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Assessing the Value of Course-Assigned E-Books

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Assessing the Value of Course-Assigned E-books

Abstract

Many academic libraries have historically limited textbook purchases. Given recent calls to support expanded online education programs and textbook affordability initiatives, however, many academic libraries have changed course to invest considerable amounts of money to license electronic books (e-books) that are assigned in courses. This study explores the value of these materials by leveraging commonly used evaluative methods, such as benefit-cost ratio and usage statistics, as well as novel criteria, including a quality analysis using Resources for College Libraries (RCL) and an analysis of the persistence of assigned titles across semesters. The findings suggest that assigned e-books are a wise investment of library funds within the authors' institutional context. By investigating value from diverse perspectives, the authors assert the importance of approaching such a complex question with multimodal and inclusive methods.

Keywords: e-books; textbook affordability; assigned texts; value; metrics and assessment

Introduction

Academic libraries have historically opted to limit textbook purchases, with many libraries enforcing policies that prohibited the purchase of texts that were designated as a textbook by booksellers, published by textbook publishers, or currently assigned at their institution.

Textbooks have been thought to be antithetical to collection development best practices for a variety of reasons: they are too expensive, too frequently updated, too ephemeral in their

relevance and appeal, and too basic—recording general knowledge and not serious scholarship—or too specific (Hoffmann and Wood 2005). This perspective has shifted, though, and in 2016 the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) identified as a top trend for collection development “an increasing need to establish more holistic and agile approaches (both qualitative and quantitative) to manage budgetary constraints while ensuring that collections are ‘responsive’ and committed to institutional research and curricular requirements and needs” (ACRL 2016, 275). The 2020 ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey found that 82% of academic library respondents included “support textbook affordability initiatives” as an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) related activity (ACRL 2021).

The understanding of textbook affordability as an equity issue and the expanded need for support of online education programs have contributed to rethinking the academic library’s role in the provision of textbooks to students. Several projects and studies have tested the viability of library purchasing and lending print textbooks, licensing assigned electronic books (e-books), coordinating textbook swap projects, and other means of facilitating students’ cost-free access to assigned texts (Soules 2019; Heartland Community College 2020; França 2021; Scott 2022). Despite these increased and frequently successful projects, however, there remains some concern around whether licensing assigned e-books is a wise investment for academic libraries. This exploratory study leverages data from benefit-cost ratio calculations, usage statistics, Resources for College Libraries (RCL) Core Titles analysis, and assigned text persistence—or the rate at which titles are assigned across course sections and semesters—to investigate the value of the investment at a public, doctoral university with high research activity in the Midwest.

Literature Review

In the context of this study, assigned texts are materials that the instructor of record requires for

any course during a given semester. Assigned texts include, but are not limited to, traditional textbooks, i.e., texts that primarily support lower-level academic courses, frequently updated, and published by Cengage, McGraw Hill, Pearson, or similar publishers. Collection development policies have more frequently excluded traditional textbooks only, but some have excluded or limited any assigned texts. Frank W. Hoffmann and Richard J. Wood (2005) provide examples of collection development policies that exclude or limit textbook acquisition, including that of Central Piedmont Community College: “The library does not systematically collect: 1) Textbooks currently adopted at CPCC [...]” (59). Some academic libraries have also forbidden interlibrary loan services for assigned texts, as evidenced in the following collection development policy: “Required textbooks are not purchased or borrowed via Document Delivery services” (Indiana University-Purdue University, Fort Wayne, qtd in Hoffmann and Wood, 135). Policies that limit an academic library’s acquisition of assigned materials often suggest an arrangement or agreement with the campus bookstore. The collection development policy at San Joaquin Delta College notes an arrangement: “The library does not generally purchase copies of textbooks from its regular materials budget. However, if the Campus Bookstore is nearly out of supply of a given textbook and it is believed there will be a delay in receiving the order, the Library will purchase one copy to place on reserve” (San Joaquin Delta College 2013). The collection development policy of Pellissippi State Community College, however, suggests an agreement: “The Libraries do not purchase textbooks to avoid competing with the campus bookstore and publishers” (Pellissippi State Community College 2019).

The primary mechanism by which academic libraries first provided assigned textbooks was through print course reserves (Laskowski 2007; Pollitz, Christie, and Middleton 2009; Murphy 2013). The University of California, Los Angeles, for example, documents how they

expanded their course reserves and collaborated with the campus bookstore in an attempt to address textbook affordability (Celik and Peck 2016). The success of print textbook programs, both in terms of usage and perceived impact, has been documented in the literature (Schlak and Johnston 2018; McHale 2020). Timothy M. Schlak and Bruce Johnston note that “Research conducted subsequent to the program’s launch showed a positive correlation between students’ use of the program and their perceived academic success” (2018, 22).

The use of course reserves to provide assigned texts, however, has prompted some questions about the long-term viability in the face of a systemic issue. Michael Krasulski (2020), a librarian serving a community in which 54% of the students are designated as low-income writes: “Could it be that the very presence of this service in our college and university libraries enable faculty to select more expensive textbooks, textbooks they might not have selected otherwise? Could the availability of course reserves be holding back the faculty at our college and universities from participating in open educational resources (OER) initiatives?” (2). This tension between advocating for OER and supporting affordability through purchasing assigned texts—whether print or digital—remains. Though unresolved, librarians must acknowledge that instructors select and assign texts; this limits the progress librarians can make with respect to OER.

