculum nor mission related. Consequently, no funding was allocated for the development of these collections, revealing what might be a fault line between old and new collection styles and motivations.

The equally strong perception of audiobooks as strictly leisure reading was upheld by various responses. Of those who said that the audiobooks were part of a separate collection, 59.6 percent said that the collection was for

leisure reading. Many comments made it clear that some academic librarians believed that audiobooks were part of the public library/recreational reading realm. Ten respondents indicated that they would rely upon public library audiobook collections, and some stated that there was no need to duplicate what was available at the local public library.

Newer Uses

Overall, 59.6 percent of respondents indicated that the audiobooks were part of a separate leisure reading collection, but of the nonleisure uses of which librarians were aware, 53.3 percent were aware of the use of audiobooks in language learning settings, 30 percent of use by the visually impaired, 26.7 percent each for classroom use and for use by those with learning disabilities, and 6.7 percent in reading groups. Additionally, some comments indicated that they were used specifically in reading classes. Among community colleges, the percentage of respondents who were aware of classroom use rose to 74.4 percent, surpassing the more traditional use in language learning. This might indicate a willingness on the part of community college instructors to adopt a greater range of teaching styles to meet the wide range of student needs.

Availability of Academic Titles

The question of the availability of academic titles for use in connection with courses came up with some frequency in the survey results. Librarians are interested in seeing this side of the market expand; students, accustomed to multiple ways of accessing information, have shown interest in audio materials including textbooks, although many academic libraries do not collect textbooks in any format. OCLC/ NetLibrary currently offers an eAudiobooks collection of 592 titles as of this writing, aimed at academic libraries. This "Recorded Books Premium Academic Collection—US" is an eclectic collection ranging from self-help titles such as *Automatic Wealth for Grads—and Anyone Else Just Starting Out*, from a series called *Your Coach in a Box*, to *The Catholic Church in the Modern Age*, from the Modern Scholar series. OverDrive offers a College Download Library that includes some audiobooks. While this provides evidence of the growing awareness of the academic library as an audiobooks customer, these collections do not seem to be highly developed. Nor does the survey indicate a wide awareness of such collections on the part of librarians, though this was not a specific question in the survey. The survey indicates readiness on the part of librarians to consider academic or nonleisure audiobook titles for their collections. One respondent writes, "If publishers made textbooks available as audiobooks, and sold them as collections, we'd be the technology star on campus." The introduction of

text-to-speech technology on the Kindle is an interesting development, although this kind of automatic “reading” is not completely comparable to an audiobook that has been professionally read. Databases such as WilsonWeb’s Readers’ Guide Full Text and Gale/Cengage’s Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center feature text-to-speech technology enabling users to “translate” the articles into audio files. In informal conversations with students, some expressed enthusiasm for the chance to listen to readings for classes and assignments. Databases may be moving in the right direction with this text-to-speech feature, but again there does not seem to be widespread awareness of this option among students and faculty. In a noteworthy move, California State University–Dominguez Hills has fitted its computer labs so students can convert reading materials into MP3 files using Kurzweil 3000 software.

Technology Issues

As for formats, 82 percent of libraries with audiobooks reported owning CDs, 63.3 percent had audiocassettes, 14.3 percent used digital downloads, and 9.2 percent had Playaways (see Figure 1).

Given the history of technological face-offs, such as Beta vs. VHS, and BluRay vs. HD-DVD, to inform the decision-making process, librarians understandably remain concerned about competing and evolving formats of audiobooks. In 2008 *The New York Times* reported that audiocassettes had

