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TextSelect: Purchasing Textbooks for Library Reserves

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Traditionally, most academic libraries have not purchased textbooks. The general philosophy has been that students are responsible for buying required reading for their classes, while the library furnishes material for student and faculty research. Of course, textbooks have always found their way into the library stacks, and many students assume that textbooks will be available to borrow. The increasing cost of textbooks, coupled with a weakened economy, has increased student demands for more affordable textbook options and with that demand has come increased attention on the issue at state and national levels.

In early 2009, the **George Mason University** Libraries attempted to address student concerns about textbook access options by analyzing interlibrary loan (ILL) borrowing statistics. Though ILL statistics may seem like an unlikely place to begin, we found that 90% of the 50 most-borrowed titles were information technology (IT) and engineering textbooks. Most of these titles (83%) were being used in Computer Science and Electrical and Computer Engineering courses. The Libraries already owned 76% of the titles in print, even though for many years our official policy had been to not collect textbooks.

The problems with textbooks and ILL are well known among ILL practitioners. Textbooks are in high demand among many institutions, with few available copies. When students borrow a textbook through ILL, the loan period is usually only four to eight weeks, often significantly less than the amount of time the item is needed. Students often expect that once they return the textbook, a second copy can be readily obtained, and they are surprised to find themselves without a textbook halfway through the semester.

Initial Textbook Reserves Pilot

In the summer of 2009, the Head of ILL and the IT/engineering liaison librarian expressed interest in placing high-demand titles on reserves to better leverage library resources. After assessing options, we established our initial textbook reserves pilot. The primary goals of this pilot were to provide students with equitable access to high-demand engineering textbooks and to alleviate demand for textbooks requested through ILL.

Space in the print Reserves area was a big limitation as we only had space for 50 titles. The pilot was limited to courses taught in the School of Engineering with the highest number of ILL requests. Initially, all copies of the current edition of a title were placed on reserve, along with one copy of a previous edition, if already owned. If a title was not owned, the IT/engineering liaison librarian ordered the current edition, paying for it with her subject funds and managing the purchase process until the book arrived and was given to Reserves staff for processing.

Communication and outreach were critical to our success, and the IT/engineering liaison librarian contacted every faculty member using a book included in our pilot. She explained the reserves program and requested that faculty share the access information for the reserves books with their students. Though feedback from teaching faculty has been minimal, it has been very positive. The faculty liaison from the Electrical and Computer Engineering department, for example, praised the Libraries' efforts to help his students who lacked funds to pay for their own textbooks.

Since the Fall 2009 semester, circulation data for each title has been reviewed regularly and used to decide whether books should remain on reserve. After the first two semesters, the older editions were taken off reserve, as they received little use. Initially, books were removed during semesters they were not used, but after several books went missing while in the open stacks and replacement copies had to be purchased, we decided to leave these titles on reserve year-round. Additionally, if eBooks were also available, print copies were taken off reserve. Statistics for the first three years of the pilot showed steady use: each title circulated an average of 11 times per semester, with averages varying between 7 and 15 circulations.

Expansion of the Program

In Fall 2012, the Libraries' new Associate University Librarian for Research and Educational Services was appointed by the Provost to a Task Force on Textbook Affordability,¹ and she charged a working group to investigate the feasibility of expanding our reserves pilot program. An environmental scan by the working group provided many examples of textbook reserves programs at other institutions, including the **University of Illinois - Urbana Champaign**, the **University of Minnesota**, **Miami University**, **North Carolina State University**, and **Virginia Tech**. The scopes of these programs

were not available electronically. We considered targeting subject areas with high-cost textbooks, such as business and STEM courses, but in the end decided to focus on classes whose students we felt were the greatest retention risks: freshmen and transfer students. We created a list of classes that satisfied the University's lower-level General Education (Gen Ed) requirements and worked with the bookstore to generate a list of required books for these classes in order to estimate a budget for the year.

The University Bookstore

We were originally concerned that the bookstore (operated by **Barnes & Noble College**) would see us as a competitor, but they were enthusiastic about the project and quickly became a crucial and cooperative partner. We discussed renting textbooks from them but decided that purchasing would work better for both sides. The bookstore offered to buy back the textbooks at the end of the semester, but due to strict rules about the disposal of state property, this was not a viable option. We purchased the books from the bookstore at a generous discount using a university purchasing card.

Workflow

Workflow challenges abounded because this was new territory for the many staff involved in identifying, purchasing, and processing such a large volume of textbooks, (see Fig. 1). In the beginning especially, communication between acquisitions staff and the bookstore was complicated by differences in the ways we identified or differentiated between titles, and the spreadsheets we received from the bookstore often needed translation. Version control became an issue as every participant in the workflow had different information needs and manipulated the spreadsheets in different ways, resulting in some confusion and even mistakes.

Fig. 1: Original Workflow (Fall 2013)

Bookstore Manager → AUL for Research and Educational Services (RES) → Policy Analyst and Planning Specialist for RES → Head of Collection Development → Collection Development Support Specialist → Head of Technical Services → Ordering Coordinator → Senior Fiscal Coordinator → Copy Cataloger → Print Reserve Coordinator

varied from a few courses or departments to, in the case of **NC State**, near-comprehensive coverage. Some programs rented textbooks, but most purchased them. Most programs, in addition to purchasing textbooks, solicited donations from faculty or publishers and made use of textbooks that were already in their collections. Some provided a mechanism for students and faculty to request specific textbooks for reserve.