The University at Buffalo conducted three pilot projects to investigate the role of the library in the textbook affordability crisis (Lyons and Hendrix 2014). They collaborated to provide semester-long access to the “electronic version of the required textbook for 800 students in each of the five large undergraduate courses that were included in the pilot” (264), up to 12 e-textbooks for 300 students in the institution’s Educational Opportunity Program, and a site license for an introductory biology e-textbook. The University of Minnesota also took a three-

pronged approach to provide expanded access to assigned texts through their Content Services department, which includes Interlibrary Loan, Publishing Services, and the Copyright Permissions Service (Eighmy-Brown, McCready, and Riha 2017). Such multifaceted library approaches to textbook affordability highlight the fact that there is no single and straightforward solution to the textbook affordability crisis.

Recent studies of the library provision of assigned texts as e-books reiterate the findings reported by Schlak and Johnston (2018), namely that faculty and students alike are pleased on the whole when their library licenses an assigned e-book. The authors separately published findings from focus groups and surveys conducted with faculty in which participants noted important gains for equity; namely, when the library provides the assigned text(s), it allows teaching faculty to “treat them [students] all the same” (Scott, Jallas, Murphy, Park, and Shelley forthcoming). Participants in that study also recommended that the authors calculate the value and impact along the line of what is offered in the study at hand. The authors also surveyed and conducted focus groups with students, the results of which highlighted affective aspects of textbook affordability and reiterated that textbook costs are indeed an obstacle (Jallas, Murphy, Park, Scott, and Shelley 2021).

Several studies highlight the strong benefit-cost ratio associated with purchasing assigned texts. It would make sense for libraries to emphasize that purchasing an unlimited-user license at \$200 for a class of forty would potentially save students \$8,000. Emily Riha and Danika LeMay reported findings from the University of Minnesota, where purchasing 120 e-books and print books for \$14,000 saved students \$61,777 (Riha and LeMay 2016). In their study of assigned texts in the East Carolina University Library, 31 purchased e-books (\$3,000) and 42 previously owned e-books saved students an estimated \$34,000 (Carr, Cardin, and Shouse 2016). More

recently, Steven Rokusek and Rachel Cooke reported that the library at Florida Gulf Coast University licensed 26 e-books for \$4,000 and estimated student savings at \$74,313 (2019).

Some libraries incorporate usage statistics into their analysis of benefit-cost. Riha and LeMay (2016), for example, noted that e-books were accessed by 397 unique users in fall 2014 and spring 2015 and offered an average savings of about \$59 per student” (393). Others have calculated the cost per use of assigned e-books and compared these to other items in the library’s collection. Some librarians track turnaways and usage to identify titles used in courses and need more expansive licenses. Jason Boczar and Laura Pascual, for example, note, “We may see very high use or multiple turnaways in our usage statistics and then identify the title as being used for a course” (2017, 97). Athena Hoepfner and Sara Duff calculated usage per student by platform and found that “ProQuest’s hosted textbooks were used, on average, 21 times per student. Springer and Elsevier also had use per enrolled student ratios that imply that every enrolled student might have used the library’s online copy of the textbook” (Hoepfner and Duff 2018).

The final two aspects of this study’s analysis—using RCL Core Titles for collection analysis of assigned texts and the persistence of assigned texts available as e-books—have not been thoroughly explored in the literature. Assessing the quality of books is difficult because their quality depends on how well they fit the needs of a reader. Various studies, however, have attempted to use metrics or core title lists to measure the intended audience for a book, its appropriateness for an academic library collection, or its general quality. The quality of e-books purchased via a consortial demand driven acquisitions program was investigated by Matthew J. Jabaily and Rhonda Glazier (2019), who leveraged content level and other data from EBSCO’s GOBI platform. Jeffrey T. Husted and Leslie J. Czechowski (2012) leveraged *Doody’s Essential Purchase Titles* list as a benchmark for their e-book collection. The authors have not identified

any published studies that use RCL to investigate the quality of academic library collections, though a number of academic libraries do maintain a subscription to the product and use RCL to conduct in-house analysis.

In their discussion of estimated cost savings to students, Rokusek and Cooke (2019) note that “The actual savings is greater if the same titles are assigned in subsequent semesters” (179). Their study does not, however, explore this phenomenon. Although theirs is a valid question, the study at hand takes the question in a slightly different direction. Rather than exploring the potential long-term savings to students when a library-licensed title is assigned in more than one semester, the authors instead consider the impact on the value from the perspective of the library’s collection budget. It is worth noting that title persistence is not a term of art in academic library collection development or higher education. It is nonetheless a useful shorthand for considering the frequency with which a given title in a specific edition is assigned—from one semester, course, or section, to the next.

Research Questions

- 1) What are the potential savings to students, on average, of the library licensing around \$10,000 worth of assigned texts a semester?
- 2) How do usage rates for library licensed e-books assigned in a course compare to those of other e-books?
- 3) Are the licensed e-books of good quality according to RCL Core Titles list?
- 4) How frequently are the same editions of a title assigned at Illinois State University?

Methods

Illinois State University (ISU) is a public, doctoral-granting institution with a fall 2020 total enrollment of 20,770, of which 6% registered as students with disabilities and 17% identified as First Generation (Illinois State University 2021).

