Free Via Library (FVL) Etextbooks: Enhancing Affordable Learning by Involving an Academic Library in the Textbook Selection Process

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an etextbook initiative which an academic library adopted to support affordable learning. After providing an overview of how textbook costs affect university students, the paper details the library's etextbook initiative and how the library works both proactively (before/during the course design phase) and reactively (after textbook selection) to identify library etextbooks which courses can use in place of student purchased textbooks. The paper then reviews data demonstrating the use of library etextbooks in courses and the cost savings to students resulting from replacing student purchased textbooks with library etextbooks. The paper concludes by discussing problems and issues the library has encountered using library ebooks as textbooks.

KEYWORDS

Library ebooks, library ebooks, affordable learning, academic libraries

Introduction

Because "access to affordable textbooks is an important component of student learning" (Cannon & Brickman, 2015, p. 38), identifying library etextbooks that students can use in their courses is "a major trend" among academic libraries (Comeaux et al., 2019, p. 138). Franklin University, located in Columbus, Ohio encourages faculty and course designers to use library etextbooks in place of student purchased textbooks where possible. The university has done this by involving the library in the university's textbook selection process both at the beginning, when courses are being developed, and at the end, after a textbook has been selected.

Since the Franklin University Library's etextbook initiative began in Fall, 2018, 1,505 courses at the university have run using at least one library etextbook. Library etextbooks have replaced 42,266 student textbook purchases, saving students and estimated $3,381,280. This paper explains how Franklin University involves the library in the textbook selection process and how the Franklin University Library's etextbook initiative works.

The Effect of High Textbook Costs on University Students

Students have repeatedly indicated that "the rapidly growing price of textbooks impacts them significantly" (Murphy & Shelley, 2020, p. 232). High textbook prices create "a significant barrier to college enrollment" (Senack & Donoghue, 2016, p. 8), and constitute a "threat to affordability and accessibility of higher education in the United States" (Senack, 2014, p. 6). Students are so concerned with the cost of textbooks that "more students (55%) worry about textbook costs than worry about the cost of tuition (50%)" (Nebraska Book Company, Inc., 2014).

When designing courses, faculty and course designers choose textbooks to help students learn. Textbook costs impact student learning because "students are not purchasing required reading materials, even though they realize they need them in order to be successful in their classes" (Eighmy-Brown et al., 2017, p. 111). According to a fall 2020 survey of college students at more than 82 universities, "65 percent of students surveyed" did not buy a textbook even though they worried that not having the textbook may hurt their grades. (Nagle & Vitez, 2021, p. 8).

Concern about textbook prices also affects student decisions to enroll in, or stay enrolled in, courses. According to a 2012 Florida study, "[t]he cost of textbooks caused thirty-one percent of respondents to decline registering for a course, thirty-five percent of respondents to register for fewer classes, fourteen percent of respondents to drop a course, and ten percent of respondents to withdraw from a course" (Gallant, 2015, p.1).

High textbook prices "pose an educational burden for the overwhelming majority of respondents, yet several of those barriers were found to be even more significant for racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students, and/or first-generation college students" (Jenkins et al., 2020, p. 4). The cost of textbooks "exacerbates the effect of income inequality

within the student body—making it harder for those with limited means to succeed, and even stay in school" (Werner, 2014, p. 760). It also harms those who do stay in school because "[s]tudents with financial difficulties may choose to forgo the purchase of textbooks due to the high financial burden, particularly since textbooks are optional but tuition fees are not" (Hilton III, et al., 2014, p. 68).

Identifying and Acquiring Library Etextbooks

As part of Franklin University's goal to provide affordable or free course resources to students (Bennett, 2017), the Franklin University Library implemented a library etextbook initiative which looks for, and encourages the use of, unlimited access library ebooks and open educational resources ("OERs") in place of student purchased textbooks. These etextbooks are referred to internally and in this paper as "FVLs" (which stands for "free via library").

The library initially began a small scale FVL program in 2018. In Fall 2019, Franklin University closed its physical bookstore and replaced it with an online bookstore. At that time, the university created a textbook team to handle communications between the university and the bookstore. The textbook team gathered information on all textbooks used in courses at Franklin University. This permitted the Franklin University Library to expand its etextbook initiative by checking every textbook used at the university for availability as an FVL, with the exception of courseware titles (because the library cannot provide courseware).