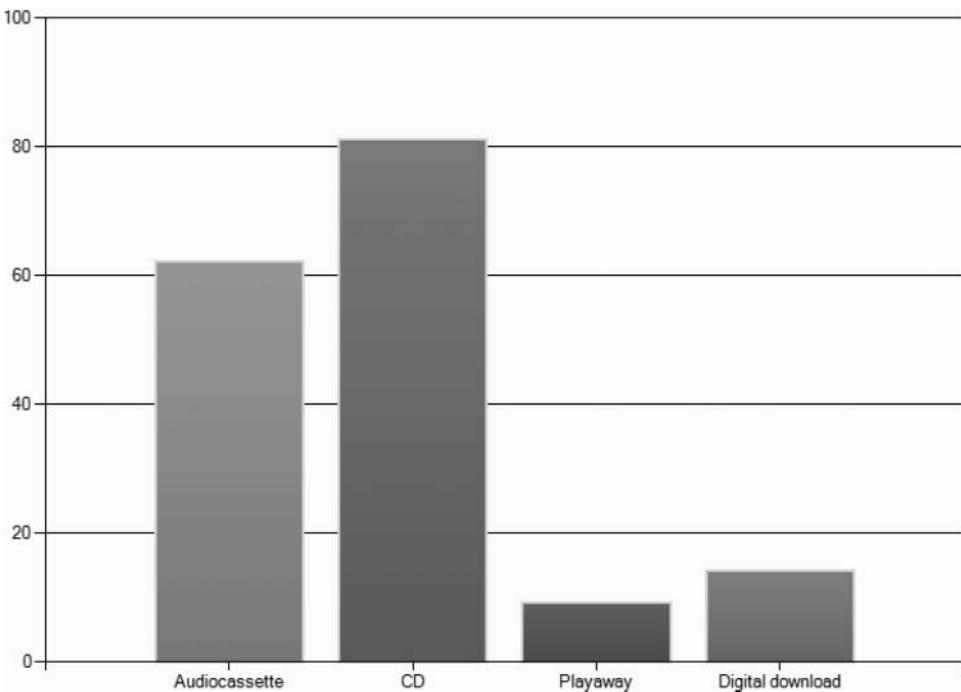


FIGURE 1 What format(s) does your library have? (Check all that apply).

“died” (Newman, C7), but libraries with collections and no doubt cassette players tucked away in media cabinets or AV labs still keep them, giving audiocassettes a fairly significant statistical presence if not a significant amount of use. CD’s and CD players remain more within the mainstream for users, but with the proliferation of iPods and other digital devices, their days of popularity are no doubt numbered as well.

The libraries that started collecting audiobooks within the last year, as expected, had no audiocassettes in their collections; however, a full 50 percent had CDs and a few had Playaways and digital downloads, suggesting again that the format issue is not sufficiently evolved to make a single choice the obvious one. One library already had two different formats for downloadable books .

Respondents’ comments illustrate the variously perceived issues with technology:

“We’ve considered them, but have not yet found a good plan or format for them.”

“We want items that are compatible with iPod and mp3 players and are not expensive.”

“[I]t’s a complicated process to set up.”

“We don’t want to have audiobooks that are only on CD; we want students and faculty to be able to listen to them on their iPods, too.”

“Only problem we’ve experienced is when one CD goes missing, you need to replace the entire set or entire audiobook to get a replacement disk.”

“We would like to expand into e-audiobooks, but have not yet determined what format or file type to get. It seems that most of our users have iPods and none of the audiobooks are compatible.”

Accessibility/Publicity/Marketing

Most collections with physical items were reported to place them on open shelves. Catalog access was mentioned for digital downloads and one library reported having a Web page for audiobook downloads. This is frequently seen on public library Web sites; the eNYPL page of the New York Public Library is one example, and a perusal of the Web shows some colleges and consortia taking this approach. Virginia Community College Libraries’ digital media collection page is an example, and the Bankier Library at Brookdale Community College links to ListenNJ, an “audiobooks project of the INFOLINK and Central Jersey Regional Library Cooperatives.”

The variety of terms used in different catalogs speaks to both the difficulty of keeping up with changing technology and also a kind of archaicism embedded in cataloging terms even as today’s OPACs seek to add Web 2.0 features and to become universal finding tools. It seems that findability must be affected by this inconsistency. Users need to be able to find the

TABLE 1 Catalog terms used to describe audiobooks

Audiobook (63.2%)	Audiobook (19.1%)	eBook (7.4%)	Electronic Resource (13.2%)	Media item (20.6%)
nonmusic recording	Audio (nonbook) + icon	Audiocassette	Spoken record	Compact Disc Spoken Word
Spoken audio	CD eAudiobook	Internet resource Book-on-cd	Talking book Book-on-cassette	Audio CD

The top row represents the choices listed in the questionnaire and the percentage of users. The rest of the table shows respondents' write-ins.

audiobooks in order to use them. At least eighteen terms were used in catalogs to indicate format (see Table 1).

For the record, Wikipedia has an article on Audiobooks, EBSCO's Academic Search Complete database recognizes "audiobooks" as a subject term, and the Audio Publishers Association uses audiobooks. However, the term "audio books" as two words remains very popular—Microsoft Word's spell-check feature uses it.

Collections are sometimes positioned in libraries to attract users, and other means of publicity included displays, by far the largest effort made to publicize them, followed by newsletter articles, blog postings, and posters. Additional efforts at promotion included E-mail, new books lists, mentioning them in freshman orientation and on library tours. One library reported demonstrating them at faculty meetings.

Who are the Users?