RQ1. When the spring 2021 assigned title list became available from the registrar's office in fall 2020, the collection assessment librarian manually searched all—1,339 unique titles—in GOBI, Milner Library's preferred online ordering platform. When searching, she noted the platforms that offered a perpetual, unlimited user license and recorded the cost of this license. The registrar's data included current student enrollment and price of the text at the campus bookstore. She calculated the potential student savings by multiplying the current enrollment by the cost of the text to students. When the cost of the text did not appear in the registrar's data, the cost of the used print text was pulled from the University bookstore's website. Approximately one third of all assigned texts—traditional textbooks and all other genres of reading materials—were available for the library to acquire with an unlimited user license or other level of access sufficient for the projected enrollment, such as ProQuest's non-linear user license.¹ When unlimited user licenses were unavailable and larger course enrollments were anticipated, multiple non-linear licenses were acquired. With the availability of licenses and their respective costs noted, the collection assessment librarian could calculate the benefit-cost ratio: the potential maximum savings to students relative to the cost of Milner Library licensing the e-book.

The instructors of record for 52 sections agreed to participate in the spring 2021 pilot project. Throughout this paper, instructor is used inclusively of all those who serve as instructor of record, regardless of faculty status. After instructors confirmed their participation, e-books were purchased with a perpetual license, primarily on ProQuest's Ebook Central platform. Of the 75 titles purchased in spring 2021, eight had a non-linear license and one had a 3-user license;

¹ ProQuest explains “Under this model, titles are not restricted to linear distribution - one patron at a time - but rather they can be lent to any number of patrons concurrently. The number of days used for each loan instance is subtracted from the total number of annual loan days set for the title - usually 325.” ProQuest, “Ebook Central: Access Models” Article Number: 000034678. https://support.proquest.com/s/article/Ebook-Central-Access-Models?language=en_US.

88% had an unlimited user license. The workflow was adapted after the spring 2021 semester to acknowledge that there is not time for instructors to be invited and consent to participate. From fall 2021 forward, titles were selected exclusively based on benefit-cost analysis. The collection assessment librarian first calculated the estimated student savings based on the registrar's data for students registered and the cost of the textbook. She then divided that by the cost to the library to license the e-book and sorted the e-books based on that ratio from largest to smallest. The team spent around \$10,000 per semester acquiring perpetual licenses for e-books with the most advantageous benefit-cost ratio on the platform that offered the best terms. Titles that did not make the cut in a given semester were noted for potential purchase in the future.

RQ2. In order to investigate usage, COUNTER 5 TR_B1 reports (Book Requests, Excluding OA_Gold) were pulled for ProQuest and EBSCO's e-book platforms at the end of the spring 2021 semester. In spring 2021, e-books on the ProQuest or EBSCO platforms accounted for approximately 80% of the e-books licensed for courses. COUNTER 5 Unique_Title_Requests provides comparable usage across e-book platforms and was accordingly preferred. COUNTER 5 TR_B1 reports were pulled again for ProQuest's Ebook Central at the end of the 2021 calendar year to investigate Unique_Title_Requests for materials licensed for courses in spring 2021 and not assigned in fall 2021.

RQ3. To consider the quality of assigned titles that were available for Milner Library to license at great potential cost savings to students, the ISBN of all texts licensed for spring 2021, fall 2021, and spring 2022 were uploaded to the Resources for College Libraries bulk search. RCL is a core list of resources for college libraries across academic disciplines (Resources for College Libraries 2022). Up to 1,000 ISBN, UPC, or EAN can be searched by uploading a .CSV file or pasting the numbers into RCL's advanced search, bulk search application. The results are

returned within the browser and can also be exported in a variety of formats. Exported data does not, however, include the Outstanding Academic Title (OAT) designation, so results were accordingly viewed in the web browser. OATs are selected by *Choice* editors as “the most important recently published academic works” and are included in the RCL database. After considering the licensed texts, the authors similarly processed all titles assigned at ISU during the spring 2021, fall 2021, and spring 2022 semesters in lists provided by the registrar’s office. Although these were also processed via the RCL bulk search, the limit of 1,000 ISBNs required that they be processed in multiple batches.

RQ4. The registrar’s lists of adopted texts were again consulted to investigate title persistence. The authors compiled a list of all assigned texts at ISU in fall 2020, spring 2021, fall 2021, and spring 2022. Including titles assigned in fall 2020 allowed the authors to explore title persistence over a longer time period, from two, to three, and finally four semesters. Title and ISBN were de-duplicated within individual semesters to avoid counting a single text multiple times due to its being used across multiple sections of a single course or in different courses. The data for all four semesters were compared to those of titles licensed by the library over the course of the spring 2021, fall 2021, and spring 2022 semesters, to all titles assigned in these three semesters, and to all titles assigned in the fall 2021 and spring 2022 semesters. The authors used Excel’s COUNTIF function to indicate if a title or ISBN was duplicated in the list and then to calculate the number of these occurrences.

Findings

Characteristics of the project courses and e-books

Texts were licensed across all ISU academic colleges and course levels—no program or degree

was excluded. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show the distribution of e-books licensed by ISU college and course level across the spring 2021, fall 2021, and spring 2022 semesters. It is no surprise that the College of Arts & Sciences—the largest college at ISU—had the most e-books licensed each semester; well-represented departments in that college are broken out in Figure 2. Three-hundred level courses also had the most e-books licensed each semester, excluding spring 2022, in which 300- and 400-level courses tied.

