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Reserve Textbooks: To Buy, or Not to Buy?

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Abstract

There is convincing evidence that academic libraries are used less frequently for research than in the past, due to the advent of the Internet. This begs the question: what role does the current library have for students? It can be argued that we simply need to convince students and faculty of library viability, or, another route would be to give students what they are asking for. And textbooks, via course reserves, are what they request most at Grossmont College.

Collection development policies typically contain some verbiage that equates to “the library does not collect textbooks, unless they are donated by faculty.” Grossmont College Library, however, recently reexamined its philosophical approach to reserves and refined its collection development policy and reserves policies and procedures as a result.

The end product was a much more user-friendly, viable, and timely reserves collection that included on-the-spot service. Getting to that result was not without its challenges, however. Many policies and procedures had to be rethought and revised in tandem with these changes.

Introduction - The Existing Situation

Grossmont College Library has had a policy since its inception of not buying textbooks for quite a few reasons.

First among them was simply that we have always had a very limited book budget, so textbooks were ruled out. Our book budget until the last couple of years had been under \$1,000 and we relied on augmentations, such as block grants, to add to it each year. With such uncertainty, we were not comfortable using a portion of the budget for textbooks.

Second, we were following the precedents set by most college libraries, so we did not consider ourselves unusual in any way. Very few libraries, as far as we could tell, actually bought texts for reserves. Most relied on faculty donations.

Third, as community college librarians, we often found ourselves referring to our undergraduate experiences. Since we attended college with the notion that textbooks were the financial responsibility of students, we all dutifully bought our textbooks and never relied on the library to provide them.

Fourth, if we did buy them for students, technical services staff would have to process them – and there would undoubtedly be short time frames. We had a limited technical services staff before, with the advent of the economic recession it is now even more limited. So we were concerned about the staffing time that would be required by adding the processing of these materials to their workload.

Fifth, space problems were another issue: where would we put the vast number of textbooks that we might be getting? Our designated reserves space was already pretty full.

And finally, other myriad reasons also factored in, as Pollitz, Christie and Middleton (2009) state “...competition with the private sector, violation of the university’s contract with a textbook vendor, and pressure from the campus bookstore.”

A Re-Examination

An article in *American Libraries*, in the “On My Mind” section, called “The Case for Textbooks,” caused us to take a first look at re-considering our policy. In this short article, McDonald and Burke (2010) cited Ranganathan’s “Five Laws of Library Science,” and convinced our librarians that textbooks should be considered for purchase. They very successfully related buying textbooks to four of the five laws. Here’s a summary of the three that impressed us:

- Books are for use.
 - They make the case that many texts are available anyway – through interlibrary loan or on their regular shelves. So why stand in the way of potential users by making textbooks harder to obtain?
- Every book its reader.
 - These quickly “obsolete” materials probably see more check-outs than most books on regular shelves.
- Save the time of the reader.
 - Students sometimes need a temporary text until they can get theirs. If we can get them texts until then, it will surely save time!

We also agreed with this statement of theirs: “What libraries restricted in an earlier age, such as fiction, would seem ludicrous today. Let us seek new ways to serve our patrons and provide them with the resources they need” (2010). Times change, and we need to change with them. Libraries should not be carefully guarded warehouses anymore – they need to respond quickly and efficiently to serve their users by supplying needed information.

After that first look at the philosophical underpinnings, we then took a look at the realities of today’s world.

First, there is evidence that print book collection use and reference desk statistics have dropped since the advent of the Internet.

As Anderson (2011) says of circulation statistics: “...use of academic libraries’ physical collections--especially of printed books--is dropping. It’s been a topic of discussion for years, and statistics bear out the conventional wisdom: the 2007-08 statistical report of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) indicates a 26% drop in initial circulations for its member libraries since 1991, while the National Center for Education Statistics’ 2006 report on academic library data reports 144.1 million circulation transactions

among academic libraries generally, down from 229 million reported by that agency in 1992--a decline of 37%.”

