TextSelect Revisited: The Evolution and Success of the Textbook Reserves Program at George Mason University

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TextSelect Revisited: The Evolution and Success of the Textbook Reserves Program at George Mason University

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The textbook reserve program at George Mason University Libraries — introduced in a 2014 article in Against the Grain — began in 2009 as a pilot focusing on textbooks for the School of Engineering. Following a 2012 campus-wide initiative to investigate textbook affordability for students, the program was expanded to include additional classes in fall 2013 and spring 2014. TextSelect was born.

Under the current TextSelect program, Mason Libraries provide (via physical reserves) one copy of every required textbook over $50 for general education courses and courses required for undergraduate majors in business, conflict resolution, economics, science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and health sciences. The program also includes textbooks under $50 for these courses if the University Libraries already own a copy, as well as graduate-level textbooks (funded separately) at the discretion of the subject librarian. This has amounted to as many as 850 titles added to our physical reserves per semester and has resulted in thousands of circulations (see Figure 1).

**Fig. 1: Titles Purchased and Usage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Titles Purchased</th>
<th>Titles Already in Collection</th>
<th>Average Cost/Title</th>
<th>Total Uses**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2013</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>$76</td>
<td>1,047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2014</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>$92</td>
<td>1,664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2014</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>$110</td>
<td>4,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2015</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>$64</td>
<td>6,351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2015</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>$132</td>
<td>8,002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2016</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>$117</td>
<td>6,677</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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As the program has matured, record-keeping has improved, but one of the major remaining workflow challenges is accurately tracking title counts and expenditures, since the Libraries often place orders that are never filled (or are filled a semester or two late) or make last-minute orders for titles that have gone missing.

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**Fig. 2: Workflow**

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**On-Campus Partnership**

Since fall 2013, the campus bookstore (operated by Barnes & Noble College) has been a strong partner in our program, which has been central to TextSelect’s success. For starters, bookstore staff generate and provide the lists of books required for classes that qualify for the program each semester. When possible, they provide us with the best-condition used copy, which costs less than list price and allows our collection budgets to stretch further. Perhaps most crucially, they provided the Libraries with funding for the program’s early years, allowing TextSelect to wear the state and local budget reductions without a loss of service to Mason’s students.

**Acquisitions Workflow**

Our workflow for processing titles in the program has remained essentially the same since Spring 2014 (see Fig. 2). Internal processes have improved, including a refinement of program criteria; implementation of a relational database to help shepherd title lists through the selection process; and the establishment of an outreach campaign directed at the faculty with courses included in the program. As the program has matured, record-keeping has improved, but one of the major remaining workflow challenges is accurately tracking title counts and expenditures, since the Libraries often place orders that

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Though TextSelect has been largely successful, it has not been without its challenges. For instance, since 2009, we have discovered that titles taken off reserve between semesters often go missing and must be reordered. To combat this, we now keep items on reserve for two years after they are last required for a course. Since we are keeping more titles on reserve for longer, space quickly became another concern. Fortunately, reorganizing the shelving and other space behind the library desk has allowed us to create enough room to house these items (at least for now) without costing the library money for new shelving or renovations.

Since TextSelect’s inception, we have also had difficulty collecting accurate usage data, an issue that caused us to change how we place these items on reserve. In the beginning, we used the reserve module of Ex Libris’ Voyager ILS, and we attached each title to a faculty name and course number. This process gave students more options for searching and identifying these titles. However, it also limited our ability to generate accurate statistics and to run historical reports, as course deletion at term end also deleted the data we would need for reporting. We ultimately decided that collecting accurate usage statistics was more important to us than the enhanced search options allowed by attaching faculty and course information, and now we instead assign temporary locations to these books which enables us to run reports whenever we need to. Students now need to know the exact title they are looking for, but since usage has continued to rise, we believe this change has not negatively impacted access to the titles.

Over the past three years, we have also identified a small percentage of students who view TextSelect as a “rental” service. For the cost of the maximum overdue fine ($25), they check out the items at the beginning of the semester, keep them for the entire period, and then return the book and pay their fine. To combat this issue — which includes a very small number of users — we implemented a number of circulation policy changes, including increasing the replacement cost of these items

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continued on page 22
from the standard $67 replacement cost to $300 and billing users for replacements costs once the item is 24 hours overdue. After emailing and calling the student for seven days overdue, we now work with the Assistant Dean of Students and the Director of the Office of Student Conduct to help resolve the issue. Having this extra level of University involvement has helped us resolve all but one of these rare situations.

Finally, awareness continues to be a challenge. As mentioned previously, we have instituted a more proactive outreach program, issuing title lists to the subject librarians well in advance of the semester so that they can reach out directly to affected faculty. Reaching out to faculty directly remains our top marketing strategy, since faculty can then notify students in their syllabus or during the first week of class. That said, we also refer students to the program when they ask at a library service desk if the library has their textbooks.

**Evaluating Success**

Thus far, the Libraries have assessed our success in terms of overall usage numbers, which have steadily increased over time. We are also pleased to hear anecdotal reports of TextSelect being used and valued, for example in “Top 3 Reasons I Can’t Live without My Library” video submissions from a 2016 University Libraries contest.

Beyond this kind of assessment, in the past year our Assessment & Planning Officer has begun analyzing the data more completely, looking more comprehensively at usage and expenditure trends, and the value offered by this program. As part of her assessment, she identified the highest usage by STEM and School of Business courses, and mostly during the first four weeks of the semester. She plans to continue examining data from additional terms and may even survey TextSelect users directly. This in-depth analysis, combined with our ongoing efforts to streamline workflows and maintain the highest levels of service, will help the Libraries develop strategies to continue and improve the TextSelect program.

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**Endnotes**

1. [http://library.gmu.edu/top3/videos](http://library.gmu.edu/top3/videos)