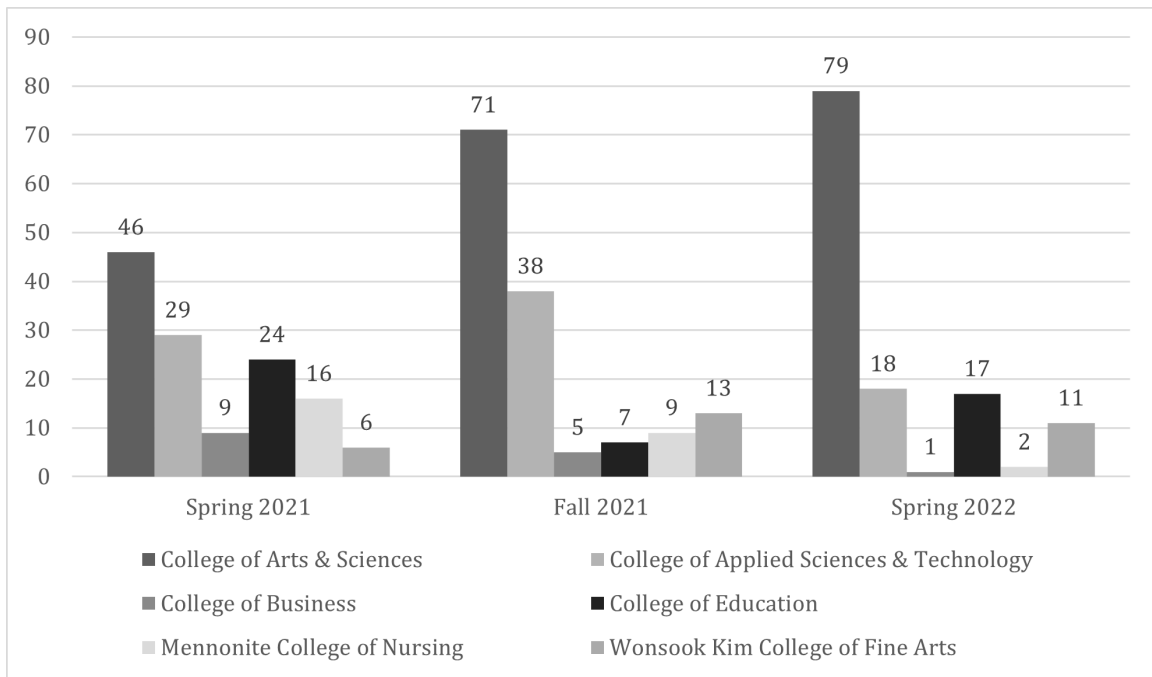


Figure 1. Distribution of licensed e-books by ISU college

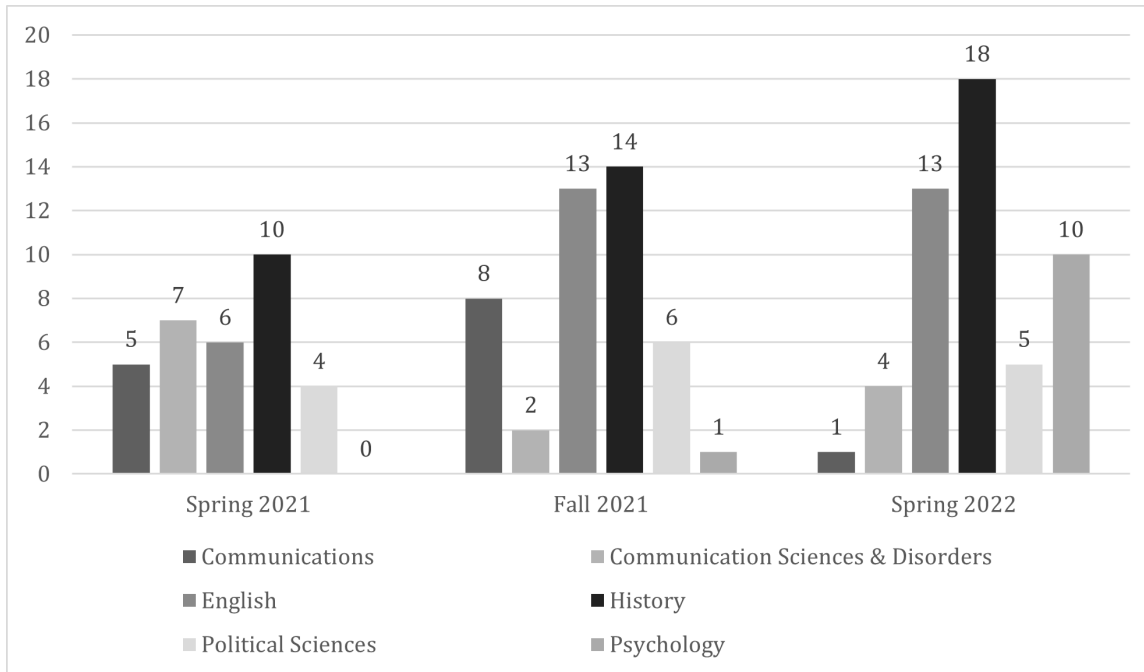


Figure 2. Distribution of licensed e-books within selected College of Arts & Sciences departments

