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“All Textbooks in the Library!” An Experiment with Library Reserves

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Abstract

In the fall of 2010, a grant of \$36,000 allowed Portland Community College Library to purchase and place on reserve a copy of every required text at one of its campuses. A smaller college “center” also placed all required texts on reserve. The program was very popular with students and parts of the reserve collection received heavy use. Compared to the previous fall term, overall use of reserves at the Cascade Campus library rose 35%, and the Southeast Center collection saw an increase of 110%. However, use of the collection was unevenly distributed, with 26% of the books having more than 11 uses that quarter, but a troubling number (37%) receiving no checkouts at all. An analysis of the data suggests several ways that books with 11 or more uses per quarter could be increased to over 70%. These are to purchase and process books in a timely manner, to adjust loan periods for some items, or to purchase texts only for courses with multiple sections. Use numbers compiled over the following 8 quarters show that textbooks purchased and placed on reserve will be used for several successive terms.

Keywords: Library Reserves, Textbooks, Sustainability, Course Reserves, Community College Libraries.

Introduction

Academic libraries in the US have been in two camps about whether they should have substantial textbook collections on reserve. One common opinion is “Textbook reserves are not a core library service” and the library should not commit significant resources to these materials. Other institutions have held that having textbooks on reserve is an essential service that supports student learning and success. The “textbooks are not a core service” philosophy had some validity in the pre-Internet age. Before the Internet, it was difficult for patrons of a library to know what items intended for general research were available elsewhere, and Inter-Library Loan was slow and cumbersome. In that era, libraries could justifiably choose to invest only in materials that would be of use for many years. Textbooks, with their short shelf life, did not fit with the technology and resources of the time.

With the rise of digital catalogs, consortia and fairly easy ILL, awareness and access to off-campus materials for research and reference has become much easier. At the same time, the cost to students of course materials has risen dramatically, leading to requests from students and state legislatures that libraries provide copies of course materials. As a result, some librarians are beginning to see access to course textbooks as a necessary service. (Johnson, 2012; McDonald, 2010).

While most college and university libraries have limited textbook reserves, some colleges have long followed the practice of having copies of all required texts in the library. Reed College and Western States University in Oregon are two of those, and North Carolina State University Library launched an ambitious, successful and ongoing

textbook reserve project in 2009. ([Raschke, 2010](#)). This article reports on an “All textbooks in the Library” trial program at Portland Community College in Oregon.

Readers who wish to learn details about the price increases in textbook and course materials would do well to read the articles and studies by [Cave](#), Christie, Pollitz and the [Government Accounting Office](#) listed in the reference section of this article.

Statement of the Problem

A 2005 study at Portland Community College found that “textbook affordability is the number one concern for students, outranking even student parking.” A college taskforce recommended, among other things, that the library should “Place a copy of every textbook ordered on Library Reserve on the campus in which the course is taught.” (Smythe and Sonnleitner, 2006) Studies in several statewide taskforces have proposed that campus libraries have copies of some to all textbooks on reserve. ([Connecticut](#), 2005; [Illinois](#), 2005; [Minnesota](#), 2007, [Pennsylvania](#), 2012.)

The cost of college course materials has become so expensive that many students no longer purchase required texts. A study of undergraduates at Oregon State University found that 30% of students sometimes chose to skip purchasing required course materials. (Christie 2009, 496.) Similar work in Connecticut found 22% making the same choice. ([Connecticut](#), 2005). Virginia’s 2006 study found that “40% of respondents could not afford to purchase textbooks for one or more semesters.” ([Virginia](#), 2006) The problem continues to accelerate. The “Student Watch” survey for 2012, released by the National Association of College Stores states that price is now the primary reason students do not purchase a textbook. This is the first year students gave cost as the primary reason for not buying a text. ([National Association of College Stores](#), 2012.) Lack of access to course materials must be a major factor in student success and retention.

“All Textbooks in the Library”

Portland Community College (PCC) is a large, multi-campus institution that in 2010-2011 school year served 57,000 college-credit students, with an full-time-equivalent (FTE) of 6,600 on-site (not distance learning) students. There are three campus libraries, Cascade, Rock Creek and Sylvania and a library service point at the smaller Southeast Center. The Cascade Campus, with about 25% of PCC’s entire enrollment had an on-campus FTE of 1,600, and a for-credit student headcount of 11,085. ([Portland Community College Factbook, 2012](#)). The Southeast Center headcounts and FTE are rolled into a larger ‘Extended Learning Campus’, so specific numbers for that location are not available.