The library provides FVLs by finding unlimited-access ebooks that the library can offer and OERs. The library works both proactively and reactively to identify FVLs. When faculty/course designers start work on a course design or redesign, they can submit a request form to ask the library to work proactively with them in identifying possible FVLs. After the library receives a request, it will assign a librarian to help the faculty/designer identify possible FVLs. The library only works proactively to help faculty/course designers if they ask the library to identify potential FVLs. However, even if faculty/course designers do not ask the library to work with them to identify potential FVLs in the design phase, after they have designed the course and selected textbooks the library works reactively to check whether it can provide the selected textbook as an FVL.

Working with Designers and Faculty Proactively to Identify FVLs

Course designers and faculty may contact the library for help finding free (to students) material when they are designing or redesigning a course. Sometimes they ask if the library can get a specific book as an FVL. Other times they ask what books the library has, or could make available, as an FVL on a given topic. (The library also receives requests to look for articles which a course could use in place of a textbook, or to supplement a textbook, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.)

Because the library wants to encourage faculty/course designers to work with us in the course planning stage, we have done our best to make them aware of FVLs and how the library can work with them to identify potential FVLs in the design process. We have done this by making presentations to the entire university about the library's etextbook program, meeting with individual colleges to explain how the library can help identify potential FVLs (as well as the benefits of using FVLs) and through individual communications to faculty/course designers offering our willingness to help find library etextbooks that they could use in their course.

When faculty/course designers request a specific book, a member of the library's staff looks through our existing ebook collections to see if we already own an unlimited access copy or have access to an unlimited access leased copy. If the library does not own an unlimited access copy, the staff member checks GOBI, the library's ebook vendor, to see whether the library can purchase an unlimited access copy from EBSCO or Ebook Central. The library performs this check even for titles available in an unlimited access leased copy, because the library prefers to own a copy than lease it, if possible (issues with using leased titles as FVLs are discussed in a later section of this paper discussing issues using library etextbooks).

If faculty/course designers ask the library to look for available FVLs on a topic, rather than a specific title, a librarian is assigned to work with them. The librarian will gather information from the faculty/designer about what information they want the textbook to include, and then will look through the library's existing ebook collections, GOBI and OER repositories to identify what unlimited access titles the library could make available as an FVL. The librarian will make a list of possible titles for the faculty/designer and, where possible, provide a link to the book so the faculty/designer can review it. If the library does not have access to the ebook, the librarian will send as much information about the book as they can. If a copy of the book is available through the OhioLINK consortium the librarian will also provide a link for the faculty/designer to request a physical copy of the book through OhioLINK.

Although the university encourages the use of FVLs to lower student costs, this does not mean that the library decides what textbook a course will use. The faculty/designer working on the course chooses the textbook they want to use. The library only identifies possible FVLs when requested to do so by a faculty/designer and does so within the parameters provided by the faculty/designer. Once the librarian assigned to the project completes their research, they provide the potential FVLs to the faculty/designer for their review and the faculty/designer decides whether to use any of the possible titles as an FVL.

Involving the Library in the Bookstore Notification Process to Check for FVLs After Textbook Selection

Not all faculty/course designers work with the library to identify FVLs when designing or redesigning a course. However, the process Franklin University uses to notify the bookstore of

what textbooks to stock lets the library check for FVLs after faculty/course designers select textbooks.

The university created a textbook team to handle communication between the university and the bookstore, which includes two library staff members. The textbook team coordinates adding textbooks to the bookstore for student purchase. Faculty/designer requests to add textbooks to the bookstore must go through the textbook team. The bookstore will not add a textbook, and the course will not list the textbook, unless it has been submitted to the textbook team. Before asking the bookstore to add a textbook for student purchase, the library staff members on the textbook team check whether the library can provide the textbook as an FVL.

When the library initially began providing FVLs, one faculty member refused to use them and required students to buy the textbook. The university decided that students should not be required to purchase a textbook if it could be provided through the library and, as a result, if a textbook is available as an FVL it is not stocked in the bookstore and faculty cannot require students to buy a book in place of an FVL.   The requesting faculty/designer is notified that the course will use an FVL and provided with the link to the library etextbook.

