

The Intersection of Scholarly Communication and Acquisitions: Required Course Materials as E-book Purchases

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Abstract

Librarians at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) developed a pilot project to obtain course material data and purchase multi-user e-books for classes. This is a practice that peer libraries like Illinois State University and Virginia Commonwealth University have utilized to further course material affordability. These proceedings provide a high-level overview of how the project was implemented, with specific details about the workflow that other libraries can adapt to their context, including identifying partners, getting funding, securing and cleaning data, comparing this data to existing holdings and licenses, purchasing content, and outreach to professors. The paper also provides ideas for scaling IUB's program down so that libraries of all sizes can create a program that is appropriate for their context. It concludes with the strengths of this model as well as the considerations that libraries should consider before creating similar programs.

Keywords: e-book acquisition, course material affordability, open educational resources, curriculum

Textbook Costs and Higher Education

The high cost of course materials and its impact on students is well documented.¹ Most recently, a survey of over 4,000 students from a variety of institution types in Illinois confirmed that course material costs continue to negatively impact students' grades and course loads.² The survey found that 41 percent of students are taking fewer courses because of course material costs, which impacts institutions' goals for student progression through their degrees. Interestingly, the Education Data Initiative notes that even as textbook costs increase an average of 6 percent each year, student spending on course materials has declined by as much as 48 percent over a term of ten years.³ This signals that students are not purchasing assigned texts, are pirating them, or are engaged in other cost-sharing solutions.

Initiatives to reduce the cost of course materials are not new—both libraries and institutions of higher education have been developing solutions to this problem for a long time. An established example includes course reserves programs, where libraries purchase physical copies of required materials and keep them on “reserve” for the term, allowing students to use them with more strict borrowing procedures (usually within the library for a very limited amount of time). Libraries have also invested in Open Educational Resource (OER) initiatives in the past decade, many of which encourage instructors to move from commercial textbooks toward free, customizable alternatives. At an institutional level, course material affordability efforts include textbook voucher programs, where a unit subsidizes or purchases textbooks for students that are Pell Grant recipients or meet some other need-based threshold. Institutions have also invested in inclusive access programs, in which bookstores negotiate directly with publishers to secure discounted rates to electronic textbooks for courses in which faculty have opted in to the program. The implications of inclusive access models, and now equitable access models which scale across all credit bearing courses, are problematic and well-documented.⁴

The e-book purchasing program described here is best thought of as one component of a larger set of programs aimed at reducing

course material costs at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB). IUB has an established inclusive access program, course reserve services, and an OER fellowship program. Creating the e-book purchasing program was intended to give the Indiana University (IU) Libraries another mechanism for responding to high course material costs.

While academic libraries have been concerned about course material costs for some time, there has been reluctance to purchase textbooks systematically or formally as part of collection development efforts. There are several reasons for this, including continuous change (new instructors, new editions), dwindling budgets, and limited physical space for storage.

However, a number of institutions have pushed back on this trend by creating programs that intentionally and explicitly purchase required course materials. These include Illinois State University (ISU), Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), Florida State University (FSU), and even academic library consortiums like the Louisiana Library Network (LOUIS) and Virginia's academic library consortium, Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA).⁵ These programs point to student success metrics, enhanced collections, and alignment with new curriculum as reasons for pursuing e-book acquisition programs focused on course materials. Some also argue that e-book acquisition programs complement libraries' OER efforts because these are course materials that often do not have an OER equivalent; Pittley-Sousa notes that doing both concurrently gives faculty "more choices than an OER program alone."⁶ In other words, high-quality OER do not exist for every course or required texts will be in copyright for a long time, making library acquisition one of the only options for increasing affordability.

IU Libraries Course Materials Purchasing Pilot Program

The primary objective of the pilot program was to find systematic pathways to financial savings for students. While other local OER projects focused on in-depth work with a small number of instructors, this pilot

had the potential for much larger savings across a significant number of classes. Another benefit is that the program does not require any changes to current instructor methods for choosing textbooks, while still introducing them to the library's efforts to promote textbook affordability. The team expects that this new program will help to increase awareness of all of the IU Libraries related student affordability work.

The pilot project was scoped based on a number of factors. IU Libraries was able to commit \$15,000 from donor funds to the program per semester, which limited the number of textbooks we were able to purchase for the program. Through an agreement with IU Bookstore, the Libraries obtained campus-wide required book lists, which further limited titles included in the project as not all instructors submitted their course textbook requirements to the bookstore. Finally, the project purchases primarily focused on e-books available for perpetual use, with unlimited simultaneous users, and without Digital Rights Management (DRM).

Upon conception of the original pilot, the first and primary need was to secure funding. The team worked with IU Libraries Development to find donor funding and ultimately funding for the original Fall 2023 pilot project and the follow-up Spring 2024 effort came from library donor funds intended to decrease student spending on course materials. Future iterations of the program will come from collection funds devoted to the program.