Previous to the project, the library did not purchase textbooks, but faculty could bring in a copy to put on reserve. Some departments were very good at this, others were not. Librarians have long noted students’ frequent requests for course textbooks, and felt their disappointment upon learning they were not available.

Motivated by environmental concerns, the student government (Associated Students of Portland Community College- ASPCC) created “The Green Initiative Fund” to support projects to make the college more sustainable. The library applied for and received a grant from this fund to launch a trial project to put a copy of each required text at the Cascade Campus library. The reasoning was that a textbook has a life of about 3 years, and that if only one student per quarter chose to use the library copy rather than buy a book, the environmental impact of buying one copy would reduce the number of texts printed, shipped and eventually discarded by 12. (Four terms a year for three years.)

The grant, with a \$5000 supplement from the Cascade Campus President was sufficient to cover the costs of purchasing all required course materials (including novels and other material not normally considered a textbook) and the estimated cost of processing these items. The Dean of Instruction at the smaller Southeast Center liked the idea, and purchased all the required materials used at that location with her discretionary funds. Circulation analysis from that program is included in this case study.

To determine the book budget, library staff got a list of required texts from the campus bookstore website (the bookstore was a willing partner in the project), pruned duplicates of texts used in more than one course, and checked

for items already in the library collection. To handle processing of the new materials, an on-call reserves specialist was given 75 additional hours of work. This number proved to be low- 120 hours would have been a better estimate. All books were put on 2 hour reserve and stayed in the library. Consumables and electronic barcodes for online supplemental materials were not purchased. The grant also did not cover distance-learning (online-only) courses. A total of 374 items were purchased under the program.

Budget and Actual Costs

Book purchases: Budget: \$27,000, actual cost \$27,415.

Staff: \$1050 for a temporary clerk to process the extra reserves. When it became obvious this was insufficient, the regular reserves staff upped their efforts. This additional labor amounted to about \$665.

Printing and Public Relations: \$1000. (Less than \$100 was actually used.)

Administrative Hours: The librarian who wrote the grant, the reserves specialist and the head of circulation all contributed some of their work time to the project. These hours were not tracked, but they were not insignificant. The errors that inevitably occurred in launching the project accounted for much of this time.

Problems Encountered in Processing

There were several problems in launching the project. First, a decision was made that since the circulation department handled reserves, they should do the purchasing from the bookstore. Unfortunately, they lacked experience in purchasing, which led to several mistakes. For example, we used the ISBN provided on the bookstore website to identify and purchase the course materials, but were unaware that the ISBN for a bundled package was different than the ISBN for the textbook itself. Bundled packages were opened, the textbooks separated out, and we lost the necessary ISBN link between material and course. This meant a lot of manual tracking and phone calls to line up the right material with the right course.

Our second error was in waiting too long to begin acquisitions. Although items had been arriving in the campus bookstore all summer, it was decided to delay purchasing any materials until 3 weeks before the term began. Our coming into the store to pick up hundreds of titles added to the pre-term pandemonium typical in college bookstores, leading to delays and errors in the bookstore. The late start in purchasing meant that library staff was hurried in processing the items, and lack of communication led to the library purchasing copies of material it already owned. In short, silos between departments contributed to cost overruns and processing delays. We should have named a project manager, and been more open and communicative with everyone involved in the project.

Lastly, the plan was to not purchase texts for distance education classes, but in the rush these books were purchased anyway. This pushed the cost of the materials over the budgeted amount, and for a time purchasing stopped until the library was sure there was sufficient grant money to buy the material. Cumulatively, the result was that many items were not available on the first day of classes, and staff time went over budget. In fact, some books were not placed on reserve until the end of the fourth week of the term.

The staff at the Southeast Center did not have worries about running over budget, and had clear and open communication between the Dean of Instruction and the library staff. As a result, all books for that center were ready at the start of the term.

Publicity, Training, and Unexpected Donations

The phrase “All Textbooks in the Library” was adopted for publicity because it was immediate, clear and powerful. The library website provided more detail, explaining what reserves are (no freshman knows), and stating that workbooks and other consumables were not included. We received no negative feedback from students about the workbooks exclusion. A banner with “All Textbooks at the Library” was hung across the front entrance of the library, and the college website publicized the venture. Faculty members were sent emails reminding them of the project, and bookmark sized information slips were placed around the library. The college publicity department did a nice job attracting the attention of the local media, several of which picked up the story.

