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Getting E-Books into Courses: How Libraries Can Partner with Faculty to Ease the Textbook Affordability Crisis

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Abstract

Academic libraries have implemented various initiatives to help reduce the cost students pay for learning materials. Popular initiatives including promoting open educational resources (OER), inclusive access programs, and curriculum-based collection development. A recent survey conducted by *Library Journal*/EBSCO identified several barriers to faculty engagement with e-books in courses. This paper will discuss those barriers, as well as the efforts at two Louisiana universities, under the leadership of the statewide academic library consortium (LOUIS), to promote both OER and library-purchased e-books, and address challenges to faculty and student engagement with these materials. In addition to these, some libraries have implemented programs to purchase books assigned to courses as e-books and made them available to students free of charge. One such program has been in place at Louisiana State University (LSU) since 2014. This paper will describe that program, including its efforts to engage faculty members, as well as similar efforts at the University of New Orleans (UNO). Among the efforts to engage faculty is LSU's "e-Textbooks for Faculty" portal; a website that enables faculty members to search for relevant e-books. A similar tool, created by EBSCO to serve a state consortium, will also be discussed. Finally, user testing was conducted to understand whether an existing library e-textbook product (EBSCO) sufficiently supported the course-reading workflow; this paper will discuss that testing as well as recommendations for platforms seeking to support this use case.

Libraries and the Affordability Landscape

Involvement in affordability initiatives is a major trend in academic libraries. One widely discussed strategy is the promotion of open educational resources (OER) and supporting faculty in their discovery, adoption, and creation. Another major strategy is curriculum-driven collection development, in which libraries purchase or license content that is assigned in classes. A closely related, more proactive strategy involves promoting existing library collections (and content that is either open or which can be licensed for campus-wide use) to faculty during the textbook selection process.

Understanding Obstacles to Faculty Engagement in Affordability

To support efforts by Louisiana libraries and others seeking to leverage library-licensed materials, EBSCO sponsored a large-scale survey via *Library Journal* to academic faculty in North America in the summer of 2018. The goal was to understand faculty perceptions and behavior related to linking to electronic library resources for courses, specifically using library e-books.

A total of 228 faculty members responded to the survey. One half teach primarily undergraduates, and the remainder were spread between postgraduates, community college, and graduate students, as shown in Figure 1.

A wide array of disciplines were represented. More than one-fourth of respondents teach social sciences, followed by English literature (19%) and education (13%). Other disciplines are listed in Figure 2 with the percentage of respondents.

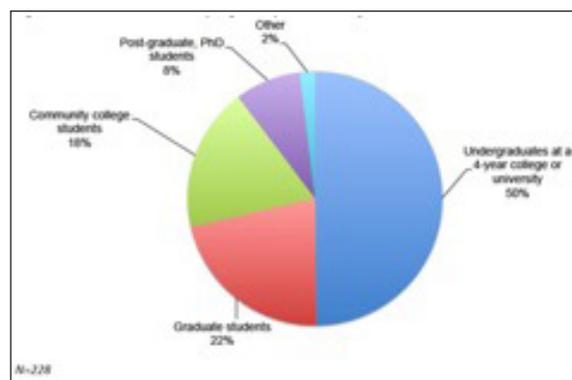


Figure 1.

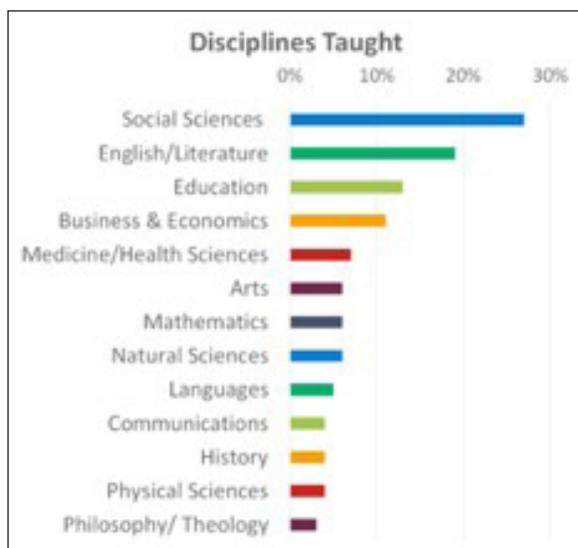


Figure 2.

