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The Perfect Mix:

Leveraging Library Collections and Bookstore Partnerships for Textbook Affordability

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NUTRITION INFORMATION

Academic libraries play an important role in supporting successful research and teaching at their parent institutions by ensuring access to journals, books, and other media. This focus on access and student success often also includes providing course materials through reserves and, more recently, has expanded at many institutions to include textbook affordability initiatives. These initiatives go by a variety of names, often focusing on open education and open educational resources (OER), and involve a variety of stakeholders from the library and around the institution. As most librarians working on such initiatives will share, it's not always easy to gain faculty buy-in for the change to open and affordable course materials. This recipe outlines a program designed to provide a low-barrier first step introducing faculty to textbook affordability using library collections. By comparing bookstore adoption information with library collections and notifying faculty of unlimited user ebooks, this program helps courses approach zero textbook costs without requiring much change from the faculty.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

- Increase textbook-related cost avoidance for students.
- Lower barriers to decreasing student textbook costs by requiring little to no change to current faculty practices.
- Provide a low-barrier first step introducing faculty to textbook affordability as a way to promote longer-term, increased engagement.
- Increase awareness and usage of library collections by promoting their usage as course materials.
- Increase faculty awareness of library services and collections and encourage future interaction.

NUMBER SERVED

Number served will depend on an institution's collection policies (e.g., if textbooks are acquired), size of school, and disciplines.

For VCU, which has approximately 30,000 students across all disciplines, including a medical campus, we received approximately 2,300 sections/titles from the bookstore in Spring 2020. From these, we found approximately

- 550 unique titles (including books, access codes, and supplementary material)
- 225 books owned in print
- 150 available as ebooks
- 100 available as unlimited user ebooks

Using the 100 ebooks, we notified approximately 70 professors teaching 80 courses and 90 sections. If all 3,000 students (duplicated headcount) used these titles instead of buying a new copy, their cost avoidance would be approximately \$320,000.

COOKING TIME

Beginning a program that compares bookstore adoptions to library collections will require a lot of set-up time. Each institution will need some trial and error to determine how to best clean data, compare against collections, and email. However, the initial setup will pay off in subsequent semesters of implementation, which can proceed more smoothly.

With that disclaimer, plan for the following:

- Reach out to the bookstore shortly after textbook adoption deadlines to obtain adoption information.
- Set aside approximately 1 week when a majority of time will be spent with the

data cleaning and comparison process. In the first cycle, it may take 2–3 weeks.

- Email faculty as early as possible to allow maximum time to adjust bookstore reporting and notify students. Notify faculty for spring before the end of the fall semester and vice versa, if possible.

DIETARY GUIDELINES

Comparing bookstore adoptions lists to library collections can act as an important part of any textbook affordability initiative. At VCU, it accounts for the majority of the “affordable” half of our Open and Affordable Course Content Initiative. Actively notifying faculty of ebooks introduces them to an initiative they might not have otherwise been aware of. This project also lowers the barrier to engagement with textbook affordability while still serving the goal of reducing textbook costs for students as much as possible.

The program applies to a subset of classes: those using scholarly or trade works rather than traditional textbooks. This reach may vary depending on an institution’s collection guidelines.

INGREDIENTS & EQUIPMENT

- Bookstore partner(s)
- List of textbook adoptions from the bookstore
- Access to information on the library’s collections, including information on the number of users for ebooks
- Librarians to perform and share out the analysis

- Access to course catalog or schedule with information on who is teaching which classes for upcoming semesters
- University directory for faculty email addresses

PREPARATION

- **Prepare to cook: Cultivating bookstore relationships.** Before starting, it’s important to develop a good relationship with the campus store. These stores often consider themselves at the forefront of textbook affordability and are often happy to support the library’s efforts (Bell, 2017). Even third-party-run stores—VCU uses Barnes and Noble—are often open to collaboration. Set up a meeting with the bookstore manager and identify shared values around affordability and student access to course materials. Share your interest in obtaining a list of adoptions, perhaps setting up a timeline for the process built around your institution’s reporting deadlines. Offer to share back titles you have identified in library collections, as these can help the bookstore more accurately order the right number of books.
- **Gather ingredients: Obtaining a list of adoptions.** Work with the bookstore to obtain a list of adoptions from the current semester. Attempt to get the list as close to the adoption reporting deadline—usually prior to registration—which will allow time for the subsequent steps before the start of the semester.