While the question of who is using audiobooks was not directly posed as part of this survey, users are nonetheless identified: faculty, staff, librarians, and students are mentioned in the survey results. Whether commuting faculty members, students working on assignments, leisure-reading librarians, or multitasking administrators, users choose what best suits their own needs. The question of whether libraries can keep up with this splintering of choices is an important one. It seems too late to think that we can ever return to the days of just books in the library. Additional research on the users of audiobooks would prove helpful in future library decision-making.

Limits of the Survey

The survey was characterized by a number of limitations. Respondents were self-selecting as subscribers of the listservs to which the survey was sent. As a result, they do not necessarily represent a cross section of all college libraries. No attempt was made to contact librarians specifically charged with audiobook collections. Yet, the information gathered provides us with a snapshot of what is happening on various campuses.

CONCLUSION

While traditional uses such as leisure reading and recordings for the blind are still the core rationale for audiobook collections, academic libraries are beginning, slowly and tentatively, to add audiobook titles for other uses as well, such as enhancing literacy, familiarizing students with libraries, and supporting curricula. As understanding of multiple intelligences and learning styles increases, it is likely that there will be significant new growth in audiobook collections, especially for these newer uses. Already it seems likely that the demand for audiobooks has outpaced the supply; students would gladly use curriculum-based audiobooks if they were more widely available.

One respondent writes, “Audio books would be a valuable addition to a library collection. If you had three different versions of a Jane Austen work, both literature and drama students could benefit from a study of how the meaning of words can be influenced by the way they are said. I’d build such a collection in a minute. It’s a hard sell, however, to collection development officers who have always thought in traditional ways.”

As technology choices become more numerous, it is difficult to predict which, if any, technologies will have staying power, and it is difficult to spend scarce budget dollars for something with a limited shelf life. However, in some ways, librarians have always made such choices.

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APPENDIX

Audiobooks in College Libraries: The Survey

1. Name of institution
2. Type of institution
 - Two-year college
 - Four-year college
 - University
3. Is the institution. . .?
 - Public
 - Private
4. How do most students travel to get to school?
 - Drive
 - Public transportation
 - Residential campus, no commute
5. Are there audiobooks in your library's collection?
 - Yes
 - No
 (Respondents who answered “No” were directed to question 20)

6. Approximately how many audiobooks are in the library's collection?
 - Fewer than 100
 - Between 100 and 200
 - More than 200
7. What format(s) does your library have? (check all that apply)
 - Audiocassette
 - CD
 - Playaway
 - Digital download
 - If downloads, what types? (for example, mp3, wma, m4b)
8. How does the library obtain the audiobooks? (check all that apply)
 - Purchase
 - Lease through a plan
9. Is there separate funding or a separate budget line for audiobooks?
 - No
 - Yes
 - If yes, please explain
10. Are new titles regularly added to the collection?
 - Yes, about once a year
 - Yes, more than once a year
 - Infrequently
 - No
11. Are the audiobooks part of the regular collection?
 - Yes
 - No, they are in a separate or special collection
12. If they are part of a special collection, select the primary purpose of that collection
 - Leisure reading
 - Textbooks
 - Language learning
 - Other (please specify)
13. At your college/ university are you aware of audiobooks being used in any of the following settings? (check all that apply)
 - Classroom
 - Reading groups
 - Language instruction
 - Learning disabilities program
 - Program for visually impaired
 - Other (please specify)
14. How are the audiobooks displayed and/or stored in your library?
 - On open shelves
 - In closed stacks
 - Boxes displayed, audiobooks in closed stacks
 - Other (please specify)

15. What marketing or publicity efforts have been made on behalf of the audiobooks? (check all that apply)
 - Posters
 - Newsletter articles
 - Blog postings
 - Display
 - Other (please specify)
16. What format types are used to describe audiobooks in the library catalog? (check all that apply)
 - Audiobook
 - Audio book
 - eBook
 - Electronic resource
 - Media item
 - Other (please specify)
17. When did your library start collecting audiobooks?
 - Within the last year
 - 2–5 years ago
 - 5 or more years ago
 - Don't know
18. What was the main reason your library decided to collect audiobooks?
 - Patrons requested them
 - In support of the curriculum
 - To increase use of library
 - Other (please specify)
19. Does your library collect usage statistics on audiobooks?
 - Yes
 - No
20. If your library does not have any audiobooks select all the reasons that apply.
 - Budgetary
 - Never considered them
 - Do not want to collect additional formats
 - Audiobooks do not fit in with our library's mission
 - Other (please specify)
21. Overall, do you think having audiobooks in your library collection is or would be...?
 - Worthwhile
 - A waste of resources
 - No opinion
 - Other (please specify)
22. Please add any further comments here. Thank you.