Since the university decided to always use FVLs when they are available, we have not received any negative feedback when we notify faculty/designers that a library etextbook will be used in their course instead of a student purchased textbook. Although faculty/designers do not usually respond to the email we send informing them that the library will provide the textbook for their course, on those occasions when they have responded the responses have been favorable and thanked us for making the textbook available to students as an FVL.

How the Franklin University Library Provides FVLs

Library FVL Platforms

The Franklin University Library provides students with ebooks on a number of different platforms, but only suggests unlimited access titles as FVLs. The library obtains unlimited access ebooks: (1) through package deals purchased as a member of the OhioLINK consortium, (2) as individual ebooks purchased through GOBI on either the Ebook Central or EBSCO platforms, and (3) leased ebooks from the O'Reilly Learning Platform. The type of library ebook used most frequently as FVLs are unlimited access titles purchased directly by the library, followed by leased unlimited access titles. The breakdown of how the library acquires library etextbooks is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Acquisition Model for Library Etextbooks

Acquisition Model	Number	Percentage
Purchased – unlimited access	193	57.61%
Leased – unlimited access	78	23.58%
Owned – OhioLINK package deal	42	12.54%
Open Educational Resource	21	6.27%

The most frequently used ebook platform for FVLs currently used at Franklin University is Ebook Central, which accounts for 52% of our FVLs with 175 titles (the remaining 18 purchased unlimited access titles are on the EBSCO platform). The next most common platform for FVLs, the O'Reilly Learning Platform, accounts for 78 titles (23% of our FVLs).

Library Spending on FVLs

When the library first began providing FVLs, the library required department contributions for etextbooks purchased as FVLs. The library would pay the cost of the single user copy of an ebook and require departments to pay the additional amount necessary to purchase an unlimited user copy. However, departments would often decide not to use an FVL to avoid paying this cost. As a result of this disincentive, the university determined to have the library pay the entire cost of FVL purchases.

While this has resulted in increased use of FVLs, and the ability to offer FVLs to faculty/course designers without requiring department authorization, there is a downside. There have been occasions when a faculty/designer has asked the library to purchase an FVL for a course they are designing only to ultimately decide not to use the book in the final design. From the start of the program in Fall 2018 through the Summer 2023 term, there have been five times where the library has purchased an FVL which was never actually used in a course. Another 11 titles the library purchased as FVLs were removed after only being used for one term. When the library required department buy-in to purchase FVLs, departments did not select FVLs unless they were going to use them.

Charging the department for some, or all, of the FVL cost in this situation would likely reduce or eliminate this issue, since it never occurred when the library required departments to contribute to the cost of purchasing an FVL. However, the university has determined that the benefit of encouraging faculty to use FVLs outweighs the cost resulting from the occasional purchase of an FVL which is never used or used only for a short time.

FVL Use and Student Savings

Student Purchased Textbooks Replaced / Courses Using FVLs

During the 13 terms since the library's etextbook program began in Fall 2018, FVLs have replaced 42,266 student textbook purchases. The library calculated this number by identifying the courses running each term which use FVLs. For each course which uses FVLs, the library then determined the number of FVLs used in the course and the number of students enrolled. This calculation assumes that every student in the course would have purchased every book. Although some students may not have otherwise purchased the textbook, since every student can access every FVL we decided to use this method to calculate student purchases replaced.

In addition to tracking student purchases replaced by FVLs, the library tracks the number of FVLs used at Franklin University by term. The library tracks both: (1) the total number of FVLs used in all courses at Franklin University, regardless of whether the courses are running during a given term, and (2) the active number of FVLs used in courses that are running in a given term. Table 2 shows the number of FVLs used in all courses during a term at Franklin University (whether the course is running that term) and the number of FVLs used in courses that are running since we started tracking this data in Fall term, 2019.