Although the media reaction was gratifying, it seems that most students learned about the project from their instructors and library staff. College policy prevents internal spamming by prohibiting staff from emailing all students, so we had to rely on faculty and the student government to promote the project outside of the library. Since some students did say they learned about the project from library staff, the banner may have been effective in prompting students to enter the library and ask “What is this about textbooks?” The grant budget included \$1,000 for a publicist and a publicity budget, but the free publicity generated by the college’s publicity department led to the decision to not hire a publicist. Except for the banner, no publicity money was spent.

There had been some fear that instructors and departments that had been regularly placing items on reserve would stop doing so, but we found the reverse was true. Our regulars continued to bring materials in, and a number of faculty and departments that had never participated were energized by the program and brought in additional copies to place on reserve. Depending on the demand, some of these were put on 2-hour reserve, but others were put on 24-hour checkout status, which allowed the book to leave the library.

Circulation staff members were enthusiastic participants in the project. They were pleased to be able to provide texts to students, and received a lot of “thank yous” from the students. An Excel™ file was created to keep the circulation staff informed on the arrival and availability of the texts. Workbooks and other consumables were listed in red, with a note for the circulation worker to tell the student that we would not be purchasing a copy. Items available electronically in the library collection were colored green with a note to guide the student to that material. Materials on order but not yet received were in yellow. This file was updated and reprinted as necessary to keep the workers up to date.

Our first attempt at student feedback was to hand students a slip of paper when they returned a reserve book. The paper had the URL of an online survey sites, and asked them to login and take the survey. Response was terrible, so after a couple of weeks one of the circulation workers took it upon himself to run off small strips of paper, about 1/8 of a sheet, with two questions: “Tell us how the textbook program at Cascade has benefitted you, with a quick note below.” There was also a place for the students to leave their email for a follow-up survey. These slips were placed at the checkout desk, placed inside the books, and circulation staff, when they had the opportunity, asked the students to fill them out. A box to place these comments was provided at the circulation desk. The response to the paper feedback was immediate and large. We received exactly 100 comment slips, nearly all positive. (The only complaints were about the two-hour checkout, as two students wanted to be able to keep the book for longer.) Students volunteered a variety of reasons why they used the project, including the cost of materials, lack of financial aid, the bookstore selling out, or Internet bookstores delivering late. The weight of carrying the textbooks to campus was also mentioned.

Some examples of comments received:

- “Saved me in the middle of an online exam!”
“I hope PCC continues this new arrangement. Thank you.”
- “This program makes classes available to me I would otherwise not be able to afford.”
“Yes, give us more!”
- “I am happy to be able to get this book on reserve to read and check out for several hours. Thank you. If it wasn’t for you, they would not be available.”

Results

By the time all the material was acquired, the grant project had added 369 volumes to the Cascade Library reserves collection. These items were flagged in the cataloging record by having the phrase “Textbook Grant” inserted in the notes field, and circulation data was taken from the library’s integrated library system.

Checkouts of all 2-hour reserves (grant funded and faculty provided) compared to the fall term the year before increased 35%, from 4470 to 6051. The smaller Southeast Center, which processed its books quickly and had them on the shelf the first day of class saw a rise from 391 to 823 checkouts, an increase of 110%.

The other two campus libraries saw a rise in 2-hour checkouts of 14%. The rise at the non-participating libraries was probably a combination of the increased awareness that reserves exist and the general increase in enrollment. Throughout all the library locations, reserves accounted for 29% of circulation, more than DVDs and recorded music combined.

Location	2 Hr. Reserves Circulation		Percentage Increase
	Fall 2009	Fall 2010	
Cascade Library	4470	6051	35%
SE Center Reserves	391	823	110%

Table One: *Change in 2-Hour Reserves Use*

At the Cascade Library, another use evaluation was done solely of the items purchased through the grant program. The most used item had an astonishing 187 checkouts during the term, and 98 items (26%) checked out 11 or more checkouts. On the other end, a troublesome 37% showed no recorded checkouts at all. The remaining 37% had between one and ten checkouts. Even with the high number of items with no checkouts, the 2 hour reserve collection averaged 8.1 checkouts over the term.

