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The Michigan State University Course Materials Program: Packing Up Your Textbook Troubles with Course Packs

by **Tyler Smeltekop** (Course Materials Program Manager, Michigan State University Libraries) <smetek5@lib.msu.edu>

Introduction

The development of course curricula must strike a balance between the costs of course content and the pedagogical value of that content for faculty and students. Before purchasing an expensive textbook for a course, many students carefully evaluate the balance between cost and value by assessing the amount of content in the book that is actually required to be read or is directly referenced by the instructor. The more content that goes unused in a course, the more negative the balance becomes, posing a particular challenge for faculty in selecting their course resources.

Course packs, also referred to as course readers, are a response to this dynamic. As highly-customized products, they are designed to contain only the pieces of information that are most pertinent to the course for which they are being created. The intensely curatorial process of content creation that is the hallmark of course packs synthesizes content from a broad array of sources and provides several benefits to faculty and students. Primarily, a positive cost-value balance is easier to achieve because course packs contain very little, if any, unused content. It is also possible for faculty to include a wide variety of types of content in a single volume, ranging from book chapters, journal articles, public domain resources (such as government documents) and their own content, often created specifically for the course pack.

Course Packs at MSU

The **Michigan State University** Course Materials Program (CMP), a part of the **MSU** Libraries, exists to assist faculty with the entire process of course pack creation and production. During our last full academic year (Fall 2013, Spring 2014 and Summer 2014), our program produced 27,733 printed course packs. In total, over 10.2 million impressions (a printed side of a sheet of paper) were printed. Our program handles the copyright clearance for any third-party copyrighted content on behalf of our faculty members; we negotiated licenses for approximately 250 faculty in this last year, to the tune of over \$145,300 paid out in royalties. The scale of our operation has grown over nearly 20 years, due largely to persistent outreach efforts to make our services known to **MSU** faculty and to the flexibility of the way our products can be formatted and produced.

Our print course packs frequently take the form of anthologies of selections, but we also produce course packs created entirely by faculty, designed to closely resemble textbooks in their format, content and structure. Color printing is not common, as the majority of content included in print course packs are text-based selections with minimal color graphics, which

are converted to grayscale during the printing process. Color printing also carries greater expense, so it is typically used in cases where color is critical to the concepts being discussed, such as electrical wiring or organic structures. All our print course packs are shrink-wrapped and three-hole punched, unless coil-binding is requested. The production is not handled in-house, as our volume is too large to be handled by our Library Copy Center, so we partner with area printing operations on a contractual basis. Contract terms stipulate that printers will turn around reprints of course packs within 24 to 48 hours, if stock runs out at the bookstore — far faster than many other commercial course pack and custom publishing operations. Management of quality control and maintaining adequate pack supply requires considerable coordination and effort, which may be an obstacle for smaller-scale operations.

In general, disadvantages inherent with print course pack models are largely internal: in addition to comprehensive supply chain management, the modes of distributing print course packs to students can provide challenges. Our program partners with two bookstores, one on campus and one near campus, to handle the retailing of print course packs to students. The benefit is twofold: one, since our packs are available at limited locations, these brick-and-mortar operations benefit from students coming to get their course packs, as well as other course materials and supplies; and two, without the retail experience to manage, our team is leaner and able to focus on the primary duties of working with faculty, preparing course pack files for printing and triaging copyright licenses.

From p-Packs to e-Packs

This Fall 2014 semester, we are fully rolling out our Electronic Course Pack (e-Pack) Program across campus after two semesters of piloting with two courses. A student who is enrolled in a course with an e-pack can purchase access in **MSU's** Non-Credit Registration System (NCRS), a system that is typically used to assess registration fees for conferences and seminars on campus and miscellaneous lab fees. Payment is made by credit card. Once access is purchased, the e-pack files are unlocked in **MSU's** current learning management system, Desire2Learn (D2L), for the student. In this way, the decision to purchase the e-pack is made by the student and access is optional, just as it is optional for students to purchase hardcopy textbooks. This element of choice is very important for us to maintain. The alternative is to levy a course fee on all students upon enrollment in the class. While administratively easier, such fees are very difficult to implement and initiating any new

fees is a divisive and highly-charged political issue at **MSU**.

While the assessment of class-wide fees for course materials generally raises objections, there are certain situations where this not only makes sense, but it simplifies matters. We have found that the use of fees works best — and is palatable for administrators, instructors and students — when a successive-style curriculum has students congruently moving through a certain order or number of classes. **MSU's** Human Medicine and Osteopathic Medicine students provide one example. These students move through a different semester structure than others on campus, taking up to nine courses in a single semester, each with its own required course pack. Under a previous model, students paid online for their print course packs during a preorder period. Print pack quantities would be finalized based on these preorders and then distributed on certain dates and times, requiring hundreds of students to gather and wait in line to receive the pack for their next class. It was chaos. Following the conclusion of the preorder period, students would inevitably come to us providing often-valid reasons for being unable to order the pack in advance — notably, one student was literally climbing Mount Kilimanjaro during the duration of the pre-order period. Students were also frustrated by the need to participate in so many preordering intervals.

Around this time, there was a growing desire by both students and faculty to have the course materials available in electronic format. By assessing a materials charge each semester for these groups of medical students, we were able to streamline the process of paying for and receiving the full bevy of printed course packs these medical students use during their academic career, and also release each print pack with an e-pack version. At first, the issue of a broadly-assessed additional charge for medical students was highly political, but with student leadership vocally supporting the availability of e-packs and administration supporting the changes, the Provost and Registrar approved the use of fees for these students.