Table 2

FVL Use at Franklin University

Term	FVLs in Program (All Courses)	FVLs in Program (Active During Term)
Fall 2019	157	119
Spring 2020	191	116
Summer 2020	196	102
Fall 2020	225	145
Spring 2021	240	137
Summer 2021	248	147
Fall 2021	279	170
Spring 2022	324	195

Summer 2022	324	176
Fall, 2022	323	212
Spring 2023	328	200
Summer 2023	335	178

Note. The university tracks textbooks for all courses offered by the university, even if the course is not running during a specific term. "FVLs in Program (All Courses)" tracks all FVLs selected for courses at the university, regardless of whether the course is actually running during that term. "FVLs in Program (Active During Term)" lists only the number of FVLs used in courses running during that term.

Overall, since the Fall 2018 term when the library's etextbook initiative started, 1,505 courses have run using at least one FVL. Whether due to availability of suitable ebooks, or faculty preference in working with the library to identify possible FVLs, the adoption level of FVLs varies by program. For the 2022-2023 academic year, the top programs using FVLs are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Top Programs Using FVLs

Program	Number of Courses
Computer Science	33
Cyber Security	33
Education	28
Information Technology	17
Psychology	16
Heath Care Management	15
Management	13
Public Administration	12
Instructional Design & Learning Technology	11
Communication	10
Web Development	10

Estimated Student Savings from FVL Use

An important question for the library's FVL program is: how much money have students saved due to the use of FVLs? The most accurate method of calculating student savings would be to find the cost of the textbooks replaced by FVLs and multiply that by the number of students who would have purchased the textbooks. However, the actual price a student pays for a textbook can vary based on factors such as whether students buy or rent the textbook, choose a print or digital format, and (if print) obtain a new or used copy. Additionally, even if the library could determine the actual price of replaced textbooks, identifying, and tracking the price of replaced textbooks would be a time-consuming project which, to be accurate, would need to be repeated every term. As a practical matter, the library lacks the staff time and availability to conduct such a project.

Instead of relying on the individual price of each textbook replaced by an FVL, the library decided to estimate the savings. The library uses $80 as the average price for a textbook replaced by an FVL[1], and calculates total student savings resulting from FVL use by multiplying $80 by the number of student textbook purchases replaced. Based on the 42,266 student textbook purchases replaced by FVLs since the library's etextbook initiative began in 2018, the library calculates that the use of FVLs has saved Franklin students $3,381,280. The number of FVLs used has grown each year, and so has the savings to students as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Estimated Student Savings Resulting from FVL Use

Year*	Estimated Savings
2018	$39,120
2019	$272,960
2020	$534,960
2021	$677,760
2022	$1,077,600
2023	$778,880
Total	$3,381,280

[1] The library found this $80 average textbook price in a report from the National Association of College Stores (2017) which is no longer available online. However, basing our calculations on a national average price of $80 provides a conservative estimate of student savings as "[m]any institutions rely on an estimate of $100" when calculating savings resulting from replacing a student purchased textbook (Hofera, 2017).

* The estimated savings for 2018 are only for Fall term, while the estimated savings for 2023 are only for Spring and Summer terms.

Effect of Using FVLs on Course Design

Because students do not have to pay for FVLs, faculty/designers can use multiple library etextbooks in a course without worrying about the effect of textbook costs on students, or that students will decide not to buy the textbooks to save money. Comparing the use of student purchased textbooks to FVLs at Franklin University does indicate that faculty/designers use more textbooks in their course when students do not need to pay for them.

With the exception of the graduate [MSN] and doctoral [DNP] nursing programs, which require students to buy four textbooks that are used in multiple courses, only three courses require students to purchase as many as three textbooks. By contrast, eight courses use four or more FVLs and 17 courses use three FVLs. That faculty/designers are more likely to use multiple textbooks when using FVLs is further demonstrated by looking at courses using only a single textbook: 88% of courses requiring students to purchase a textbook only require students to purchase one textbook, while only 67% of courses using library textbooks use just one FVL. Additionally, faculty/designers may choose to supplement a student purchased textbook with an FVL; 53 courses with student purchased textbooks also include one or more FVLs.

Issues Using Library Etextbooks

While the use of FVLs benefits students, the library has encountered a variety of issues with the use of library etextbooks. These issues include limitations on FVL availability, problems affecting student access, and difficulties caused by using leased ebooks as FVLs.