Factors associated with the books used fewer than 11 times.

The high number of items without fewer than 11 checkouts was a concern. A sample of 80 items was taken from the list of items was taken from the list of 280 titles that had 10 or fewer uses. This provided a 99% statistical probability that the sample reflected the less used part of collection as a whole. We found that these 80 titles were used in a total of 149 sections (specific classes.) Only 16 of the 80 were for courses with more than one section, and one of them was a hybrid. There was a strong relationship between having only one section of a course and low textbook reserve use, although this was not universal, as some single-section books had good use figures.

Furthermore, only 71 of those 149 sections (48%) were offered on campus during hours that the library was open. Because the reserve books for the project were all on 2-hour checkouts and could not leave the library, we unintentionally put these books in a status in which they could not be used before or after the class for which they were required. To quote the great philosopher H. J. Simpson, “D’oh!”

I mentioned earlier that we inadvertently purchased several duplicate copies, and that faculty brought in duplicate copies on their own. When circulation staff was asked to pull a reserve, they simply grabbed one off the shelf- not always the one purchased for the program. This led to a lower ‘use per item’ of the materials purchased for the grant project. When we checked to see circulation by title, rather than copy, we found an additional 81 titles actually had more than 11 or more uses in the quarter.

When accounting for duplicates and single-section courses, the program results became vastly different. By counting use by title, instead of copy, and avoiding purchasing texts for single-section courses or courses that met when the library was closed, then the percentage of titles with 11 or more uses in the quarter would have risen to 75%.

Circulation	Number of titles	Percentage
51+	5	2%
41-50	6	3%
31-40	14	6%
21-30	20	9%
11-20	130	56%
0-10	58	25%

Table 2: *Reserves use after including use of duplicates, and eliminating single-section titles.*

These adjustments do not taken into account the uses that would have occurred had the library been able to purchase and process the materials in a timely fashion. As late as Oct 28 (the 5th week of the 11 week term) 30 required texts that were for sale in the bookstore were not yet available in the library.

Long-Term use of the Reserves Collection.

To see if these materials would be used over a longer-term, grant-purchased books were checked for total circulation after 2 years of availability. Except for a few items that had become unavailable, most remained on reserve. During those eight quarters the 483 books added at both Cascade and Southeast Center had 13,852 circulations. Sixteen (3%) were no longer available for various reasons, and the number never used had dropped to 17% (84 items). Even with a fair number of never used items on the shelf, the average use of books in the program was 28.7 over the 8 quarters.

At the Cascade campus, 377 items had 11,965 uses, an average of 31.7 uses over the 2 years. One item had more than 400 checkouts, six between 200 and 299, and thirty between 100 and 199 uses.

EBooks and Photocopying

As this was a project aimed at sustainability, there was concern that students would simply photocopy the texts, offsetting the environmental savings of reusing the texts. In fact, student use of the library photocopiers increased by 9%, exactly the same as the enrollment increase. Anecdotally, students generally reported that they read the texts in the library rather than copying them.

When checking for duplicates, it was discovered that five of the required texts were already present in the library’s EBook collection. These items were not purchased, and instead the instructors were sent an email, asking them to tell their classes that the texts were available online for free in the library.

We checked eBook use of these five titles after the term was over. (These were all single section courses.)

Title	Use July 1-Dec 20
<i>Get Clients Now</i>	26
<i>Life and Times of Frederick Douglass</i>	2
<i>Checking for understanding</i>	173
<i>Teachers guide to working...paraeducators</i>	2
<i>New Jack</i>	81

Table 3: *EBooks viewings of Required Reading.*

The dates for counting EBook use varies a bit from the term, due to how that vendor tracks use. The Douglass title had low use, but several copies are in the library, it is available free online, and it was sold for \$2.00 in the bookstore. I suspect the instructor that used *Teachers guide to working with paraeducators* forgot to tell the class of that book’s availability, because *Checking for understanding*, with 173 uses, was for the same course!

This isn’t a representative study on eBook reserves of required material, but it gives an intriguing possibility that electronic textbooks would be popular if they could be accessed for free from the library. This study was done before the library’s eBooks could be downloaded to portable readers, so these numbers might be even higher today. The strong use of these eBooks also implies that single-section courses might be best served with electronic copies.