In terms of reference desk statistics, there is Applegate’s (2008) study in which he concludes, “The data show that there has in fact been a decline in the number of reference transactions per week on a per-library basis across all institutional types. That is, comparing 2004 to 2002 figures, the average American academic library saw its overall number of transactions decline approximately 2.2%...” And Banks and Pracht (2008) got responses from a survey that indicated “for the first of these questions, the main response dealt with the fact that the Internet had transformed reference because of its vast reach and information, reducing questions at the desk.”

So we concluded: maybe we need to shift our idea of which services/materials are the most valuable to offer.

Second, costs of textbooks have risen exponentially. As Buczynski says, “Hundreds of articles have been written over the last few years addressing the rising cost of textbooks. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported in 2005 that textbook prices increased at twice the rate of inflation over the past two decades” (1996). And Crouse (2007) states that “...prices of textbooks increased by 186% from 1986-2005....”

At the time of this writing, tuition at a California community college costs \$26 per credit unit. So it is quite common for a textbook to cost twice as much as the tuition for a course. So while California is a leader in access to higher education, textbooks for classes can be cost prohibitive and a psychological hurdle for students. Students may not realize the extent to which the state subsidizes their tuition and cannot fathom paying more for their book than the course itself. This situation makes lower cost textbook alternatives logical and appealing. Students would rather use a free desk copy in reserve than purchase their own textbook.

Meanwhile, the economy is still reeling from the effects of the “Great Recession.” This caused us to consider a possible change in student needs: maybe students are so “money-short” that textbooks have become one of their highest priority needs. As Buczynski states: “The rising ‘out of pocket’ cost of higher education has shined a spotlight on textbooks. Many students are not acquiring them because they are financially unable to do so or deliberately choose to go without. This trend introduced inequality into the classroom, in that some students have the required learning materials to succeed in the course while others do not, or have unreliable borrower access to the materials. Student success is directly impacted by this inequality in the learning environment “(1996).

Furthermore, textbooks are more readily available through online purchase than they were 10 years ago. The online offerings can save students quite a bit of money, but unfortunately can take a while to arrive - and may not be the correct edition when they do arrive. This situation leaves students with lag time while waiting for books to arrive. They may get behind in the course in the first few weeks while waiting for a book.

Then too, since students are purchasing or renting more books online rather than at the campus bookstore, 1) The campus bookstore doesn’t worry as much about the library as “bookstore competition”, and 2) Students need textbooks as a stop-gap until they can get the ones they ordered online, because books ordered online frequently take a number of days, or even more than a week, to arrive.

We also saw some benefits for improved library image and marketing. These included: 1) more positive public relations with students, 2) more library use, and 3) increased outreach from librarians to faculty.

For all of these reasons, we decided that purchasing textbooks for the library would be a pilot program, one that could be discontinued at any time. We would monitor student response and circulation statistics to ensure that our pilot program had some degree of impact. The pilot program would be reevaluated in future semesters to determine whether it should continue.

The first step, then, would be to review and modify a number of existing policies and procedures.

Policy Issues

Change to Collection Development Policy

The first step was to change the piece of the Collection Development Policy that referred to Reserves. Our former statement was: "The Library does not purchase the specific edition of a textbook used in a college course; their high cost and frequent revisions make most textbooks a poor investment for the library's permanent collection. However, instructors may place copies on reserve. Workbooks and study guides are not purchased. Textbooks will be accepted as gifts."

It now reads: "The library may use a small percentage of the print book budget to purchase textbooks based on student demand. Determination of funding will be periodically reviewed by librarians. Workbooks and other consumable books are not purchased" (Middlemas, Farina-Hess and Morrison, 2010). While we still accept student and faculty donations, this is dealt with in the donations section of our collection development policy.

We decided not to designate the percentage amount within the policy. At this point, it is ten percent of our \$40,000 new line item (or \$4,000 per year), but we reserved the right to change it at any time.

Student Driven Collection

We were concerned with identifying who this collection would benefit, and felt strongly that it should be a student-driven collection, e.g. library purchases should be primarily for the benefit of students. For this reason, we decided to purchase books by request from students only.