Availability

The biggest issue with FVLs is availability. Many titles are not available for library purchase as an unlimited access ebook because "publishers can't afford to trade scores or hundreds of book sales to individuals for a single campus sale" (Anderson, 2016). Often, if a faculty member or course designer requests a specific textbook, it will not be available as an FVL. This can cause frustration among faculty who want to use a specific title and may lead to them not seeking to use library etextbooks in the future.

East Carolina University conducted a project where they identified 1,239 distinct texts being used in courses at their university. The library determined that they already had unlimited access to 56 of these titles. It then checked 1,183 titles it did not already have as unlimited access ebooks and found that it could only purchase an additional 56 (4.8%) of those titles in an unlimited access version (Carr, Cardin, & Shouse, 2016, p. 4). The Franklin University Library has also attempted to obtain unlimited access versions of textbooks by reviewing the list of textbooks used at the university. Like East Carolina University, we found that most of the

textbooks in use at the university were not available as an unlimited access library ebook. Our most recent project to check whether we could replace student purchased textbooks with FVLs found that we could provide an FVL for only 10 of 364 titles (2.7%).

Adding FVLs to courses is easiest when the faculty or course designer is open-minded about what textbook will work for the course they are designing. When the faculty/designer is willing to consider unlimited access titles the library has, or can purchase, the library is more likely to be able to provide an FVL than when they are set on a specific title.

Access

User Limits

The library only uses unlimited access ebooks as FVLs. Using single user (or even three user) titles as FVLs causes problems because multiple students try to access the book at the same time (usually just before an assignment is due) and some of them cannot access the ebook because someone else is using it. This results in student dissatisfaction with the library because they do not understand the licensing issues, and is contrary to the purpose of providing FVLs, which is to give students access to their textbooks.

Although the library has attempted to educate faculty/course designers about licensing issues when using library ebooks as FVLs, and the need to involve the library in the decision so we can make sure they are selecting properly licensed titles, faculty/course designers do occasionally place single user library ebooks in a course without notifying the library or the textbook team. When the library becomes aware of this, we will first attempt to obtain an unlimited user copy. If an unlimited user copy is not available the textbook team will contact the lead faculty for the course, notify them of the problem. and provide the link to a form they can fill out to ask the library to look for a properly licensed FVL. The faculty/designer does not have to select a new textbook -- if they want to continue using the title, it is placed in the bookstore for student purchase and the link to the single user textbook is removed from the course.

Permalink / Proxy / Login

Students can only access library etextbooks if the course contains a properly formatted link. Not all faculty/course designers are aware of the proper method for linking to library resources. As a result, sometimes they add FVLs to a course using an invalid link. The link must be a permalink and, for off-campus access to work, the permalink must be proxied. To make matters even more confusing, different library ebook platforms have different methods of creating permalinks and different ways of proxying them.

The library has addressed these issues through education, informing faculty and course designers of the proper methods of linking and asking them to check with library staff before including FVLs in courses. The library has also created a 19-page document titled "Where to

Find Permalinks and When to Add a Proxy" that faculty/course designers can reference when linking to library materials. To make proxying links easier, the university's IT department created a proxy tool that automatically adds the proxy information to a library link. However, proper linking to library resources is an ongoing issue due to the confusing nature of library links and turnover among faculty/course designers.

Students also sometimes have trouble logging into the library either due to confusion over how to login, or because there is a problem with their account. Library staff troubleshoots login issues as they occur and has worked with the university's technology support help desk to create documentation and procedures for troubleshooting these issues. The library has also created a student-facing library troubleshooting research guide (using Springshare's LibGuide platform), as well as internal guidance documents so that any librarian contacted by a student with a login issue can help the student gain access.

Platform Issues

Another technical issue which sometimes prevents students from accessing their library etextbooks occurs when a vendor's platform goes down either due to an unforeseen technical error or planned maintenance. When this occurs, the library notifies the instructors and lead faculty of affected courses so they are aware of the issue and can notify their students of the problem.

Previously, this required library staff to cross-reference the library's list of FVLs with two different reports from the university. The university's IT department recently streamlined this process by creating a combined report which lists what courses are running in a term, what FVL/library platform they are using, and the name and email addresses of both the instructors and the lead faculty for the course.