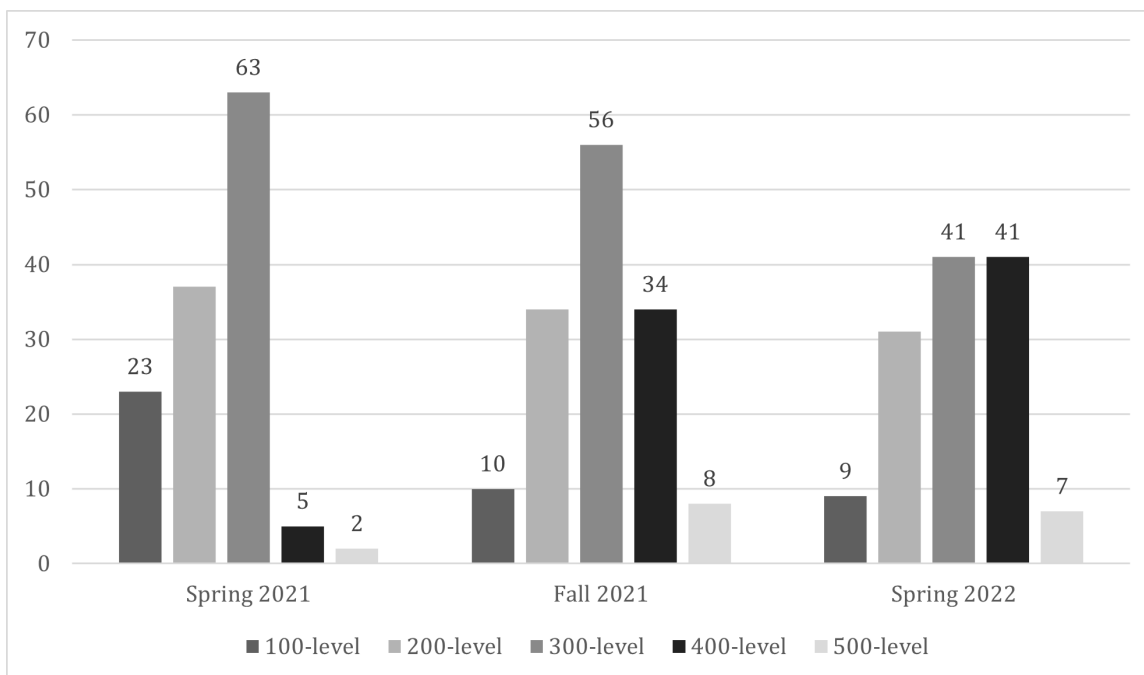


Figure 3. Distribution of licensed e-books by ISU course level

Many publishers do not make their content available for libraries to license or offer

economically viable terms for institutional licensing (University of Guelph Library 2020). In the three semesters this project has been conducted, the highest percentage of all assigned texts available to license via GOBI has been around one-third. E-books published by traditional textbook publishers are often unavailable to license individually, and when they are available, they are often attended by exorbitant costs. Figure 4 shows the publishers of titles for which Milner Library licensed more than five e-books over the course of the spring 2021, fall 2021, and spring 2022 semesters. Routledge led with 28 titles purchased, followed by a handful of academic and university presses, and some specialized publishers. It is not surprising that university presses would be so well represented. The team was pleased that disciplinary publishers such as F. A. Davis, Brookes, Corwin, and Sagamore-Venture, who all publish traditional textbooks, extend reasonable pricing and licensing terms to academic libraries.

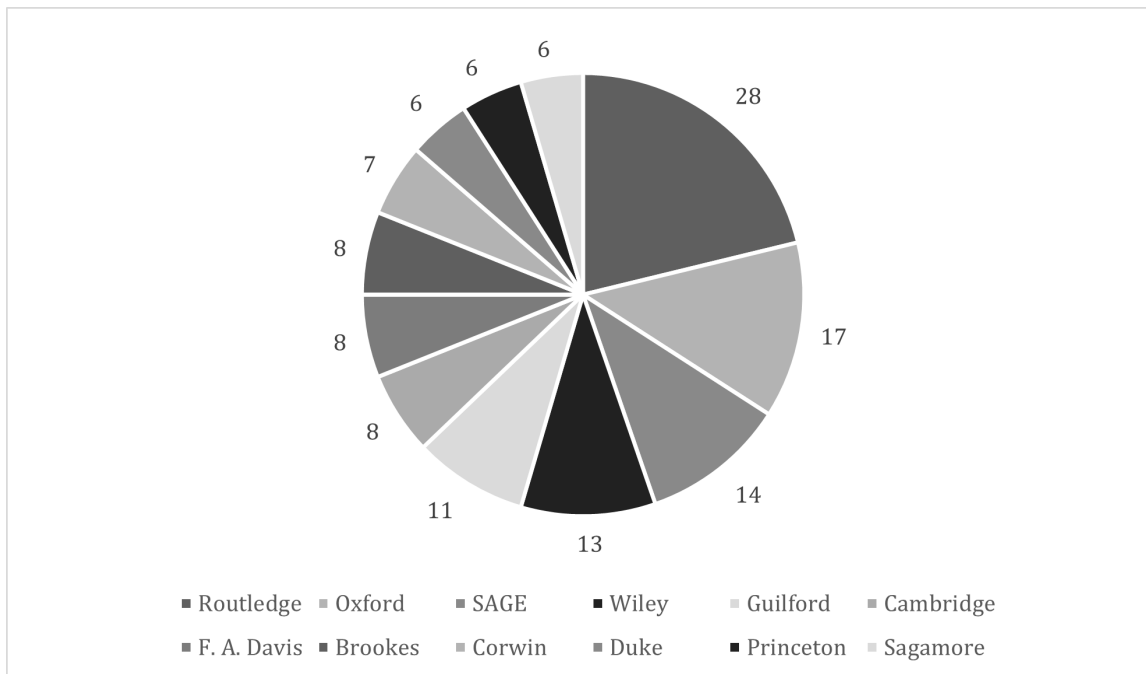


Figure 4. Publishers with more than 5 titles licensed

RQ1. What are the potential savings to students, on average, of the library licensing around

\$10,000 worth of assigned texts a semester?