At the same time, the organizers explored various methods to obtain lists of required course materials. The best source of data on campus is the local Follett bookstore which collects instructor submitted course materials each semester. The pilot team contacted the bookstore directly to request copies of textbook lists. The request was not immediately granted, however, and local bookstore management voiced concerns about sharing their data. Eventually, the pilot team was able to work with both the bookstore and the IU Purchasing representative who manages the university's contract with the bookstore. The purchasing office liaison was able to intercede on behalf

of the library and a group meeting surfaced the bookstore's primary concerns—that their data would end up in the hands of those who might post it publicly or that it would make its way to Amazon lists. The library's team was able to assuage this particular concern with assurances that the data would only be accessed by a limited number of library staff. The team also explained more details about the proposed usage, focusing in particular on the lack of course materials available for library licensing, and that purchases would inevitably focus more substantially on lower-cost materials in the humanities and social sciences, rather than, for example, high-cost science textbooks. The libraries also emphasized to the purchasing liaison that course text data ultimately belongs to the university, regardless of the fact that IU has given the bookstore permission to collect that data.

With the critical data in hand, the pilot team was able to begin the actual process. The data from the bookstore was the key piece of information that the pilot team needed to carry out their process. Upon receipt, the pilot team cleaned the bookstore data, then added instructor information and enrollment data. During the fall semester, this data was added manually, while in the spring semester, the team was able to automate this process with reports from the university's data warehouse. Textbook cost was also added manually during each pilot phase.

The next step in the process was to check for existing holdings that met the desired criteria. During the first semester of the pilot, the team manually searched the library's online catalog to determine if required textbooks were already held in an electronic format with acceptable license terms. In the spring, the team obtained a report of e-book holdings from their Electronic Resource Management (ERM) system and used Microsoft Access to compare the ISBNs on the required textbook list with those listed in the ERM system output. However, determining the DRM associated with each title was a challenge, as the online catalog, ERM system report, and many vendor websites did not provide this data.

In the first iteration of the pilot, the team conducted bulk searches of ISBNs in GOBI to determine availability. In the spring, however, it became apparent that the ISBN search was not turning up all available e-books with that title and the team conducted manual searches, which they expect to continue. In some cases, for example, an alternate edition or publishing may be functional in place of the requested text, while in others, this would likely be undesirable, such as in the case of different translations, or an updated edition. As titles were found with appropriate license terms, the team added these to a GOBI folder for handoff to the library's acquisitions team for final purchase.

Once purchases were finalized and e-book copies available for use, the acquisition team sent URLs in advance of addition of the title to the library's catalog so that the project team could contact instructors as quickly as possible. The speed of URL availability varies significantly by publisher, with some URLs available within an hour or so of purchase, and others within a few days. With URLs in hand, the team was able to contact instructors via e-mail with a direct link to their text.

Pilot Results

As shown in Table 1, the pilot resulted in significant savings for students with only a fraction of that spent by the libraries. This savings, as well as the number of students impacted, also does not account for reuse of these resources. Instructors do not typically replace textbooks annually, so the savings over time will increase. Finally, the discipline breakdown aligned with the team's expectations: STEM courses, which are more likely to use texts that are not licensable by libraries, were less impacted. On the other hand, the savings spread relatively evenly across the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

After two semesters of this pilot project, it became apparent that one primary factor for success is the timing of receipt of the original bookstore data. In the first semester, the team did not receive this data until two weeks before the first day of classes. This limited the ability of the pilot team to research holdings thoroughly before proceeding

Table 1. Pilot Results

	Fall 2023		Spring 2024		TOTALS
Total amount spent	\$13,689.61		\$14,430.04		\$28,119.65
Total savings for students	\$166,763.45		\$71,028.45		\$237,791.90
Total students impacted	2,893		1,179		4,072
Total classes impacted	58		33		91
Course level					
Undergraduate	59	70%	24	73%	
Graduate	25	30%	9	27%	
Departments/units impacted	37		15		
Books purchased/upgraded	78		38		116
Arts & Humanities	35	45%	17	45%	
Social Sciences	33	42%	21	55%	
STEM	10	13%	1	3%	

with purchases. In addition, it was difficult to take time to prioritize the purchases according to desired goals, such as enrollment. In order to avoid a similar situation in the spring, the team contacted the bookstore much further in advance of the start of spring courses and ended up receiving the data a full eight weeks before the start of classes. Although this gave the team far more time to clean data and prioritize purchases, there were only about one-fifth of the listings compared to fall semester. Essentially, many instructors had not yet submitted their textbook requests. Going forward, the goal will be to receive the data about four weeks in advance of the start of classes to attempt to balance timing of instructor submissions with the time needed to fully process the data. Unfortunately, the team cannot know for sure when the data will become available from the bookstore. In addition, the textbook form for instructors is voluntary, meaning that some instructors may never complete the form, and others may wait until closer to the start of term, after the team has already received the dataset. To combat this issue, the team has promoted early submission of the textbook form in all associated outreach.

Working with the data itself also brought a number of issues. First, the data as received is not immediately usable; it requires cleanup, as well as the addition of data from multiple other sources before it is complete for purposes of this project. Those additional sources also

require data cleanup; for example, course data reports are valuable, but require additional work to incorporate into the bookstore data set. In round two of the pilot, the team was able to add in new automated steps to check existing e-book holdings by incorporating additional data sources.

