



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## NEEDY STUDENTS NEED TEXTBOOKS: A CAMPUS LIBRARY RESPONDS

Textbooks are expensive. New textbooks costing less than \$75 are the exceptions; most cost more. For many community college students, these costs are burdens that they struggle to handle as well as they can. For others, they cannot handle them at all.

In years past, the College had an informal safety net for these students, where the campus president would pay for the textbooks for a student plainly unable to buy his or her own. The program worked well, but only for those students whose needs drove them to complain to a powerful administrator. Such students, we must admit, are a small subset of a larger population of students who are less likely to take that proactive step and whose monthly budgets are stretched to the breaking point.

Their schedules are often stretched as tight as their budgets, so relying on borrowing a friend's textbook, or using a library-use-only copy from the reserve desk, will not always work. These practices are vulnerable to the slightest change in the student's ability to maintain a hectic schedule. Caring for a sick child or coping with a schedule change at work can limit, and even prevent, students' access to borrowed books and negatively affect their chances for academic success. They need textbooks of their own to complete courses with good grades.

Administrators and faculty have known about these conditions for a long time. Effective responses to them imply long-term access to thousands of dollars a year and maybe a restructuring of the policies by which faculty adopt textbooks. This problem promises to be with us for some time.

In 2010, the vice president of learning suggested that I, as library director, adopt a program to buy textbooks out of the library's book budget and lend them to needy students for an entire semester. The program represented an important shift from our past practice, when the cost and staff time involved in maintaining a collection of current textbooks were enough to stop any

further thinking about the matter. After all, the lynchpin of the library's mission statement is to provide its users with access to information. Books are still important enough parts of this process that any initiative to put them in front of eager and motivated readers is vital instructional support. When we add the project's obvious humanitarian aspect, we have the promise of a program that will make an important contribution to student success.

By the end of the first year of the program's operation, I wanted to have some idea of its long-term viability and weigh its obvious benefits against the problems that would only be apparent once I started work. The program is simple enough and can be administered by one person, with the understanding that during peak use—the two- to three-week period at the beginning of the fall semester—this person will be busy, indeed. In fact, nearly half of the program's spending for the entire 2010-2011 year took place during this short time. The program saw a high level of use during the same period at the start of fall 2011, as well. During each period, the textbook loan program served about 50 students.

Needy students tell faculty or staff in the financial aid office. They, in turn, refer students to me, the program's administrator in the library. If they think they have identified a student who may qualify, they are to email me a short statement of the student's financial need or condition and a list of the textbooks needed. I check the list for books that are already in the library catalog and available for long-term checkout, and I lend those. If the library does not own the books, I buy them from the campus bookstore, enter them into the library's reserve collection, and lend them to the students. I adjust the due date for a date comfortably after the last exam day, so that the student may keep the books for study during finals.

During the first year of service, the library spent nearly \$22K on textbooks for the program, or about 25% of the total book budget. The program represents a substantial expense, but all of these books are used with grateful enthusiasm by every student who checks them out, so we have high return on the money we spend.



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Textbook loans, arguably, contribute to better grades, make the difference between student success or failure in coursework, and contribute to student retention and persistence.

Textbook loans also generate goodwill. One student benefiting from the program told me that she felt honored that someone cared enough about her success to lend her the books she needed. Another told me that he was eager to succeed, so that one day he would be able to help someone the way the school was helping him now. Naturally, students telling their friends about their experience with the program is a good recruiting strategy.

While many bookstores offer students a price break for e-textbooks, used books, or rental books, these solutions have the drawback of costing students money before they can begin to save it. Applicants to this program are too financially challenged to take advantage of these offers.

Some challenges affect program operation. I have no reliable way of weeding out applicants who are not in real financial need. Well-meaning observers on campus have suggested that I limit the program to financial aid awardees, but some students in convincing need are not eligible for financial aid, for a variety of reasons.

Course software that is bundled with an assigned text is another challenge. This software allows the student access to online tools that the instructor considers important to success. The software's access code is designed to be used only for a specific period and cannot be used by another student after the first has finished the course. For some courses, access to these online tools is required. In this case, the library is forced to choose between buying a bundled textbook at a much greater cost than an unbundled one, or lending the student the textbook, without the necessary bundled software (buying single-use software is arguably outside the library's mandate to provide books to its patrons). Ironically, this latter option puts the student back into the very situation that the library's textbook loan program was designed to relieve in the first place. It is too soon to evaluate the impact on the program when a textbook gets revised to a newer edition, besides saying that if this happens with more than one popular textbook a year, it will result in my buying fewer books to stay within budget. Over the life of a particular edition, the library may accumulate a half-dozen or so copies of the same title. As long as that edition remains in print, the library can lend those copies and save the expense of buying new ones. When the same title is issued in a new edition, however, older copies become useless for anything more than information-only circulating copies; and the library is saddled with the expense of replacing them with the

newer edition for long-term checkout. At this point, it seems likely that this situation will not go away as long as copyright holders can boost a title's flagging sales by issuing a changed version in a new edition.

It would not be accurate to say that the program's success hinges on the number of books we buy, as lending any textbooks at all could conceivably look like a successful outcome. It would certainly seem so to the students borrowing the books. I cannot say that success depends directly on the number of people served, either, because I have no way of knowing what proportion of needy students the program is reaching. These conditions can work to the program administrator's advantage, though, as even a small library with between only five and ten thousand dollars to devote to this program, and a librarian willing to accept the extra workload, can make it successful. For a small program, the challenge for the program administrator will be not disappointing the many students who apply after its allotted money has been spent for the semester.

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