In spring 2021, the library invested \$9,964 in assigned e-books. The 3,910 students enrolled across 132 sections had the opportunity to save as much as \$221,280. A total of 75 e-books were purchased perpetually.

In fall 2021, the library invested \$11,935 in new e-books for 2,540 students enrolled in 142 sections. Students had the opportunity to save up to \$129,142 on newly licensed texts. In addition to the 105 titles newly and perpetually licensed, the collection assessment librarian also identified 109 assigned titles that the library had previously licensed. The potential savings of the previously licensed e-books is \$134,797, and the combined total potential student savings for fall 2021 is \$263,939.

In spring 2022, the library invested \$13,826 in 118 new e-books, and identified 126 titles that had been previously purchased with a license that supported spring 2022 course usage. The 1,805 students enrolled in sections with a newly licensed e-text had the opportunity to save up to \$81,932. Students also had the opportunity to save up to \$155,482 on previously licensed texts in spring 2022. The total potential savings to students via library-licensed e-books in spring 2022 was \$233,200. Figure 5 demonstrates the growing potential student savings from previously licensed content as this project continues, even after the most impactful new titles were licensed in the initial round and the potential savings of newly licensed content diminishes.

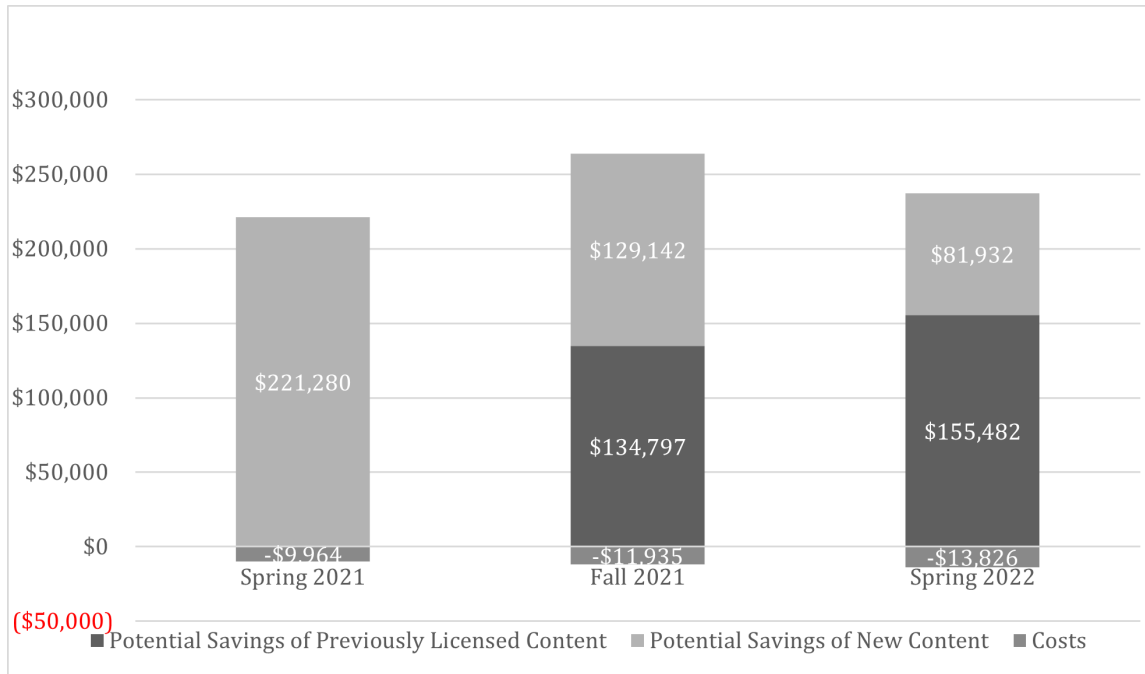


Figure 5. Licensing costs and potential savings

RQ2. How do usage rates for library licensed e-books assigned in a course compare to those of other e-books?

Figure 6 shows the combined average monthly e-book usage on the ProQuest and EBSCO platforms during the 2021 spring semester. The graph depicts the average number of unique title requests for e-books assigned in participating classes, assigned in non-participating classes, and e-books not assigned in a spring semester 2021 course. Spring 2021 was the only semester in which we focused exclusively on courses for which the instructor consented to participate. E-books used by classes that participated in the pilot project saw tremendous usage relative to other e-books. The monthly average usage of unique title requests for participating classes was 44, compared to an average of 0.5 for e-books that were not assigned in a course. Textbooks licensed for classes with professors who chose not to participate also saw markedly higher usage than our other e-books purchased during this same period, though not nearly as much as the books bought for participating classes. The monthly average for these e-books was 2.2 unique title requests,

over four times higher than e-books that were not assigned but twenty times less than e-books assigned in participating classes. This reiterates the importance of collaborating with faculty and making it easy for them to integrate assigned e-books into their courses.