COOKING METHOD

1. *Mise en place*: Clean bookstore data.

Begin by cleaning the data. This will reduce the number of books to compare against the library collection. If the data is shared as a spreadsheet, both Microsoft Excel and Google Sheets allow for easy searching and duplicate removal, although other tools are also available.

To clean the data, first remove duplicate titles using ISBN. Then, depending on your collection guidelines, review the list to remove

- traditional textbooks (identify by publisher, e.g., Cengage, Pearson)
- custom items (usually include “custom” in the title)
- items with access codes (search for “access code” or certain publishers or products, e.g., Top Hat or Mindtap)
- items with media/supplementary materials (e.g., CD, DVD, Kits)
- items that are looseleaf (usually include some version of “looseleaf” in the title)
- non-book materials (e.g., Clickers)

Tip: One way to quickly identify items to remove is to create additional columns for each of these options and to evaluate each row for that category (see figure 1). In Excel, use variations on the formula

```
=IF(SUMPRODUCT(--ISNUMBER(SEARCH({">CUSTOM<"},F2)))>0, "y", "n")
```

Those rows that have “n” labels in all columns are those to evaluate in Step 2.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
1	Semester	DEPT	COURSE	SECTION	AUTHOR	TITLE	EDITION	PUBLISHER	ISBN	Access	Supplemental	Custom	Looseleaf
2	Spring 2020	ACCT	305	901	HAMLEN	ADVANCED ACCOUNTING-W/ACCESS	4TH 18	CAMB BUS	9.78162E+12	y	n	n	n
3	Spring 2020	ACCT	305	902	HAMLEN	ADVANCED ACCOUNTING-W/ACCESS	4TH 18	CAMB BUS	9.78162E+12	y	n	n	n
4	Spring 2020	ACCT	301	901	SMITH	CCH FED.TAX.:COMPREH.TOP.,2020	28TH 19	CCH	9.78081E+12	n	n	n	n
5	Spring 2020	ACCT	610	901	CRUMBLEY	FORENSIC+INVESTIGATIVE ACCOUNTING	8TH 17	CCH	9.78081E+12	n	n	n	n
6	Spring 2020	ACCT	406	001	GLEIM	AUDITING+SYSTEMS	21ST 18	GLEIM PUBS	9.78162E+12	n	n	n	n
7	Spring 2020	ACCT	406	901	GLEIM	AUDITING+SYSTEMS	21ST 18	GLEIM PUBS	9.78162E+12	n	n	n	n
8	Spring 2020	ACCT	406	902	GLEIM	AUDITING+SYSTEMS	21ST 18	GLEIM PUBS	9.78162E+12	n	n	n	n

Figure 1. Sample spreadsheet for cleaning data

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2. Run list of current adoptions against library catalog. Using the list of cleaned data, search for each title in the catalog. Note which items are owned as print versus ebooks and which ebooks have unlimited users. Collect permalinks, if possible, for all ebooks. Figure 2 provides an example of a completed comparison.

Tip: first identify the full title and specific edition using an ISBN search service (like <https://isbnsearch.org/>) as the information from bookstore lists may be incomplete or unclear.

3. Generate a master list of sections and books. Compare the list of unlimited user ebooks identified in step 2 against the

original list from the bookstore to generate a list of all course sections which use each ebook. Then, review the course catalog to identify who teaches each section on this list, and go over the school directory to collect email addresses for those professors.

4. Email faculty. Using the master list generated in step 3, email faculty letting them know they are assigning a book(s) available through the library, sending the permalink, and asking them to share with their students. A sample email is provided in the appendix.