Reference librarians who helped students check for reserve items during the first week of the term would encourage students to fill out a textbook request form if their text was not available in Reserves. Request forms would be generated at the reference desk from students who were looking for their textbook in person.

Many instructors put desk copies on reserve, so we decided immediately not to duplicate books that were already in the collection, regardless of demand. Some books are in such demand that we could have twenty copies - and that still would not be enough.

Since the collection was intended to be a student-generated collection, we decided that we would be happy to explain the program to faculty if asked. However, we would not advertise the program to them, for a few reasons: First, because it might discourage instructors from bringing desk copies for the reserve collection; second, we were also concerned that some instructors would be uncomfortable with the idea that we purchased one instructor's textbook, but another instructor had to put his or her desk copy on reserve; and third, some instructors may be tempted to sell their desk copy to book buyers and then have the library purchase one for reserves.

Procedure Issues

Budget

In considering our collection development policy changes for reserves, the first question we asked was how much money to dedicate for the purchase of textbooks.

Textbook publishers offer new editions constantly, so keeping up with every required textbook for every class could become quite costly and prohibit other collection development endeavors. In our librarian discussions, a few of us voiced concerns over our ever-shrinking book budget. Budget cuts and

electronic book collections have chiseled away at the print book budget in previous years. Thus, we didn't want to buy too many textbooks that would then be out of date in a few years. We also didn't want to undercut the validity of the pilot program by not allocating enough dollars and having too little impact for students to notice.

After much discussion, we decided that ten percent of the print book budget was appropriate for a pilot program and that it would be divided as equally as possible between fall and spring semesters.

Fairness

Unfortunately, ten percent of our book budget would not be enough to cover all student textbook requests, and therefore keeping requests equitable was a very real concern. We also wanted to reward students who were motivated.

Thus students were required to complete the request form accurately and in person. We made a point of deciding not to create an online request form or take requests over the telephone - in order to filter out students who may not be eager to obtain the textbook. Forms were date- and time-stamped to give those who sought out their textbooks early a bit of an edge in our priority purchase list. Sometimes our students lacked pertinent information about the textbook they were seeking. So we decided students must complete the form themselves, and also have complete information about the book. We felt this helped to promote student responsibility, and that we would be more likely to purchase textbooks that would get the most use.

Students who could not supply all of the required information moved to the bottom of the list. This was an attempt to purchase books for those students who seemed most likely to complete the course successfully. Students who couldn't figure out their instructor or course were considered "high-risk" for dropping a class.

Timeline/Form

Timeliness became an essential part of our procedures. Since some students were using our service as a stop-gap measure until their online purchases were delivered, the faster we could get the books on the shelf the better. We took request forms from students the first week only, and then purchased the books at the college bookstore. We then cataloged and processed them at the beginning of the second week. See the Appendix for a copy of the Request Form.

Establishing a Priority List

Since we couldn't purchase all the textbooks requested, we prioritized the list based on certain factors:

- Demand: Books with multiple requests were given the highest priority.
- Cost: Books that were relatively inexpensive (less than \$30) were given less priority since students may have more ability to purchase these books themselves.
- Course Level: Upper division and esoteric courses were given less priority because we knew there was less demand, and students in these courses may be more likely to purchase the text and use it for future reference throughout their studies.

Request to Faculty

Since our budget wasn't large enough to purchase all of the texts, if a student request was made for a book, we decided to call or email faculty to request their desk copy in the hope that we could save our budget money for other texts instead. We also realized that this would serve the dual purpose of outreach to faculty, since they would learn that the library was actively involved in supporting their courses in a new way.

Where to Purchase

Since time was of the essence, we decided to purchase all books at the campus bookstore rather than our book jobber. This doubled as a commitment to support business at the campus bookstore (since offering reserves removed business from them, we felt it was the right thing to do). It also ensured accuracy in editions.

We chose new books over used because our books generally get so much wear and tear, but also to keep less expensive used books more accessible to students for purchase.