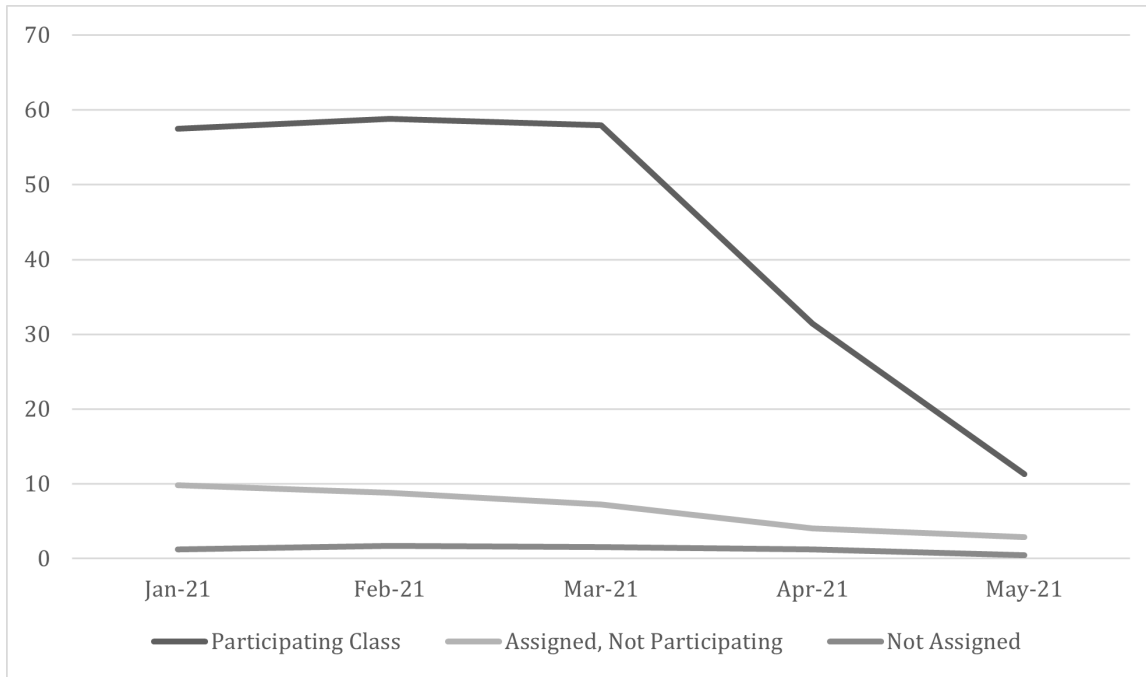


Figure 6. Spring 2021 average monthly usage by status

Figure 7 shows the average monthly usage of ProQuest e-books in the fall 2021 semester that had been assigned in the spring 2021 semester but were not assigned in the fall 2021 semester, compared to all e-books available on ProQuest during this period. These titles had a relatively high average monthly usage of 3.9 unique title requests compared to the average monthly usage of 0.9 for all ProQuest e-books during the fall 2021 semester.

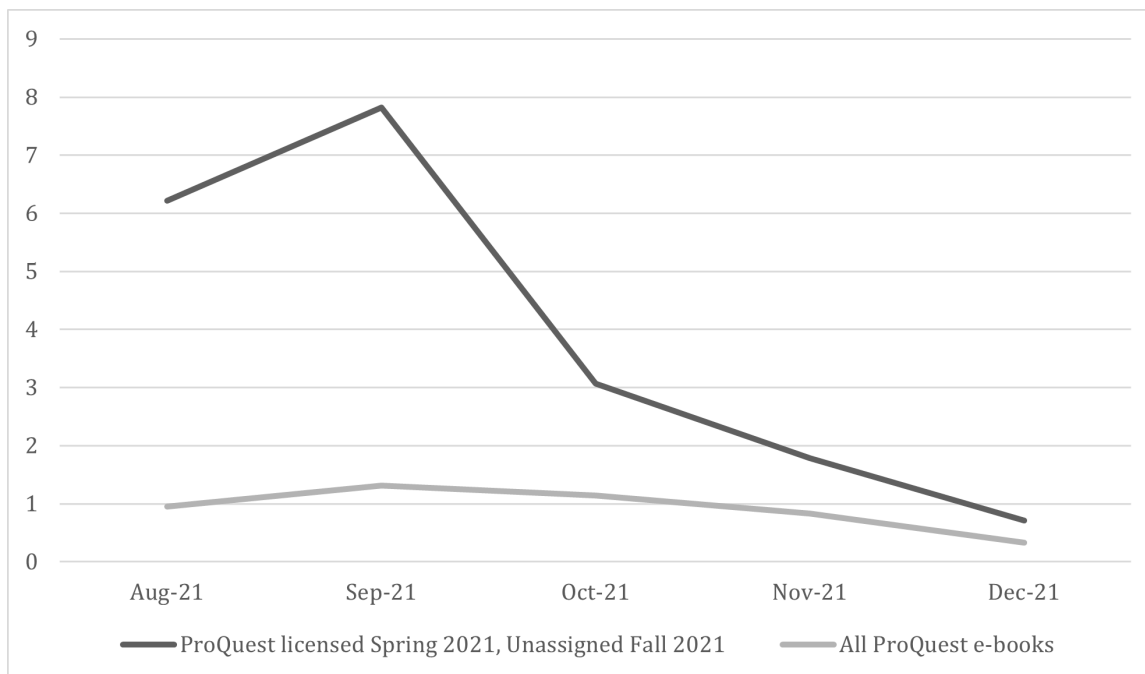


Figure 7. Fall 2021 average monthly usage by status

RQ3. Are the assigned titles licensed by the library of good quality according to RCL Core Titles list?

Of the 293 titles with an ISBN licensed for spring 2021, fall 2021, and spring 2022, 36 (13%) are included in RCL with three (1%) designated as OAT. Of the 2,251 titles with an ISBN assigned spring 2021, fall 2021, and spring 2022 at ISU, 294 (13%) are included in RCL, with nine (0.4%) designated as OAT. Of the 1,946 titles that were assigned but not licensed by the library during these three semesters, 252 (13%) are included in RCL and with ten (0.5%) designated as an OAT. Although texts licensed by the library appeared in RCL at the same rate (13%) as all assigned texts, licensed texts were more than twice as likely to be designated as an OAT.