Tip: working with mail merge makes the emailing process a lot quicker! However,

be careful when notifying faculty about more than one book or more than one class. You may have to create separate mail merges by the number of notifications or create custom emails for these unique circumstances.

5. Taste-testing: Track faculty sharing of information. In the email to faculty, ask them to share back whether they have reported the textbook to students and how they did so. Faculty may change their request to the bookstore (for example, asking the bookstore to add a note that the text is available for free through the library) or share the link to the ebook version with students via the syllabus, LMS, or email. Use the infor-

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J	K	L	
1	AUTHOR	TITLE	EDITION	PUBLISHER	ISBN	VCU Own	VCU Print Edition	#copies	VCU Ebook VCU Own	Edition	#users	Link
2												
3	HAMMER	REENGINEERING THE CORPORATION-REV.+UPT.	REV 03	HARP PUB	9780060559533	Y	2001	1				
4	MILGRAM	OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY	9	HARP PUB	9780061765216	Y	2009	1				
5	HARARI	SAPIENS: BRIEF HISTORY OF HUMANKIND	18	HARP PUB	9780062316110	Y	2015	1				
6	WOODSON	ANOTHER BROOKLYN	17	HARP PUB	9780062359995	Y	2017	1				
7	MILLER	HISTORY OF WESTERN MUSIC	(5TH)91	HARP PUB	9780064671071							
8	LEWIS	FUND.OF NUCLEAR REACTOR PHYSICS	8	ELSEVIER	9780123706317	Y	2008	1	Y	2008	-1	https://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=http://se
9	BUTLER	FUNDAMENTALS OF FORENSIC DNA TYPING	10	ELSEVIER	9780123749994	Y	2010	1	Y	2009	-1	https://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=http://se
10	ROSS	INTRO.TO PROBABILITY MODELS	11TH 14	ELSEVIER	9780124079489				Y	2014	-1	https://www.sciencedirect.com/book/978012

Figure 2. Sample comparison between bookstore adoptions and VCU collections. In the #users column, -1 stands for unlimited users.

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mation provided to generate a more accurate cost avoidance count for these courses' textbooks.

ALLERGY WARNINGS

- The types of materials identified through the initiative will vary depending on an institution's collection guidelines. For VCU, these course materials will be scholarly and trade works but not traditional textbooks. If your institution collects textbooks, eliminate the removal of traditional textbooks from the list in step 1.
- It's best to get adoption lists as soon as possible after the reporting deadline so you can reach out to faculty in time for them to take action. However, you might find that many adoptions have not yet been reported by the deadline. Bookstore managers can help determine the best time to share the list for your initial efforts. They often have an idea of how many adoptions they will receive in total, and you can coordinate with them for an updated adoption list from them once they're closer to a full report for a second round of searching and notifying faculty.
- When evaluating ebooks, you may also want to consider the type of ownership. Books the library owns perpetually are great to share because faculty can use them in subsequent semesters without worry. However, books available through subscription always have the possibility of disappearing between semesters. Some subscriptions may

also auto-update when a new edition is released, so the institution loses access to past editions. If sharing subscription copies with faculty, consider including a disclaimer reminding faculty to check the link if used in a subsequent semester. This is also good practice as some services occasionally change links even when the book is still available.

CLEAN-UP

The taste-testing step—asking faculty to report how they share the ebook availability with students—is a good way to assess the initiative. There is no guarantee that faculty will read the email you send, so asking for this reporting is an additional action step for them to engage with the content and assess the actual impact.

In spring 2020, we received responses from approximately 30 percent of the faculty that we notified. Some responses were more engaged than others, but all responses were positive. Here are some sample responses we received:

- "Thank you so much for sharing this electronic resource! I will email my students by the end of the week to ensure they know they have free access to these 2 textbooks. It is wonderful we can save them some money on books."
- "Thanks so much for letting me know! This will be a huge weight off the students!"
- "Wonderful, this is fantastic, thank you! I'm very appreciative to you for emailing me and helping out students in this way."