Since faculty are critical partners in supporting a course-materials use case for the library, it is important to understand how faculty perceive this possibility and any current obstacles they face. According to survey respondents, the biggest obstacle for faculty in using library e-books as course materials is that the library doesn't purchase assigned titles (22%). There are several contributing factors: the library may not, as a policy, collect course materials, the instructor may not know that the library would purchase materials if requested, or the material may not be available for institutional purchase. Unfortunately, we do not have the data behind this response, but write-in responses indicated that many faculty don't realize this is an option or haven't considered how to fully leverage it.

The second most-cited obstacle to using library e-books as course materials was the belief that students prefer print (17%), and third is that there isn't an easy way to incorporate library materials into the course management system (15%). The next most popular reasons, difficulty in locating library materials and difficulty using the e-book platforms themselves, were both identified by 7% of respondents.

This project attempts to explore and overcome each of these top obstacles so that libraries can play a successful role in increasing course materials affordability. Assuming libraries are willing to make purchases of content used in courses, the other obstacles are not insurmountable. This paper will discuss how to incorporate e-books in the course management system, ways to better facilitate faculty selection of

materials that can be purchased by the library, and how e-book platforms can optimize the workflow for students looking for course materials or course readings.

Finally, while many students do prefer print materials, EBSCO and *Library Journal* explored this very question in the spring of 2018 with a survey to end-users and found that general preference to be quite circumstantial. That survey found that while students prefer print for long-form or leisure reading, there is a slight preference for e-books when it comes to research materials, primarily because of convenience and price. Furthermore, the survey found that one of the most common workflows associated with e-book use is printing the chapter required, so one could surmise that library e-books would be quite satisfactory as course materials if they are convenient, cheap (free to students), and provide an easy way to print required readings.

Exposing Faculty to Affordable Content: Creating Discovery Portals

At the most basic level, libraries can promote affordability by simply informing faculty that the library owns an e-book version of an assigned course text. LSU's process is probably typical of the workflow that many libraries use. One LSU librarian functions as the primary contact for the e-textbook program. This librarian contacts the instructor, informs them that LSU Libraries has an e-textbook available for their course, and provides information about the book's availability and about the e-textbook program. Faculty are encouraged to notify students about the e-text's availability and to include that information in the course syllabus.

Subject librarians are also involved in sharing information about the program. These librarians leverage their existing relationships with faculty to promote the program at departmental meetings and newsletters as well as through direct communication via e-mail and personal contact.

Libraries can also more proactively engage faculty during the course selection process. To encourage faculty to explore e-books as course materials, LSU constructed a e-textbook selection portal. This is a website that allows instructors to search from an extensive list of titles available as e-books (<https://www.lib.lsu.edu/ebooks/faculty>). The portal is populated with the title lists from selected publishers that allow e-books to be purchased for unlimited

simultaneous use, and that allow unlimited printing and downloading of content. These publishers are Project MUSE, Wiley, SpringerNature, Cambridge, Taylor & Francis, Elsevier, UPSO, Knovel, and JSTOR. In addition, open educational resources, for example, OpenStax, are also included.

Populating this database involves several steps. First, library developers run a script that extracts essential information from title lists on the publishers' websites. The data from these lists are then combined into one master sheet per publisher. Next, a library Web developer scans the existing e-textbook entries for duplicate titles; any titles that are already included in the portal are then removed from the spreadsheet prior to ingest.

Before its launch in 2015, the lead developer and e-textbook librarian coordinated user testing on the portal with three instructors and two librarians. The insights from this testing yielded three important suggestions for improvements. One was adjusting the search settings. Our initial setting only returned results for exact matches. Our testing indicated that this was too restrictive, and we decided to change this to a "contains all words" option; this allowed for better balance between precision and recall. Another change was to add search tips to the "No Results" screen. Another suggestion gleaned from testing was to indicate whether the item was already part of the Libraries' collection. This improvement was implemented in version 2, which was launched in 2016.

To differentiate titles that LSU already owns from those that we could purchase, library staff runs a report from our ILS system. Items identified in this report are given a value in the master spreadsheet that indicates the e-book is already available. This spreadsheet is then checked to ensure that formatting is correct for the next step, importing into our Drupal website. The Feeds module is used to import the data. The Feeds ingestion process converts the data into pages, which are searchable through the e-textbook portal.

