

Summary:

Changes since March 2020 have clearly revealed the coming shift from print textbook reserves to digital learning materials that all students can equitably afford to access.

Farewell Print Textbook Reserves: A COVID-19 Change to Embrace

[Steven J. Bell](#)

Along with interlibrary loans and book purchases on demand, a high-use and routinely expected service that academic libraries provide to faculty is the course reserves section. In anticipation of students who will be seeking course materials, instructors arrange with their library to acquire this vital educational content and make it available for short loan periods. Even as the 21st century has greatly shifted the delivery of course learning content from print to digital, hard-copy reserves – featuring textbooks, DVDs, lab manuals, and other miscellaneous items like rock collections and break-apart skeletons – remain deeply embedded in library service offerings. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to remote learning are contributing to the demise of reserves, at least for print textbooks. We should embrace this change.

All of us in higher education are contemplating and debating the pandemic-related changes that will likely persist long after the virus subsides. For example, the increase in online courses and degree programs in the curriculum is widely forecast to become a permanent fixture of higher education. Meanwhile Goldie Blumenstyk, a senior writer at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, identified ten long-accepted higher education practices that faculty would eliminate as a result of working through the pandemic.¹ Her readers contributed their top picks, which included standard practices such as class

¹ Goldie Blumenstyk, ["Let's Give a Kiss Goodbye to These 10 Pandemic-Endangered Practices,"](#) *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 16, 2020.

lectures, in-person office hours, office meetings, placed-based conferences, and rigid academic calendars.

Physical, library-based course reserves failed to make it onto Blumenstyk's list, but they should have. As elaborated below, many publishers have historically been unwilling to sell textbooks to academic libraries. In response, some librarians have chosen to commit considerable amounts of their materials budget to buying print textbooks from their own bookstore in order to offer the books to students. But these projects² simply subsidize faculty's ability to require course textbooks without considering the cost to students; faculty know that the library will purchase several copies to place on reserve. Librarians who offer these textbook reserve projects love to tout the benefits to students, but in reality, there are many drawbacks for students. Borrowing textbooks from reserve collections is terribly inconvenient, routes students' tuition money back to textbook purchases, creates an obstacle to deep learning (since students have only two to three hours at a time to read them), and is a remedy that more affluent students can completely ignore. Shifting to digital learning materials that all students can equitably afford to access is clearly a superior approach.

The COVID-19 pandemic underlined the need for this approach. As we moved into the fall of 2020, academic libraries faced another challenge to their print reserves, whether they planned to reopen and make their collections available or decided to remain closed and offer only pick-up options. The many long-overdue textbooks checked out during the spring and summer came back to libraries in a deluge of returns the first weeks of the fall semester. Meanwhile librarians learned that the coronavirus can live on book surfaces for up to six days depending on how the books are stored upon return.³

² See, for example, Amy Chang and Judy Garrison, "[Textbook Lending Service](#)," *College & Research Libraries News*, October 2011.

³ Alison Marcotte, "[REALM Project Announces Test 4 Results](#)," *American Libraries*, September 4, 2020.

Librarians thus needed to quarantine circulating books for four to seven days in order to give the virus time to dissipate. High-circulation print reserve books presented a far greater challenge, since library staff could not safely shelve and recirculate these books. Safety-minded librarians feared that students would return and reborrow these books too quickly to allow for the requisite quarantine period. That forced academic librarians, at least those whose libraries were open, to eliminate access to their print reserve collections.

To address this challenge, academic librarians decided to temporarily increase their scanning of print books in order to add them to electronic course reserves. Given the pandemic, most felt they were on safe ground to push the boundaries of fair use scanning. By far, though, the preferred alternative to print reserves seems to be to find existing digital versions of the required textbooks.⁴ This converges with faculty demands for e-book versions of their textbooks – demands that had already skyrocketed when campuses were forced to closed in mid-March 2020. Librarians were inundated with requests to quickly obtain e-book versions of faculty members’ now inaccessible print textbooks. Faculty expected they could easily replace the print texts with digital versions, funded by the library. This was a good plan, but executing it, as faculty would learn, was often impossible.

For one thing, many textbook publishers refuse to sell their products, in any format, to academic libraries. The big three – Pearson, McGraw-Hill, and Cengage – make their profits from direct sales to students. To their credit, some smaller publishers came to the aid of colleges and universities during the pandemic by opening access to their digital collections at no cost.⁵ That enabled academic libraries to vastly increase access to e-

⁴ This personal observation is based on conversations occurring among academic librarians on various listservs.

⁵ Matt Enis, [“How Vendors Are Working with Academic Libraries in Their Pivot to Digital,”](#) *Library Journal*, September 3, 2020.

books, though few were the expensive textbooks typically required in first- and second-year courses. Unfortunately, many of those programs ended before the start of the Fall 2020 semester. For example, my own library went from more than 90 e-book collections, inflated by gratis resources, to just under 75 after the beginning of the semester.

To some extent, academic libraries were already strategically adding multi-user e-books identified as regularly used course textbooks.⁶ These were often upper-level monographs available from scholarly or trade publishers. In contrast, digital textbook packages from the big three publishers are sold to students for single-semester access and require digital codes for both reading and assignment content. Students are unable to resell them. Whether called *inclusive access books*, *first-day digital books*, or as the U.S. Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) refers to them, *automatic-billing programs*,⁷ these are off-limits to academic libraries.