- "I'm delighted to learn, this is outstanding, thank you for your proactivity."

However, such responses do not capture the full impact of the initiative. Some faculty may have seen the email and shared the information with students but chosen not to respond. Others may have taken the information and continued to use it in future semesters, extending the impact. Since this program is based on bookstore data, if a professor opts not to report the free ebook to the bookstore in a subsequent semester, we will not be aware of that usage. We are currently evaluating the possibility of follow-ups to faculty previously notified, weighing the desire to track impact with the unwillingness to overwhelm inboxes or demand too much action for an initiative for which faculty did not instigate their involvement.

We've also started to see other positive impacts. Faculty have begun reaching out to the librarian who sent out the email in subsequent semesters, asking about the possibility of purchasing different ebooks for their courses. This exciting development seems to emphasize the underlying assumption that reducing initiative barriers will increase awareness and engagement with faculty in the future.

CHEF'S NOTES

If the process and unknown time commitment seem overwhelming, start on a smaller scale. Consider identifying the top enrollment courses or a department, like history or politi-

cal science, which may have high overlap with library resources. Use this to help estimate the time commitment and evaluate expanding the program against staffing requirements.

In our first round, we looked up books using our discovery layer. However, we're exploring other options for making the process easier. For example, in Alma, you can upload lists using the "sets" function. However, this process requires some additional checking from cleaned lists for books whose print ISBN does not appear in the MARC record of the ebook version. There is also the possibility of working with vendors, like EBSCO or GOBI, to outsource the searching of library collections.

If you decide to track books that your library has in its print collections, consider notifying faculty that you have a book that can be placed in course reserves for student use. While this will not provide as much access as an unlimited user ebook, it can still increase access by some measure. You might also find that many print titles used as textbooks are missing from your collection and consider purchasing replacements as unlimited user ebooks when possible.

APPENDIX: SAMPLE EMAIL TO FACULTY

Subject: VCU Libraries ebook available for your course

Dear Professor {{Last Name}},

VCU Libraries has identified that a book(s)

that you are currently assigning for your [semester] class(es) is available as an ebook(s) with unlimited users:

{{Title}} by {{Author}} for use in {{Department}} {{Course}} {{Section}} available at {{Permalink}}

Please note that while we believe this is the correct text and edition, please check before sharing with your students. Also, note that library ebooks typically do not include supplemental materials that may be required.

What should I do with this ebook and link?

We hope that you will share this link with your students so that they are aware there is a freely accessible version. Since costs prohibit many students from purchasing books at the beginning of the semester or perhaps at all, sharing this resource can help ensure that all students have access to the text, increasing the potential for them to succeed in your class. More specifically, you can

- Ask the bookstore to add a note alongside your book sharing it is available through the library or asking your students to talk to you before purchasing
- Include the link in your syllabus
- Include the link on Blackboard/the LMS, and/or
- Email information to your students

If you have any questions, please let me or your liaison librarian, cc'd here.

What does VCU Libraries need?

VCU Libraries is happy to provide these resources to the VCU faculty without stipulations.

However, **we do ask that you report if you shared the ebook link with your students by either responding to this email letting us know how you shared it with your students.**

About this project

In partnership with the VCU Bookstore, VCU Libraries has identified a number of assigned course texts that are available in the library collections as ebooks. Although purchasing traditional textbooks generally falls outside of our collection guidelines, we have many scholarly books that are assigned as course materials, and we are notifying faculty of their availability to provide another potential option for students. This is part of our broader efforts to support the use of open and affordable course content at VCU.

Learning more

If you'd like help with identifying other potential library resources that can be used as course materials, you can contact me or your liaison librarian, cc'd here, for assistance.

Thank you,
Jessica Kirschner
Open Educational Resources Librarian

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bell, Steven. 2017. What about the bookstore: Textbook affordability programs and the academic library-bookstore relationship. *College & Research Libraries News* 78(7). <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/16700/18183>