The faculty-facing page enables instructors to search a database of over 400,000 e-books by title or keyword. Results are displayed with items owned by the Libraries displayed first. This form was used to assign 13 e-books to courses and to request the purchase of four new titles for the spring 2018 semester.

Inspired by LSU's e-textbook portal, LOUIS (the statewide Louisiana academic library consortium)

worked closely with EBSCO to develop a prototype of a similar discovery tool that could be implemented at a consortial level. The resulting e-textbook search portal provides a vehicle for libraries to meet faculty at the point of selection, exposing them to both open textbooks and e-books that could be licensed by libraries for campus-wide use. The portal searches several open textbook collections as well as the GOBI acquisitions databases prefiltered for DRM-free titles. When a faculty member identifies a title of interest, a purchase request can be generated and sent to the appropriate library for possible purchase.

In its first year of implementation, the portal was searched 1,616 times, resulting in 89 clicks into an open textbook record and 309 clicks on the "request to purchase feature." One librarian whose library experienced significant use of the portal indicated that some faculty used it more to explore possible titles and initiate conversations with the library about possible purchases, rather than to definitively select titles for purchase. While not the only tool that faculty have to identify affordable content, the portal represents a real step forward in combining both open and licensable content in a single search. EBSCO continues to develop this tool and hopes to make it available at scale in 2019.

Understanding Obstacles to E-Textbook Access by Students

While identifying e-books that are assigned in courses and then licensing that content is the primary focus of curriculum-driven collection development, following through with informing the faculty member, and ultimately the student, is key to ensuring the ultimate success of this initiative. Specifically, the most important factor in ensuring ease of student use and access is that the library provide the link to the title in the course management system, either in the syllabus or as a textbook or resource. The *Library Journal* Faculty Survey inquired about how faculty currently link or provide course readings for students, and found that the most common approach to providing a course reading is when the faculty posts a PDF chapter into the CMS—41% of respondents do this always or often, while 28% of faculty always or often provide the citation in the syllabus and provide no further direction. In either of these cases, even if the title was made available by the library, all library usage would be lost since students aren't directed to the library e-book itself, where usage data would be collected and reportable. So it is important not only to make the resource

visible within the library management system (Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle), but also to direct students back to the library resource itself, both to measure the success of the affordable learning program and to demonstrate the library's value in these projects. Fortunately, 88% of faculty report that cost to students is important to them when selecting course materials, and more than half said they would be interested in usage statistics on materials they assign, so there is reason to believe that most faculty would be willing partners in these efforts.

Does the Student Know About the (Free) E-Textbook?

Since 2014, LSU has maintained a student-facing Web page that lists all of the e-textbooks available for courses that semester (<https://www.lib.lsu.edu/ebooks>). Students can browse or search the page and find links to textbooks assigned to their classes. To populate this page, we start with the list of books assigned to courses that our bookstore shares with us. First, we identify e-books from this list that the Libraries already owns. Then we purchase the e-books that we can procure with no DRM restrictions and with unlimited simultaneous user access.

LSU's student e-textbook portal offers a visible and easy-to-search point of access for students to identify e-books assigned in current courses. To the extent that students are aware of this tool, it can go a long way toward ensuring that students take advantage of the e-textbooks available to them. Equally valuable is the ability to directly embed the textbook link in the online course management system, as LSU has done. In contrast, the University of New Orleans librarians had been sending the individual faculty member a link to the e-book and relying on him or her to embed the e-book link and/or in the course Moodle site. After running the curriculum-driven e-book program for a few semesters, the UNO collections librarian reviewed usage data for assigned e-books, expecting to see significantly higher use than for other e-books. She instead discovered, disappointingly, that many titles showed no more use than an average e-book. After gathering information from faculty, the librarian learned that some faculty were unaware that the e-book was available (suggesting that at least some of the e-mails sent were either missed or ignored), and that only a small percentage were actually providing the link to the book directly in the syllabus or online course (though some indicated that the link had been emailed to students). For future semesters, we will work with

our Moodle administrator to ensure that the book is embedded in the course and continue to explore other options for promoting the availability of these alternatives to student-purchased course texts.