Understanding and accessing e-book licensing terms remains one of the most complex components of the workflow, as holdings data from the ERM system does not contain license terms. In the spring pilot, the team was able to obtain license terms from holdings data for titles purchased in EBSCOhost and Ebook Central, however all other e-books continue to require manual checking. This research involves looking at the item on the provider's website; consulting purchase notes on records in the ERM system; or consulting an internal LibGuide, developed by the library's e-resources team, that lists providers and databases where purchases are perpetually licensed or DRM-free.

Finally, this process incorporates entirely new work into the Scholarly Communication Department that is traditionally performed in other parts of the libraries—collection management work and acquisitions work. The team benefitted from the expertise of team members who had previously worked in both of these areas. The pilot would not have been as successful, and would have taken further iterations to reach the level of automation achieved, without this expertise.

Potential Variations of IU's Program

While other institutions might be interested in creating similar programs, we recognize that not every library has the financial resources or staff time to acquire e-books in the way we have described. First, it is important to note that purchasing is not a requirement for creating a useful course material e-book program. Libraries without funding can work to increase student awareness of current holdings by comparing a required course material spreadsheet from their bookstore

with their current holdings and then doing outreach to make sure that students are aware of what the library owns electronically. Outreach might include e-mailing instructors to inform students that the library owns an e-book version or even working with the bookstore to ensure that required course material listings within their system tell students that the library owns the material.

For libraries that have funding to purchase materials but are contending with limited staff time, searching and purchasing less systematically is a good first step. One way of doing this is by engaging with one department or division at a time. For example, you might create a pilot program that purchases materials for three social science departments. This program would engage subject librarians (or administrative assistants or faculty themselves) to collect required course materials instructor-by-instructor and then purchase the materials that are available under the license parameters outlined. This would give the library a general idea of the process and workload before scaling the program to an entire division or campus.

Other libraries utilize a form for faculty to request purchase of course materials as e-books, which is also piecemeal but a good way to gauge interest and refine the workflow.⁷ For libraries that already have physical reserves, this is a great place to start as you already have a list of curriculum needs on your campus. Reviewing the list of physical reserves to purchase e-book versions of the texts can be a great way to increase access to required course materials.

For libraries interested in going beyond IU's program, there are several aspirational examples in the literature. Libraries that have established course material acquisition programs often create discovery portals for faculty and/or students to search for e-book titles for purchase or use. Florida State University's portal is one example of what Mitchell Scott calls "downstream" acquisition as it allows faculty and students to search for their course and determine if the library owns their course materials after the material has already been purchased.⁸ The Louisiana Library Network portal is an example of what Scott calls "upstream" acquisition as they enable faculty to search for

what the library *could* buy. The LOUIS acquisition portal is a GOBI acquisitions database pre-filtered for DRM-free titles. Faculty locate a title, select it, and then a purchase request is sent to the appropriate library/person.⁹ Discovery portals take IU's program a step further by making purchased course materials more discoverable or even involving faculty in the selection process.

Strengths and Considerations of This Model

There are many strengths of this model. IU's program saved students money and increased day one access to course materials. Research from Illinois State University finds that programs like IU's also generally improve the library's collection. Rachel E. Scott and colleagues found that titles they purchased as part of a similar e-book acquisition program were used four times as much as titles that were not connected to a class.¹⁰ Additionally, once a title was purchased, over 40 percent showed up again in the required course material list within the next four semesters; in other words, purchasing these titles is an initial investment that will reap benefits for multiple semesters. Finally, Scott found that course materials purchased as part of ISU's program were about twice as likely to be designated as an Outstanding Academic Text in Resources for College Libraries, signaling that they are high-quality additions to the collection. Perhaps most importantly, IU's program engaged faculty in a variety of disciplines. We contacted seventy-two instructors to let them know that their materials had been purchased and twenty-eight responded (39 percent response rate), even though a response was not requested. These were generally instructors thanking us for purchasing their material, but these could be useful initial connections for demonstrating that the library is a partner in reducing course material costs.

At the same time, it is important to note the limitations of IU's program. E-books are not ideal for some disciplines where a visual or

tactile component is important. E-books with our license stipulations are also not available in all disciplines, which means that these kinds of programs will often favor certain departments. Some faculty might not understand why we can license certain e-books and not others, which may require libraries to educate faculty on publisher license stipulations and why they limit library licenses.

Another critique of this model is that unlike OER work, it invests in the traditional publishing system and fails to ask faculty to change the way that they think about their intellectual property or engage with the publishing industry. In other words, the library makes the process invisible to faculty and they simply get notified that their existing course materials are now free to students. We acknowledge these critiques while also noting that our students need us to act now. Librarians concerned with educating faculty about textbook affordability might consider encouraging them to select titles published by university presses, as they are generally easier for the library to license with unlimited users. An audience member at the NASIG presentation also noted that this kind of model must make the cost of the labor performed by library staff visible in order to be sustainable. Faculty should see programs like IU's as an intentional investment that the library has made, which requires staff time and expertise.

Contributor Notes

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Notes

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