Results of Pilot: Mistakes, Mishaps and Successes

Managing the Budget

The pilot went smoothly overall, but there were a few bumps in the road. The first hurdle happened when we tried to divide the allocated money evenly between two semesters. Since fall is a busier semester, we spent beyond our allocation, leaving less money for spring, which we later realized was problematic.

Bookstore

For spring, we went a little over the money available. Unfortunately, the credit at the bookstore was for an exact amount, so our staff had to put back books from our carefully selected title list. Since these staff had not initially prioritized the list, they were forced to choose, with no background information, which books to put back on the spur of the moment. Because of our short timeline, there was no chance to return and consult librarians. At the same time, in our zeal to get the books on the shelf as quickly as possible, staff went to the bookstore on Wednesday morning when the bookstore was extremely busy. So there was further frustration for our staff because they had to deal with huge lines at the same time.

Duplication

Since we called or emailed individual faculty members requesting they bring desk copies to put on reserve before we purchased our books from the bookstore, there was a bit of duplication. Unfortunately, one faculty member brought his desk copy in for reserves just as the technical services staff was cataloging the library-purchased copy.

Format

Another hurdle that we had not prepared for was that many textbooks are now published in paperback format. Textbooks are generally heavy books, and as a general rule, the technical services staff puts Permabind on all paperback books in house to make them sturdier. This was time-consuming and added a cost of approximately \$2 to each of the paperback textbooks.

The General Pitfalls of Collection Development

Librarians may purchase the most interesting, useful book that is completely appropriate for readers and for whatever reason, it never gets used or is underutilized. The same applies to our pilot program. Some textbooks didn't get used, some were too expensive and had a very high cost/use ratio. Others were a lot of trouble for technical services to get processed due to format and cataloging difficulties. The same problems of collection development apply in this scenario: despite our best intentions, some textbooks we purchased may not have been the best use of our shrinking library dollars.

Communication with Classified Staff

In our excitement about our new pilot, librarians neglected to include classified staff enough in the planning process. Since all of the purchases and processing needed to be done in the first few weeks, it

put a burden on the technical services staff. Had the classified staff understood the project better, they could have reprioritized their work load and cleared more time for the pilot project.

Statistical Data

A basic assumption of this pilot program was that there is a lot of demand at the library for textbooks. So we didn't pull statistics on this demand. Besides, our statistics would be misleading because we have an open reserves stacks system. Students only need to check out the reserve item if they are taking it out of the library. Many items get used in the library and it is impossible to account for that usage since often times, students re-shelve the books themselves. However, we did a comparison of reserve statistics before and after our pilot program and found the following:

We were able to fulfill a significant number of requests.

- In fall 2010 there were 51 requests for 43 unique titles, and in spring 2011 there were 38 requests for 31 unique titles.
- Of these, we were able to purchase the following with the 10% of the budget we had allocated for this project:
- In fall 2010, 27 titles were purchased and 13 titles were donated by the instructor. A total of 40 of the 43 requested titles were provided for students.
- In spring 2011, 14 titles were purchased and 7 titles donated by the instructor. A total of 21 of the 31 requested titles were provided for students. (see Figure 1)