Student Challenges in Using the E-Textbook (User Testing)

Even students who are aware of an e-book's availability may experience technical problems accessing the book or navigating and using content. LSU Libraries has conducted usability testing on its e-textbook portal for students, the portal for faculty, and, in addition, on four e-book platforms. The platforms tested were SpringerNature, Project MUSE, Taylor & Francis, and JSTOR. These were selected because they are the platforms that offer most of our course-assigned books.

In a review of library literature on the subject of e-book usage and satisfaction, we noted that many usability issues were related to DRM restrictions. As most of the items LSU Libraries acquire are purchased without DRM, we chose to focus our testing on other problematic aspects. Researchers have reported problems in searching for information as well as with navigation. Therefore, we focused our scenarios on searching for specific information, navigating from page to page, and in printing or downloading. Our goals were to identify features that were beneficial to users as well as problem areas. A complete discussion of this research will be forthcoming in a later publication. For this paper, we will discuss some of our most significant findings.

The students we observed generally engaged in one of two paths to find information; one was to browse the table of contents, the other was to search. Two problems were observed when students used search. The first was that students who attempted to search for information were initially confused by the search results screen. This problem was observed on both SpringerNature and Project MUSE. The relevant chapters were listed on the results screen, but there was no indication of the page where the result was found, or even that the term was found in that chapter at all. When the researchers asked the participants to explain their hesitancy, both students remarked that search results often include their search terms highlighted in context, specifically mentioning that Google results are displayed in that manner. While they deduced that their search terms were found in the listed chapters, the lack of a clear indication left them in doubt. This observation suggests that both platforms could be improved by

including a note indicating the terms were found in the chapter, and even more so by featuring a snippet of the chapter text with search terms highlighted.

Another search-related problem was the unforgiving nature of searching with a PDF. Students would often enter several terms, expecting a loose match on any of the terms in the query. Instead, the software retrieves only exact matches.

Several participants leveraged the book's Index. Those students who accessed the Index, then searched within it found the desired information more quickly than those who attempted to search the entire book or browse the table of contents. Finally, we observed that students who downloaded an entire e-book, then searched it were more successful at finding specific information than those who didn't. Two platforms, SpringerNature and Taylor & Francis, enable full book downloads in PDF format.

Usability testing was also conducted in partnership with EBSCO in an effort to produce actionable platform improvements in support of the course-materials workflow. Students were asked to complete various tasks associated with locating and utilizing their assigned reading: find the course textbook, locate next week's reading, print an excerpt from the textbook, and copy and paste a portion of the textbook. Students were most successful accessing the course textbook when they went directly into Moodle and found the "Student Support Resources" link. Other access attempts were less efficient or led to dead-ends: one student typed a partial title into EDS/OneSearch and got a lot of hits and didn't see the book, and another student typed the course name ("Ethics") into the library catalog.

To locate the specific reading assignment, most students visually scanned the table of contents. Several

students searched for the page number or a place to enter the page number, and the one student who found the place to enter and jump to the specific page was successful. We concluded it is important to make the "jump to page" function prominent, since presumably many course readings will be assigned by page number. Students who landed on the detail record were often confused, saying there was too much information there and it wasn't clear. EBSCO recommends that libraries adjust settings so that full-text links bypass the detail record and take users straight to the full-text e-book viewer.

Students also attempted to use CTRL+F to search for an excerpt in the title, which doesn't function as a search tool within the e-book viewer. (There is a search within function, but not all the students located it easily). As mentioned above, a downloaded e-book file would be searchable via CTRL+F, but we concluded that the e-book platform itself should look to intercept CTRL+F commands so that students can execute a search more intuitively.

Conclusion

Libraries have proven to be important partners in affordability initiatives, connecting key stakeholders, including faculty, instructional designers, administrators, bookstore staff, and vendors. But challenges remain, including the unavailability of some content in open or licensable formats, faculty misunderstandings about OER and/or libraries' ability to license e-books for courses, and technical barriers for students in finding e-books online and navigating them successfully. Libraries have been able to address many of these issues through the innovative development of tools and workflows, often in collaboration with vendor partners and by sharing best practices and success stories. Library services will continue to evolve along with affordability initiatives.