Projected Costs to Continue the Project

Had the program been continued, the expense would have fallen considerably. For the Winter Term of 2012, the cost of the required texts not already in the Cascade Library collection was \$7,150. Adding 25% for labor, (\$1787.50) the project could have been continued at Cascade for less than \$9000, 25% of the cost to launch the project.

The initial investment needed to continue and expand the program over all campuses would have been about \$100,000. There would have been a fair amount of duplication of texts on each campus because core courses are taught at all locations. Using the same 25% figure for ongoing costs, and a \$5,000 fudge factor, the cost of continuing the program would have been about \$30,000 a term afterwards, for an annual ongoing expense of around \$100,000. The general fund of the college for the biennium 2009-2011 was \$324,000,000, so over 2 years, the cost of continuing the program would have been .0006% of the general fund. ([Portland Community College Budget](#)).

North Carolina State University Library started its “All Textbooks in the Library” program in 2008. This program is funded from the library’s materials budget. NCSU Library, a much bigger institution than PCC, initially purchased about 4,000 titles, and it saw a 240% increase in reserves circulation. The use of the NCSU reserves collection has risen every year, and ongoing costs at NCSU dropped considerably after the initial purchase. ([Raschke, 2010](#).) It would be interesting to see if the NCSU program has led to any changes in student success or retention.

Discussion and Lessons Learned

One error we made in this project was in not defining what success would look like. While the project demonstrated that there was considerable demand for textbooks on reserve, this study did prove or disprove the idea that this textbook reserve program had an environmental impact. It is doubtful that it reached the environmental impact of saving 12 books for every one purchased. Without defining some specific result as a success, the ‘saving 12’ number became a sort of default standard of success. Had the project been aimed at increasing access to reserves, or increasing circulation, it possibly would have been called a success. Since the goal of this project was sustainability, we should have added a checkbox to the comment slips to see if the student chose not to buy a copy because of the availability of the library reserves.

A variation of this program at Mount Hood Community College probably has had a positive environmental impact, and still saved their students money. At Mount Hood, the faculty of several departments committed to using the same textbook for five core courses for at least three years. The student government supplied the library with enough money to purchase a set of 30 copies for the five different subjects, which were then allowed to be checked out for the entire quarter. Each term all copies of the textbooks were checked out the first day of the term, so the library eventually switched to 7 day loans in order to increase availability. This program, launched in 2007, continues today, so over 5 years it has probably had a positive environmental impact. (Mount Hood, 2012)

The PCC program does support the notion that there is considerable demand for required course materials on reserve. The student government (ASPCC) was supportive of continuing the program, and after library administration decided not to apply for another grant, the student government considered funding the program on all campuses themselves. A complicated funding snafu led to the money ASPCC was going to use for the project becoming unavailable. However, two of our graduates are now developing a similar program at our sister institution, Portland State University.

Other errors were not acquiring the textbooks as soon as they began arriving, and having the Circulation department purchase these materials. Had the library staff had the time to acquire and process the reserves in a timely fashion, they would have had all the materials on the shelf at the start of the term, when the textbook need was especially high because financial aid had not been released. The efficient processing at the SE Center led to a 110% rise in reserves circulation.

The problem of the unused reserves is a complicated one. At Portland Community College, many of them were associated with courses that were of only one section, or courses that were offered when the library was closed. One option, which would save money, would be to not purchase these texts. However, that would lead to a lessening of the “All Textbooks are in the Library” message, and could be seen as unfair. (I suppose you could call it “Textbooks in the Library”, and explain that single-section texts are not included.) Another option would be to change the lending period of the texts that were associated with these courses to 24 hours or even a week. That might have led to higher use, and retained the power of the “All Textbooks in the Library” slogan.

While North Carolina State University Library’s program has been a success and has seen growth. Two smaller-scale programs, with limited materials on reserve have been alternately labeled a success and a failure. ([Middlemas, 2012](#); [Laskowski, 2007](#).) I suspect the bold sweep of an “All Textbooks” program may be part of the difference, and

libraries might consider some textbooks being purchased but not used the opportunity cost for the program as a whole.

Libraries that want to investigate textbook reserves as a sustainability issue should make sure to record in some manner if students chose not to purchase textbooks because of their program. Likewise, libraries that wish to increase circulation, fear irrelevance, or are committed to playing an active role in student success and retention should consider making a pitch to their institutions for increased funding in order to provide a broad textbook reserve service.

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