Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

A Syllabus Review Model for Proactive Ebook Textbook Provisioning

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Setting

This article describes how a university library implemented an innovative model for provisioning unlimited-user ebook versions of assigned textbooks. The model tasks library personnel with proactively reviewing subject departments' course syllabi near the start of each term in order to identify textbooks available for the library to purchase as unlimited-user ebooks.

Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) is a regional comprehensive university located on the northwest side of Chicago. NEIU is primarily a commuter school, and its student body is predominantly working-class consisting of high percentages of first-generation college students and Pell Grant recipients. Yet NEIU has struggled to retain this student population. NEIU's full-time equivalent enrollment has ranged from approximately 10,000 one decade ago to approximately 5,000 during more recent year—enrollment

decline of roughly 50%. In this context, campus administration identified student enrollment and retention as strategic priorities and asked the NEIU Libraries (hereafter "the Library") to address high textbook costs as one barrier hindering student enrollment and retention.

Problem

For decades, the Library's circulation desk has maintained a print reserve collection consisting of assigned or required course texts (hereafter "textbooks"). These textbooks are available for students to borrow for limited periods of time, typically two hours. Whether or not a given textbook is placed within the print reserve collection depends entirely on the initiative of the subject faculty member assigning the textbook; in this sense, the Library's model for print textbook provisioning could be described as "responsive" as opposed to proactive. In some cases, a faculty member donates or loans their personal copy of a textbook to the Library's reserve collection, and in other cases, the faculty member requests that the Library move an already-owned book from the regularly circulating collection to the reserve collection. In the remainder of cases, a faculty member submits a textbook purchase request form to their subject librarian or to a Library circulation desk staff member and the Library purchases the textbook and places it in the reserve collection. The textbook purchase request form originated as a print form decades ago but was migrated to Google Forms.

Recently, the Library changed this Google Form to permit faculty members to request that the library purchase an electronic (ebook) version of a textbook. While promising, this option has proven problematic. Textbooks requested by faculty members in ebook format are typically either unavailable for the Library to purchase or are only available on a license model permitting one or three simultaneous users, rendering them generally unable to serve an entire class of students. Meanwhile, librarians have strongly suspected that at least some of the textbooks assigned on campus *are* in fact available for the Library to purchase on a license model permitting unlimited simultaneous users. Yet our "responsive" model of provisioning ebook versions of textbooks has depended on the Library receiving a purchase request from a faculty member; only a small percentage of faculty members submit such requests, and, as noted, an even smaller percentage of these requests can be satisfied in ebook format for unlimited simultaneous users.

Evidence

Considering the relatively low circulation of the Library's print textbook collection (alongside the low circulation of the print monographs purchased by subject librarian selectors), the Library believed that shifting to a more proactive approach of provisioning electronic textbooks could result in higher circulation, a better return on investment, and ultimately, greater value delivered to students. As suggested in ACRL's *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*, the Library identified course syllabi as a site of investigation (Oakleaf, 2010). During the Fall semester of 2024, the Library partnered with the History, Art, Music, and Computer Science departments to receive access to their current-term syllabi. The Library was also approached by a professor in the Political Science department who requested, and was granted, the inclusion of his syllabi in the program. The Library received blanket approval from the chairs of these departments to collect and review their syllabi in order to identify and, when possible, provision textbooks as ebooks permitting unlimited simultaneous users.

Implementation

Launched in the Fall 2024 semester, this project drew upon the efforts of Library faculty and staff across a number of functional areas. The Library's social sciences librarian served as project coordinator and also reviewed syllabi for History, one of his subject departments. The Library's technical services coordinator established workflows for syllabus reviewers to submit ebook purchase requests to technical services staff, and for technical services staff to execute ebook purchase orders; she also reviewed Fall 2024 syllabi for Art and Music, two of her subject areas. The Library's continuing resources librarian reviewed the Fall 2024 syllabi for Computer Science, one of his subject departments. The Library's assessment coordinator was tasked with assessing the program, collecting, and analyzing all project data.

The Library project team organized all project-related course syllabi in a Google Drive folder. Project team members then created a division of labor to review each syllabus. When a textbook was identified, the reviewer would first search NEIU's library catalog to determine if the Library already owned or licensed an ebook version of it on the unlimited-user model (typically provided via subscription packages already acquired by the library). If the textbook was already accessible as an unlimited-user ebook via the Library catalog, the reviewer would email the instructor of the course whose syllabus was being reviewed, sending a permalink for access to the ebook that the instructor could then share with their students. If the textbook was not currently accessible via the Library catalog as an unlimited-user ebook, the reviewer would search the Library's book purchasing platform, EBSCO's GOBI (Global Online Bibliographic Information), to see if an ebook version of the textbook was available for purchase on the unlimited-user model. If it was, the reviewer would submit a purchase request form to a member of Library acquisitions staff, who would make the purchase; the reviewer would also email the instructor to inform them that they could expect an access link shortly and to encourage them to share this information with their students. Once access to the purchased unlimited-user ebook version of the textbook had been activated, the reviewer would email the instructor again, this time providing the permalink to the text that the instructor could provide directly to their students. Throughout this process, the project team tracked the syllabi that they reviewed, logging the course numbers, instructors, number of textbooks assigned per course, and number of textbooks provisioned per course.

