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Textbooks Are Expensive, But OER Can Be Challenging: Providing E-Textbook Access Through the Library

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Abstract

Research has shown that textbook costs are rising. Open educational resources (OER), though increasingly popular, are not available for all courses and can be difficult to adopt, particularly for contingent faculty. In response to the textbook crisis and the limitations of OER, Temple University has sought alternative ways to provide textbook access to students. We have promoted OER through a grant program since 2011 and offer a website to expose assigned readings that the Libraries own in e-book format. In 2018, the Libraries also began purchasing e-textbooks. The campus bookstore sends a list of assigned books each semester. We review the list according to criteria such as e-availability, existing library holdings, and previous assignment of the same materials. In spring 2018, Temple University Libraries purchased 38 assigned texts as e-books and added these to the e-textbook website. These e-books had heavier usage than other e-books purchased during the same period, and the Libraries plan to continue this practice.

Introduction

Research has shown that textbook costs are rising. Between 2006 and 2016, the price of textbooks increased 73% (Senack & Donoghue, 2016). A 2017 report estimated that students at public or private four-year institutions spend an average of \$1,200 on textbooks each year (Jensen & Nackerud, 2018). Senack and Donoghue found that two-thirds of students opted not to buy a required book because of its cost, while almost all of these students felt that this would negatively impact their grades (Senack & Donoghue, 2016). Inability to pay for a textbook can negatively affect grades, or can cut into a student's ability to pay for school, possibly leading students to drop out (Jensen & Nackerud, 2018; Senack & Donoghue, 2016).

Libraries have been promoting the adoption of open access textbooks, usually through grants to encourage faculty to redesign their courses (Bell, 2018). However, lack of availability of materials has constrained the growth of the open educational resources (OER) movement (Bell, 2018; Senack, 2014). In response to both the textbook crisis and the limitations of OER, Temple University has long been seeking alternative ways to provide textbook access to our students.

Temple University is a Research 1 institution with FTE 35,000. Our response to the textbook affordability crisis began in 2011 with a grant program that supports nine faculty per year in redesigning their

courses to rely on materials that students can access without any additional cost—either open access materials or those available through the Libraries. Although 67 faculty members have participated in the program thus far, this represents a small fraction of the university's over 2,000 full-time faculty. More recently, Temple University Libraries have added two new approaches to facilitating access to course materials.

In 2015 the Libraries created a website to expose assigned course readings owned in e-book format.¹ Media Services librarian Brian Boling uses several APIs to process a list of assigned materials and add them to a database. Though the specific APIs used have changed over time due to discontinued data sources and an ILS migration, the basic process has remained the same. Each semester, the campus bookstore provides a spreadsheet of course materials, often during the first week of classes. From this list, Brian uses a home-grown script to determine eISBNs associated with these print ISBNs and then matches the eISBNs against library holdings. Upon finding a match, the program writes book and course information to a MySQL database, which then generates a front-end display of assigned readings. Even this automated process requires several days to complete, given daily limits on some API calls and the need to manually check that single user e-books (more a frustration than a boon to large classes) have not slipped into the display.

In January 2018 we began deliberately growing our collection of e-textbooks. Collections Analysis librarian Karen Kohn has processed the list of course materials and developed criteria for purchase. First, the book should be available on Ebook Central (EBC), our primary e-book aggregator, with either an unlimited user or nonlinear lending license. Nonlinear lending allows the library a set number of accesses per year, regardless of whether these occur simultaneously or one at a time. Second, we filter for books that have been assigned in at least one previous semester. We made this decision with the expectation that we would not be able to afford every textbook and hoped that this would ensure we spent money on materials likely to be used in future semesters. Lastly, we avoided buying titles we already own or subscribe to.

The selection process begins with the list of course materials, which the campus bookstore sends as an Excel spreadsheet. Karen uses formulas to count how many courses and sections have assigned a given book. These numbers would prove useful if we needed to narrow the purchase list to those titles that would reach the most students. She also compares each semester's list to past semesters to filter out books that were assigned for the first time. Next, she checks Temple's current e-book holdings using Analytics, the reporting tool of the Alma ILS. Titles that Temple already owns as a single-user copy remain on the list as possible candidates for upgrade. OASIS, the ordering platform for Coutts, provides information on which books are available on Ebook Central. Karen imports the information from Analytics and OASIS back into the original spreadsheet and then filters the spreadsheet to show only items that meet the selection criteria: assigned in more than one semester, not already owned, and available on EBC. In reviewing these remaining titles more closely, we found that some classics supposedly available electronically were actually reprint editions that did not match the print versions assigned by the professor. Since this seemed to be true of almost all classics and all e-books costing less than 10 dollars, we now routinely remove these from the purchase list. After this step the head of Acquisitions looks at the price total to determine if the list needs further winnowing.

For better or worse, in the two semesters we have been purchasing textbooks, simply filtering the list to books available in EBC has shrunk the list to a point where we were able to purchase everything that met the initial criteria. In the spring 2018 semester, the

bookstore list contained 2,025 titles. Of these, there were 1,160 that had been assigned in a previous semester and were not already owned electronically. Out of 1,160, only 66 were available with a multiuser license on Ebook Central. Temple University Libraries purchased 38 of these. In fall 2018 we purchased 82, out of an initial list of 2,475.

Once the books had been ordered, we promoted the service in several ways. Karen shared the title list with departmental liaisons, encouraging them to notify relevant faculty. Brian manually added the newly purchased titles to his database. The website itself has limited findability because the library promotes it via blog posts that, by their nature, fall from prominence as the semester progresses. In the future, Brian would like to explore options for feeding available e-book titles directly into course management software, providing visibility in the online space where students do much of their coursework.

Several concerns arose, both from librarians and from faculty. In courses focused on close reading, faculty expressed the desire for students to own a print copy. In one case, where the faculty member authored the assigned text, questions arose as to how the purchase would affect their book royalties. Most significantly, since the selection and purchase of e-textbooks was not completed until a few weeks into the semester, some librarians worried that students would have already purchased the books and would not benefit from the library purchase. While we wish the purchasing could proceed more quickly, this concern may pose fewer issues than it seems. First, some research indicates that 25% of students wait until after the first week of classes to purchase course materials (Febbo, 2018). Second, we purchased materials that we expected will be assigned in the future, so next semester's students will have access before the semester starts. Finally, concern about students who would not buy their textbooks *at all* motivated this project; such students would still benefit from a book becoming available during the third or fourth week of the semester.

Despite the purchasing delay, it does seem that students are finding and using the course materials that Temple University Libraries purchases for them. Of the 38 books bought for the spring 2018 semester, 73.68% were used in that semester, compared to 13.19% of all e-books firm ordered in that time period. While we were surprised that 26.32% (10 books) of the e-textbooks were not used, this is still a much higher usage rate than other purchases.

The books were used more heavily as well, with an average of 226.07 uses for each book that was used, compared to 184.47 for all firm orders. The usage count is the sum of the BR1 and BR2 reports, as this

vendor uses both. We plan to continue purchasing electronic copies of assigned course materials as part of the Libraries' response to the textbook affordability crisis.

Note

1. <http://filmitems.x10.mx/ebooks2/ebooks2view.php>

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