Usability

The library currently provides ebooks on seven different platforms (excluding OER). Each platform has a different interface and different rules about what users can do. Full access may require users to create an account with the provider (which may require an extra login, beyond the library proxy login). Some titles have a limit on the number of pages per day which can be downloaded or printed. Others cannot be downloaded at all. Still others may provide no easy way to print. As a result of these different platforms, FVLs do not provide a consistent user experience.

Unfortunately, these usability issues are largely publisher imposed, and outside of the library's control. Where there is a choice, the library does purchase a DRM-free version of an ebook to provide users with the ability to more freely access and use the ebook. However, many titles used as FVLs are not available DRM-free.

Leased Titles

While the library prefers to own titles used as FVLs, it also uses unlimited access leased titles. Currently, the library only uses leased titles through the O'Reilly Learning Platform. Leased titles from the O'Reilly Learning Platform provide 32% of our FVLs, which is the second most titles from any library platform. Using leased titles as FVLs increases the number of potential student textbook purchases that can be replaced by library etextbooks.

However, using leased titles as FVLs carries the risk that the library can lose access because the vendor removes the leased title from its platform. The library has no control over when a vendor removes a leased FVL and, in the worst case, may lose access to a leased FVL title during a term when a course using it as a textbook is running. This risk was demonstrated in Fall, 2022, when Wiley removed a number of titles from the leased Academic Complete platform at the beginning of the term, causing issues for several universities and students who were using those materials as library etextbooks (D'Agnostino, 2022). Although we recognize this risk, the university determined that the benefits provided by the larger pool of potential FVLs outweighed this risk.

Since the beginning of the library's etextbook initiative, the library has lost access to six leased FVLs which impacted a running course. The first time we lost access to a leased FVL during a term occurred near the end of the term, and the library was able to work with lead faculty for the course to replace the FVL with articles from the library's databases. Another time, lead faculty removed the textbook from the course without a replacement. The other four times we lost access to leased FVLs while a course was running, the university purchased access codes from the bookstore for the textbook so that students would not have to pay for the textbook even though it was no longer available through the library.

Because of the possibility that the library can lose access to a leased title, the library buys leased FVLs if they are available in an unlimited access version. The library periodically checks GOBI to see whether it can purchase an unlimited access copy of leased FVLs. Availability of these leased titles for purchase in an unlimited access version varies, and sometimes titles which we could not purchase when we initially checked later become available. On the library's most recent check to see what leased FVLs could be purchased as unlimited access ebooks, we found that 24 of 107 leased FVLs were either available for purchase as an unlimited access title or already owned through one of the library's OhioLINK packages.

Conclusion

Because "student success is directly impacted by availability of required learning materials" (Watson, Domizi, & Clouser, 2017, p. 288), academic libraries can help students and make education more affordable by implementing an FVL program. FVLs give students free access to their textbooks, eliminating a major cost/concern of getting a college education.

Libraries do face barriers to implementing a successful FVL program including the lack of availability of many titles in unlimited access formats and the difficulty of knowing what textbooks courses are using.

However, if a university closely involves its library in their textbook selection process, it can implement a successful FVL program. By encouraging faculty/course designers to work with a library during the design or redesign of a course and looking for possible FVLs at the beginning of the design process, an academic library may provide more options for potential library etextbooks that the faculty/designer can design the course around. When faculty/course designers do not work with the library, a library FVL program faces the issue of identifying what textbooks courses are using so that they can attempt to provide an FVL. If a university places the library in the communication chain used to notify the bookstore of what titles to stock, it can ensure that the library can perform an FVL check for all titles.

Implementing an FVL program does require additional work on the part of library staff. Identifying potential FVLs before a course is selected requires staff time to discuss course requirements with faculty/designers, search for potential FVLs, and gather information about potential FVLs in a format that will help faculty/course designers decide whether to use a library textbook as an FVL. Placing the library in the communication chain between the university and the bookstore also creates additional work for library staff. However, this additional work benefits the university and ultimately, the university's students, by greatly increasing the ability of the library to provide students with textbooks that they do not need to pay for.

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