Outcome

During the Fall semester of 2024, the project team reviewed over 100 syllabi and provisioned 27 textbooks as unlimited-user ebooks. Of these 27 unlimited-user ebook textbooks, six were already owned or licensed by the library, unbeknownst to the instructor who assigned them; the remaining 21 were purchased by the Library. By subject department, 21 of the provisioned ebooks were assigned in History courses, two were assigned in Political Science courses, and four were assigned in Music courses. Unfortunately, none of the textbooks assigned in Art or Computer Science courses were able to be provisioned as unlimited-user ebooks.

Circulation of the 27 ebooks provisioned as a result of this project greatly outperformed that of other Library collections during the Fall 2024 semester. Per COUNTER TR_B1 reporting, these 27 project ebooks were accessed 1,134 times across 263 unique title requests. By comparison, the 472 print books in the Library's print textbook collection generated a total circulation of 200 during Fall 2024. Similarly, the 127 print books selected by subject librarians for purchase throughout Fall 2024 circulated a total of 11 times during that same semester. All told, the titles provisioned for the project for Fall 2024 amounted to a total cost of $2,400.39 (at the average price of $150.02 per ebook license). This amounted to a cost of $9.13 per unique title request for the semester.

The majority of these textbooks are assigned in courses that are offered each year, and some are even assigned in courses that are offered each semester. For example, the single most accessed ebook provisioned by this project, *Knowledge and Power: Science in World History*, alone accounted for 543 uses across 118 unique title requests; this textbook was assigned in History 114, a course which is offered each term in multiple sections, with this same textbook assigned to each new semester's class of students.

Reflection

The project team analyzed the number of ebooks provisioned by subject department in relation to the number of syllabi reviewed by subject department during the Fall 2024 semester. On this basis, the project team decided to discontinue syllabus review for the Computer Science department, for which no ebooks were able to be provisioned. Additionally, the team decided to limit syllabus review for the Art and Music departments to courses pertaining to history and theory, as the reviewer of these departments' syllabi deemed only these types of courses to be likely to assign textbooks that the Library would be able to provision as unlimited-user ebooks. The project team made these decisions in the interest of establishing reasonable limits on the time spent on syllabus review during Spring 2025. At the same time, the Library added the syllabi of the English and Political Science departments to this project for Spring 2025, in the hope that one or both of these departments will prove similar in profile to History in terms of the relatively high proportion of ebooks that can be provisioned by the Library per syllabus reviewed.

Usage data gathered at the time of this writing—while incomplete for the Spring 2025 semester because the Standardized Usage Statistics Harvesting Initiative (SUSHI) data has not yet been provided for May 2025—indicates that the 32 ebooks provisioned for the Spring 2025 term have already been accessed three times as frequently as the 27 Fall 2024 ebooks: a total of 3,314 times across 430 unique title requests. Additionally, the 27 ebooks provisioned for Fall 2024 have been accessed an additional 329 times during the Spring 2025 semester. These results are highly encouraging.

Overall, this project was well-received and performed beyond our expectations, with all involved in agreement that the project was worth the time and effort. Data from this project have been relatively easy to gather and to communicate to library and university administrations. This project also strengthened relationships between the Library and participating subject departments; numerous department chairs and instructors expressed gratitude for this project and an eagerness to continue it beyond the spring of 2025. The possibility of automating the process of syllabus review may open further opportunities to increase the scale of this project.

The model for this project can be deployed by other university libraries. It may be particularly attractive to libraries serving universities attempting to retain low-income students. It may also be attractive to university libraries attempting to make the most of limited acquisitions budgets. More generally, this project provides a relatively straightforward model for any university library seeking to capture empirical data—in this case, "e-textbook" usage data—and utilize it to demonstrate the library's contribution to university goals. Regardless of their motivation(s), libraries are advised to begin by investigating a pilot/trial version of this model with their university's history department. When this model was implemented at the NEIU Libraries with a variety of subject departments, the project team was most frequently able to provision texts for the history department as compared to other departments, and the texts provisioned for the history department were used more than those provisioned for other departments.

Author Contributions

Max Hosford: Writing – original draft (lead), Writing – review and editing (lead), Data curation, Formal analysis **Edward Remus:** Writing – original draft (supporting), Writing – review and editing (supporting), Project administration

References

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