The working group decided to focus on print textbooks, as we felt that a majority of students prefer using print and that many text-

Bundling

Some titles came bundled with access codes to supplemental online material (test banks, study guides) that could only be used by one student. We worked with the bookstore to obtain codeless versions of titles but accepted titles with access codes if that was the only option. We considered blacking out the access code but decided to allow the lucky first borrower of the textbook to use it. Although the bookstore understood that we

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did not want lab manuals or consumable items such as workbooks, in some cases there was no way to disaggregate such content from the textbook itself.

Title Lists

Because some faculty members are notoriously late in getting their orders to the bookstore, we received new lists weekly. These lists were vetted to ensure that only Gen Ed classes were included and that none were left out. Titles were manually searched in the catalog to identify titles we already owned – these were retrieved from the stacks and put on reserve by Access Services staff. All textbooks were placed on two-hour reserve at the Johnson Center Library (now the Gateway Library) and listed in the catalog under professor and course name.

Marketing

To market the pilot program, which we named TextSelect, we emailed department heads whose courses had books on reserve. We emphasized TextSelect's value not just as a substitute for buying requiring textbooks, but also as a supplement for students who already owned the textbook. We highlighted TextSelect on the library homepage and in the library news and sent out an announcement in Mason E-files, a university-wide weekly announcement email. We also arranged for an article about the program to be published in the student newspaper.

Fine-tuning

For Spring 2014, we made some adjustments to TextSelect, streamlining the ordering process and tweaking the purchasing criteria. Originally, we ordered two copies of textbooks for classes with more than 500 students, but we found that class size did not increase usage enough to justify an extra copy. We also increased the minimum textbook price from \$20 to \$50; expanded the program from 100 and 200 level Gen Ed courses to include Gen Ed courses at all undergraduate levels; and invited the Business librarian to include graduate level courses in the School of Management.

We improved workflows and reduced the number of staff involved in the process from ten to six (see Fig. 2). We are still assessing options for how to handle TextSelect titles when they are not being used for a class. Ideally, we would like to make them accessible for our

patrons, but this increases the likelihood that they will no longer be available when we need to put them back on reserve (as we had seen earlier with the engineering textbooks). Before the summer semester we added a form to our Website allowing students to suggest purchases for the TextSelect program.

One note of concern is that the number of noncirculating titles increased from 16% in the fall semester to 50% in spring. We are assessing reasons why this may have occurred. To our surprise, cost did not necessarily correlate with usage: there were several textbooks with list prices of \$200 or

Fig. 2: Revised Workflow (Summer 2014)

Bookstore Manager → Collection Development Support Specialist → Ordering Coordinator → Senior Fiscal Coordinator → Copy Cataloger → Print Reserve Coordinator

Challenges

Fostering awareness of TextSelect is a challenge as students and faculty are understandably unsure of which courses and textbooks are or can be included. The parameters of the program are objective (though evolving), but subject librarians determine which engineering and business textbooks are most appropriate to place on reserves. Timing is also an issue: students may not be aware that a title has been ordered before buying the book themselves, and, no matter how far in advance we start the ordering process, we are not able to get all the books ordered and on reserve before classes start.

Assessing Success

Overall, we have been pleased by the usage of the textbooks that we have put on reserve (see Fig. 3). Overall, use increased by 58% from fall to spring. We did not see any clear trends in usage by sub-

ject area, but in general liberal arts courses seemed to have lower textbook use than social sciences and STEM disciplines. The ten most-used textbooks in the spring semester were in math, electrical engineering, management, civil engineering, chemistry, computer science, economics, and physics. The preponderance of engineering and computer science titles on the list is likely due in part to more awareness of the program since its inception dates back to 2009.

more that had no usage at all. We suspect that either the students did not know that their textbook was on reserve or the title, though supposedly required, was not heavily used by the professor. Another observation is that “regular” books (novels and inexpensive trade paperback nonfiction) were more likely to have low or no usage than “traditional” textbooks. Going forward, we will likely focus more on traditional textbooks.

For Fall 2014, we are continuing the TextSelect program and expanding it to include required courses in all STEM fields as well as the School for Conflict Resolution and Analysis (S-CAR). We are pleased with the results of our year-long TextSelect pilot, along with the engineering reserves program that preceded it; we feel it has been a step in the right direction toward easing some of the burden of textbook costs for our students. 🌱

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Endnotes

1. The final report of the task force can be accessed at http://www.gmu.edu/resources/facstaff/senate/MINUTES_FS_2013-14/13-Task%20Force%20Report%20FINAL.pdf

Fig. 3: Titles Purchased and Usage

	Titles Purchased*	Average Cost/Title*	Total Uses**	Average Use/Title**	Zero Usage**
Fall 2013	222	\$76	1,047	6	16%
Spring 2014	213	\$92	1,664	4	50%
Summer 2014	27	\$125	N/A	N/A	N/A

* Excludes titles already owned by the library. ** Includes titles already owned by the library.