Given the experience we have had producing e-packs for the medical colleges, we've already noticed a number of advantages of e-packs over print packs. Unlike a printed product, electronic files can be easily updated in the event of errors, a simple process of correcting the mistake and notifying the faculty and students. Additionally, there is no difference in cost to have full color in an e-pack, whereas there is a significant gulf between black-and-white and full-color printing. The biggest advantage, however, is the utilization

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of currently-implemented digital solutions like NCRS and D2L in that 24/7, on-campus technical support already exists. This frees our staff up to focus on other aspects of our operation.

Course Packs and the Library: Better Together

The CMP was not always part of the Library; the program and its staff were adopted by the Text Management Unit of the Library four years ago from the on-campus printing and mail processing operation when they decided to shutter the program. We have found that the Library environment, personnel and resources have significantly enhanced our ability to serve the campus. On several occasions, subject librarians have stepped in to assist faculty in their particular academic specialization to find replacements for selections with expensive royalties that are pertinent while resulting in cheaper fees. Departmental librarian liaisons have also been absolutely indispensable in connecting our marketing with the departmental leadership, enhancing the reach of word-of-mouth recommendations from deans and directors to their faculty. There's also the obvious benefit of having rapid access to a monumental collection of books for us to scan selections to include in course packs, as well as making the task of tracking down original sources for materials that have been republished multiple times much less time-consuming. Perhaps most of all, though, I have found that the values and priorities of the library environment strongly encourage the development of products and services that meaningfully engage with faculty and students.

Becoming a part of the Library has also brought more tangible, direct impacts on our services too. We quickly realized that for many of the licenses governing our electronic journal access, language specifically addressing the use of that content in Library-produced course materials would be permitted, with no additional royalty or licensing required. We discovered that the entire journal catalogs from some publishers could be included in our course packs without charge — something any other provider would have to pay royalties on. E-journal licenses are consulted on an as-needed basis, and we are in the process of developing a spreadsheet logging the arrangements pertaining to our course packs for each journal and publisher. While a fairly intensive process, this has helped us bring our pack prices down significantly, in some cases.

To make this program run efficiently, legally and comprehensively, we often rely on others with expertise in areas where we have less experience. For example, in order to begin outsourcing our printing work, we received assistance from our campus purchasing department to negotiate the process of receiving and evaluating bids from prospective printing vendors. Our partnership with bookstores to ensure that the distribution process remains overseen by managers who have had years of experience is also a case of this.

against the grain people profile

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Tyler Smeltekop

BORN AND LIVED: Born in Lansing, Michigan. Raised in Williamston, Michigan.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Began at the Course Materials Program as a student employee during my undergrad at MSU. In the eight years since my hire, I've moved from a student employee to manager of the program.

FAMILY: Lovely wife and a little cat.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE: Playing tennis and racquetball, seeing good friends often.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *Fight Club*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Aldo Leopold's A Sand County Almanac*.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Doubling our Fall printed volume my first year as manager.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Become a librarian and continue to work towards bringing resources to students.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Until more universities create and/or adequately support their own course materials programs, providing an alternative for faculty that emphasizes the utilization of already-licensed library resources, students will continue to pay more for content than they might have to. 🐼

By having these aspects handled externally, we are able to narrow the range of roles that need to be filled. Our Program is primarily staffed by student assistants, undergraduates and graduates alike, who are charged with a diverse array of responsibilities. Chief amongst them is the management of thousands of permission requests sent to publishers, presses and individuals all over the world, along with the follow-up work often required for cases where the rights have changed hands over time. Our permissioning work is made easier through the **Copyright Clearance Center** and a portion of our royalties are paid through them. Everyone shares in the customer service work, interacting with faculty while moving course pack projects from conception to having them ready in the bookstores. Currently, we have one on-call staffer, and two full-time employees (including myself). Administrative support is exceedingly critical since growth in our program has surged — expanding the size of our team was essential to keep up.

Our Course Materials Program has required a steady stream of creative solutions and innovative tactics to develop new services, such as our e-packs, and keep pace with the ever-changing landscape of academic use of copyrighted materials. If you are interested in replicating our program at your institution, or enhancing currently-implemented course materials services, I would urge you to consider a few important factors. The scalability of our operation has moved from producing packs on a small number of photocopiers, in the program's infancy, to professional printing ven-

dors on machines capable of 125 impressions a minute, a demonstration of the range of print production that can be undertaken. Electronic course packs eliminate the need to manage a supply chain for a printed product, making an already-complex operation a bit more focused.

If parts of our services already exist at your institution, it can be relatively simple to parcel out other components to supplant existing services, such as copyright clearance. An existing library copy center may have the capacity to serve a limited number of courses, and the additional staff to negotiate permission requests on behalf of faculty ensure that the photocopying will be legal and in accordance with copyright regulations. Similarly, production might be able to be handled by on-campus printing programs as well, with your library managing the permission clearance and order intake.

The **MSU** Course Materials Program now pays for itself, covering all costs from print production, royalties and wages for our staff, as well as other overhead costs. Librarians considering implementing similar programs at their institutions should know that it takes a few years of hard work, trial and error, and outreach before enough faculty adopt the service and costs begin to balance out. Remaining at-cost is imperative for our operation and we believe that with the support of the **MSU** Library, we have been given the flexibility and resources needed to continue developing more sophisticated and affordable products for our students. 🐼