This all came as a surprise to many faculty members. Given that their library colleagues seemed to previously encounter few, if any, difficulties in acquiring requested textbooks to put on reserve, faculty questioned why it was suddenly so hard to fulfill these digital requests. Librarians set about outlining the problem, explaining that the issue was not about budgets or collection policies but, rather, was a simple inability to buy the books. Librarians cannot buy what no publisher will sell them. Some librarians took to Twitter to share their frustration:

⁶ For example, see the web page at my institution: [“E-Textbooks at Temple University Libraries.”](#)

⁷ Kaitlyn Vitez, [“Automatic Textbook Billing: An Offer Students Can’t Refuse?”](#) report by U.S. PIRG Education Fund, February 2020.



Jamie @jamiehaz · Aug 31

The library can't provide the e-book if the publisher won't sell it to us.*

*No - not even if you have 120 students enrolled in the class and you're just now realizing they might not all buy it.

21 298 1.3K

Tweet reprinted with permission from Jamie Hazlitt, Librarian for Collection Development & Evaluation, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.



Sally @sallibrarian · Sep 1

Replying to @jamiehaz

A professor included me on an email to the publisher of the **textbook** she wanted and was told no they don't have an e-textbook the **library can buy**. I feel bad for the students, but glad the professor could see first hand what **we** are dealing with.

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Tweet reprinted with permission from Sally Bryant, Head of Access Services, Pepperdine Libraries, Pepperdine University.

A more elegant explanation of the e-textbook conundrum was articulated by thoughtful librarians at Guelph University. Their "[Commercial Textbooks Present Challenges in a Virtual Environment](#)" document was adopted by other libraries to communicate to instructors the difficulties presented by e-textbook purchasing.⁸ As they succinctly stated the gist of the problem: "Approximately 85% of existing course textbooks are simply unavailable to libraries in any other format than print."

Multiple factors are converging to show faculty that they must now help lead the way to a more radical shift away from print and toward e-content, especially those materials their students can access at no or little cost.

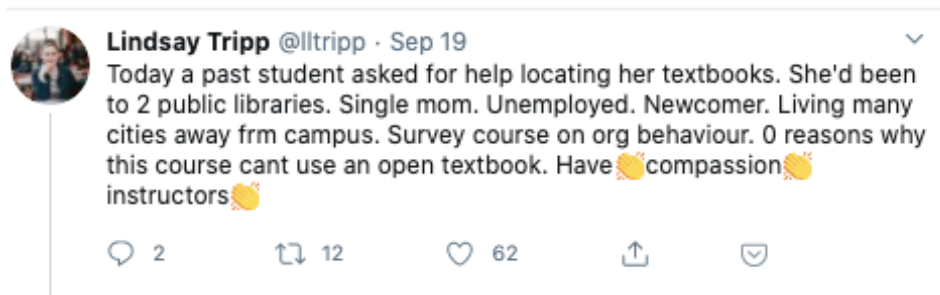
⁸ See, for example, Grand Valley State University Libraries, "[Statement on Textbooks in the Library Collection](#)," last updated July 15, 2020.

- *Growing acceptance that students can learn nearly as effectively with digital materials as with print.* Past research and surveys of faculty and students showed a preference for print textbooks over digital and suggested that for students' reading comprehension, print pages are more effective than digital screens.⁹ The pandemic shift to digital learning materials, however, has brought an awareness that college/ university students can successfully adapt to screen-reading their texts.
- *Growing recognition that publishers are seeking to eliminate all print versions of their books in favor of digital versions that often take the form of learning platforms.*¹⁰ Faculty must acknowledge the demise of the print textbooks that libraries traditionally added to the reserve collection. Described by publishers as a way to offer students more affordable content, the planned all-digital shift is a thinly disguised strategy to permanently eliminate the aftermarket for used print textbooks, a major profit-killer for these publishers. Commercially published digital textbooks often lock students into nonnegotiable user agreements and add unanticipated fees to their tuition bill.
- *Growing awareness that the COVID-19 pandemic has left more students and their families in precarious financial situations that, for some, could make the difference between staying in a course or dropping out.* Previously, faculty could justify their decision to choose expensive textbooks because they believed that students either could afford the textbooks or would receive financial aid to subsidize purchase of the textbooks. That perception must bend to the reality that too many students and their families need serious relief from costly learning materials. Even reasonably priced books may be more than what economically fragile families

⁹ See, for example, Wade Tyler Millward, "[Predictions of Print Textbooks' Death Remain Greatly Exaggerated](#)," *EdSurge*, April 26, 2019; Sharon O'Malley, "[There's No Easy Answer](#)," *Inside Higher Ed*, August 16, 2017.

¹⁰ John Maher, "[Pearson Puts Print Books to Bed](#)," *Publishers Weekly*, July 16, 2019.

can manage. As this tweet below states so well, now is the time for faculty to show compassion for their students' financial plight.



Tweet reprinted with permission from Lindsay Tripp, Copyright Librarian, Langara Library, Langara College.

- *Growing frustration that even when it may be possible to acquire access to a digital textbook, the publisher may allow the library to purchase only a single-user license. That rarely, if ever, meets course enrollment needs. Students end up competing against each other for access to the one online book. Negotiating for a multiple-user license can end up costing the library hundreds or even in excess of one thousand dollars for a single title – a price tag that is simply unaffordable for most academic libraries.*

The current turn of events points to the future demise of print textbook reserves. It should spur librarians and their faculty colleagues to imagine higher education with fully digital e-reserves and a commitment to born-digital, zero- or low-cost learning materials that all students can equitably afford to access. We should adopt Open Educational Resources (OER) to the fullest extent possible. Together, let us learn from this COVID-19 experience and move forward by eliminating our fragile dependence on course content that commercial publishers refuse to make available to libraries in digital format. Any sustainable future for affordable and accessible digital learning materials must come from within the academy.

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