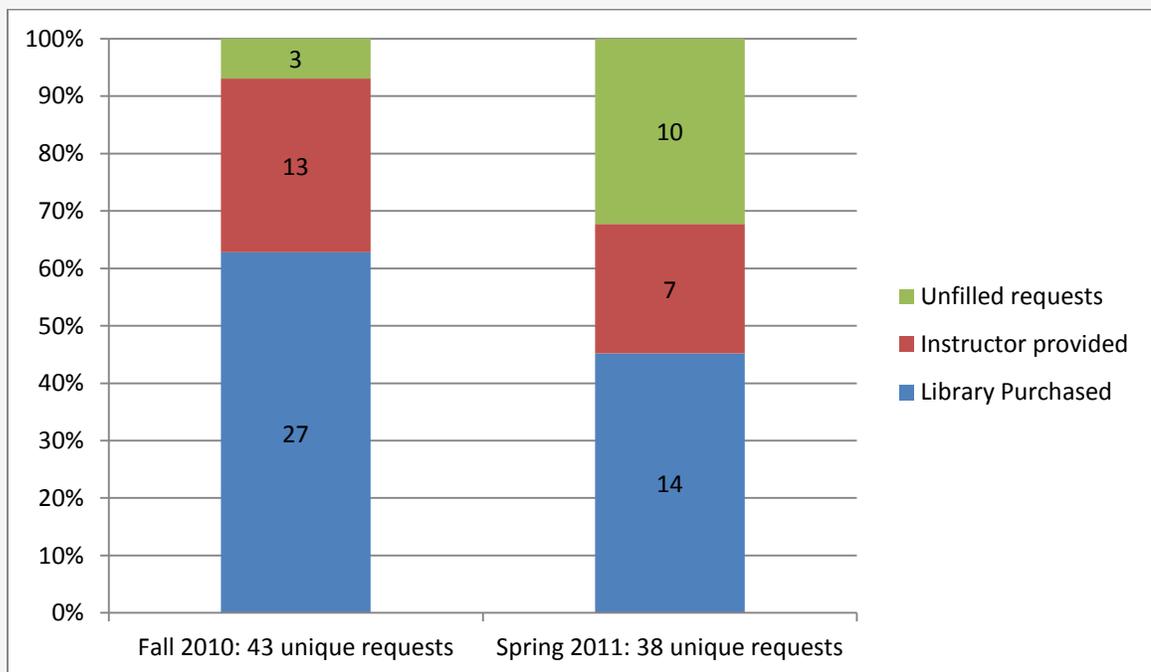


Figure 1: Fulfilling Requests

We were able to get some decent bang for our buck.

- The library-purchased books had 172 charges in fall 2010 and 71 charges in spring 2011. Since we spent a total of \$2611.61 in fall and \$1,380.71 in spring, the cost per circulation in fall was \$15.18 and for spring, \$19.44.

- However, we must keep in mind that the books were actually used maybe three times as much as they were checked out, due to in-house usages. Therefore, the estimated average cost per use in fall was \$5.06, and for spring, \$6.48.
- It is important to note also that they would likely be used for more than one term – possibly up to 3 – 5 years. That, of course, would bring the average “cost per use overall” down much further.

Conclusion

We consider the Grossmont College Library Reserves Pilot Program a success. Students get what they want most from the library, faculty is appreciative of the service, and the library's image has correspondingly improved. Although the books cost us around \$6.00 per usage (so far), it has definitely been worth the ten percent of the book budget that was allocated to be able to fulfill one of the topmost needs that students have. We did not have the shelf space problems we had worried about, and technical services has been able to incorporate this twice-a-year process into the workload.

We therefore plan to make this pilot permanent.

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Appendix

Textbooks on Reserve Request Form

To help defray the high cost of education Grossmont College Library has set aside a small portion of our book budget to purchase current textbooks for our collection. Selected books will be housed in the Reserve area of the Library and lent to students for a 3-hour time limit.

Please complete this form in full for book purchase requests. Textbook information for your classes is available from the Grossmont Bookstore website at <http://grossmont.bncollege.com/>.

Note that there is limited funding so we will not be able to purchase all books requested.

Incomplete forms will not be considered. Deadline for submission is Tuesday, August 30 at 8:00 p.m. Return this completed form to the Library Reference Desk.

Purchased items will be made available at the end of the second week of class. You will not be individually notified, so please check the library catalog and shelves in the Reserve area for your requested title.

-----cut on dotted line-----

Textbook Information

<i>Title</i>		
<i>Author's Last Name, First Name</i>		
<i>Edition (if available)</i>	<i>Date of Publication</i>	

Student Information

<i>First Name</i>	<i>Last Name</i>	<i>ID #</i>
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Class Information

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Course #</i> <i>e.g. 110</i>	<i>Section</i> <i>e.g. 0620</i>	<i>Instructor's Last Name</i>
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