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Springing for Student Textbooks? Exploring New Directions for Library Collections

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Springing for Student Textbooks? Exploring New Directions for Library Collections

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Abstract

Given the increasing costs of student textbooks, it is only natural that students would engage in cost-avoidance behaviors. Likewise, some professors have modified their curricular choices to avoid passing along the cost of required texts for their students. At the University of Tennessee Health Science Center, the library has licensed several databases that include access to a number of assigned student textbooks. While the provision of these textbooks was not the intent in the licensing of these resources, it is an added benefit of the subscription and their availability is appreciated by the students who may avoid individual purchases. Because there has been no effort on the part of the library to license resources for the purpose of providing access to textbooks, students in certain programs have access to many assigned texts while students in other programs have access to no textbooks at all.

Using an adapted version of a previously created survey, faculty were asked questions about currently licensed platforms, the selection of course textbooks, and the importance of textbook availability. The purpose of the survey was to gauge faculty members' level of knowledge and interest in expanding the course textbook offerings available through the library's electronic collections. Proposed future actions include expanding textbooks offerings, exploring potential funding streams to support the expansion, and involving librarians in curricular development and textbook selection.

Introduction

With the increasing costs of required course textbooks, both students and faculty have sought alternative options. For students, this could mean cost-avoidance behaviors such as opting to not purchase a textbook. For faculty, they might select a lower-cost textbook or one available electronically through the library collections to avoid passing along the cost to their students. Having textbooks included in a library's electronic collection is beneficial for both students who do not have to pay for individual access and faculty who are assured that all students have equal access. The question arises: what role does the library play in access to student textbooks? There are varying collection development policies where some academic libraries must provide required course textbooks, while other policies might purposefully exclude required course textbooks from the budget. This project explores the potential of library and librarian involvement in curricular development and textbook selection based on faculty opinion.

Setting

The University of Tennessee Health Science Center (UTHSC) is a public, academic health system. The Memphis campus is made up of six academic colleges for Medicine, Pharmacy, Dentistry, Nursing, Health Professions, and Graduate Health Sciences, and the Health Sciences Library supports all of these college with its collections, as well as research and instruction support. At UTHSC, the library has licensed several databases that include access to a number of required course textbooks. While the inclusion of the textbooks was not done intentionally, it is an added benefit of the subscription of the licensed resources, and the availability of these textbooks is appreciated by both students and faculty. Because there has been no effort on the part of the library to license resources for the purpose of providing access to textbooks, students in certain programs have access to many assigned texts, while students in other programs have access to no textbooks at all. As of October 2018, the library provides e-books though AccessMedicine from McGraw-Hill, ClinicalKey from Elsevier, EBSCO, and the R2 Digital Library. Over the

years, the library has received collection acquisition requests from both students and faculty about the online availability of course textbooks. In order to explore potential new directions for the library's collection, librarians at UTHSC decided to survey faculty members' levels of satisfaction with the current collection, as well as their opinions about a potential e-textbook program.

Methodology

Rather than survey the entire campus at once, the decision was made to focus on one college's faculty. The College of Nursing was selected for a variety of reasons, but the most influential is the long-standing, established relationship between the College of Nursing (CON) and the library. The library and the CON began working together in 2003, and the current library liaison receives requests about the online availability of course textbooks on a regular basis. These regular requests demonstrate some interest in e-textbooks, but the librarians were unsure how far that interest reached.

The survey used in this project was adapted from a previously published survey by DeGroote, Shultz, and Blecic (2014). Once the questions were changed to align with the institution and research project goals, the finalized survey was sent to the campus Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. Qualtrics was selected to host the survey due to the campus license of the software. This allowed the survey to be easily distributed to CON faculty, and Qualtrics includes a feature that sends out reminders only to those who have not yet completed the survey, which can reduce e-mail fatigue. The 19 survey questions related to five categories: database use, journal use, e-textbooks, open access publishing, and demographics. Comment options were included as a part of several questions. The initial survey invitation was distributed to 91 full-time CON faculty, and two follow-up reminders were sent over a two-week period. Survey responses were anonymous.

Results

There were a total of 28 completed responses for a completion rate of 30.7%. The section related to the potential e-textbook program opened with: "Several databases to which the library subscribes provide students with access to required textbooks (e.g., AccessMedicine contains Lange's *Basic & Clinical Pharmacology*). Please answer true/false to the following statements." The first statement asked

respondents if they believed that the library should expand access to resources that include textbooks, and 89% said that was true. The next two statements related to the faculty's decision-making in selecting their required course textbooks: 82% said that the availability of a student textbook in a library database would make it more likely that they would recommend it as an assigned textbook. Additionally, over half (61%) responded that they would recommend an alternative to their current textbook if it were available to students in a library database. When asked if they would support a student fee to support the licensing of resources that include student textbooks in lieu of individual students purchasing required textbooks, 79% said they would. Finally, 93% selected that it was true that they would welcome the inclusion of a librarian on curricular committees.

Discussion/Conclusion

This project sought to measure faculty interest and support of a potential e-textbook program that would provide required course textbooks electronically through the library's online resources. Positive responses to the survey indicate that the responding CON faculty do see that the library has a role in providing students access to course textbooks. Nearly all of the respondents believed that the library should expand its collection to be more inclusive of course textbooks. The faculty support is particularly shown in the majority response (82%) that the textbook availability within the library influences their decision when selecting the textbooks for their courses. Faculty support of the potential e-textbook program is vital due to their role in selecting their own course textbooks. The statement regarding a potential student fee revealed some reservations with 21% saying they would not support one. This could be because the faculty are sensitive to all the costs that students are responsible for throughout their academic program. However, if the e-textbook program moves forward and the student fee is comparable or less than what students would be responsible for if they had to individually purchase their textbooks, then support could possibly increase. A statement regarding librarian inclusion on curricular committees was incorporated into the e-textbook program section because it would provide a bridge between the curricular decisions and the library's collections. The librarian would have a more clear understanding of educational and curricular needs, which would play a role in collection acquisition and vendor discussions. The overwhelming majority (93%) of respondents were receptive to the inclusion.

While the e-textbook program is still only a potential reality, this project was a necessary initial step to gauge faculty interest before moving forward. Survey data will be used to set up meetings with CON administration in order to continue the conversation about the e-textbook program and the inclusion of the CON liaison librarian on the curricular committees. Additional plans for the future include adapting the survey for each of the five remaining academic colleges on the UTHSC campus in order to survey the entire faculty. The adapted surveys will potentially include questions related to Open Educational Resources (OER) instead of focusing solely on licensed resources.

Limitations of the project are a low response rate and the specific nature of the survey questions, which limit the usage of the survey data to be representative of other faculty populations. However, in terms of knowledge gained for the library, the project has significant value.

References

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