The authors conducted a similar analysis for all e-book titles purchased via Demand Driven Acquisitions (DDA) during the 2020 and 2021 fiscal years to provide additional context for these results. Milner Library has an e-book DDA program with ProQuest; in FY 2020, 314 titles were purchased, and in FY 2021, 374 were purchased. Of these 688 titles, 51 (7%) are included in RCL, and 4 (0.6%) are designated as an OAT.

RQ4. How frequently are the same editions of a title assigned at ISU?

The authors compiled a list of all assigned texts at ISU in the fall 2020, spring 2021, fall 2021, and spring 2022 semesters. Title and ISBN were de-duplicated within individual semesters to avoid counting a single text multiple times due to its being used across multiple sections of a single course or in different courses. Results indicate that title persistence increases over longer periods of study. Within these four semesters, a total of 5,688 texts were assigned. Around 39% (2,238) of the texts were assigned multiple times when counted by ISBN. ISBN data is not available for all texts and accordingly, the duplicate count by title was slightly higher, at around 42% (2,382). Inconsistencies in the transcription and presentation of title information, however, renders the title field particularly susceptible to matching errors. Given these caveats, it seems that over one-third of assigned texts at ISU in these four semesters were assigned in more than one semester during the two-year period.

The authors then investigated the persistence of the titles licensed through the e-textbook pilot program. The pilot program commenced with the spring 2021 semester, and accordingly includes only three semesters—spring 2021, fall 2021, and spring 2022. Of the 298 unique titles newly licensed through this project, 52 (17%) were assigned at least twice when matched by title, and 53 (18%) were assigned at least twice when matched by ISBN. When all assigned texts at ISU over these three semesters was investigated, the title persistence rate was higher than for those licensed by the library. Of the 3,877 titles assigned at ISU over three semesters, 1,258 (32%) were assigned more than once when matched by ISBN and 1,330 (34%) when matched by title. Of 2,541 titles assigned at ISU over the fall 2021 and spring 2022 semesters, 469 (18%) were assigned more than once when matched by ISBN and 509 (20%). Figure 8 demonstrates the increase in title persistence rates as the period of evaluation increases from two to four semesters.

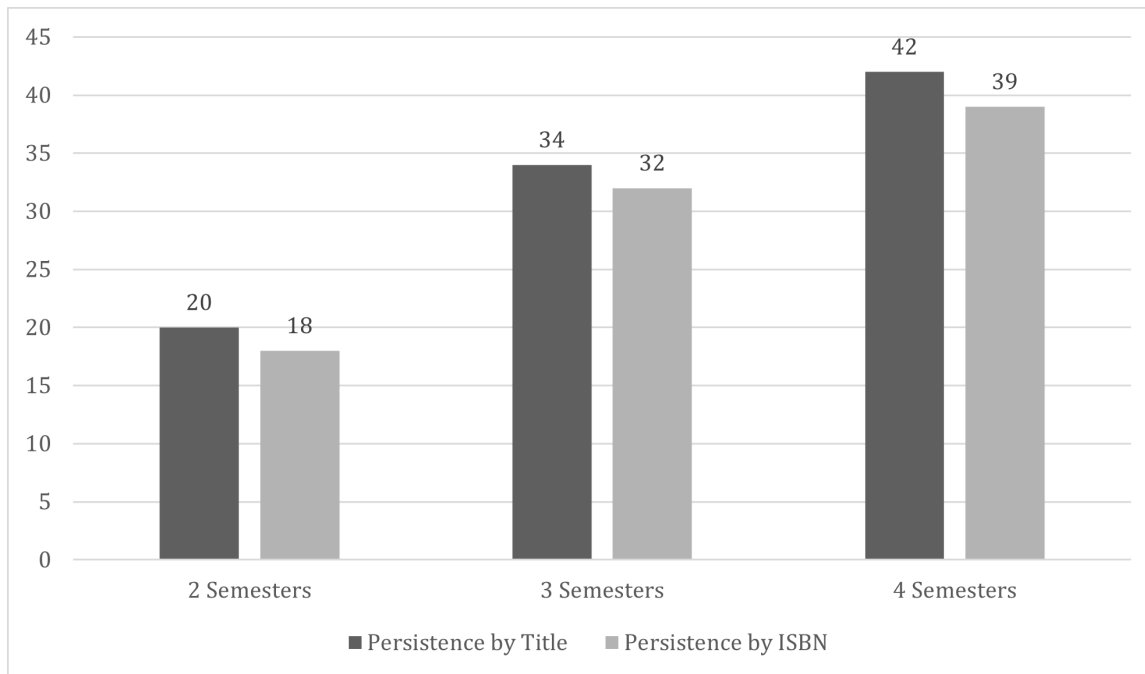


Figure 8. Title persistence percentage rates by title and ISBN for all assigned texts

Discussion

The authors acknowledge a variety of limitations to this study. The project team first met in the fall of 2020 and has only had three semesters to develop and refine their approaches. In the initial semester, ProQuest and EBSCO e-book platforms were preferred based on their relative comprehensiveness of access and robustness of usage data. In subsequent semesters, e-books have been licensed from a variety of publishers, on a variety of platforms, and with varying terms of use; this approach has made collecting and comparing e-book usage information more complex. The authors further acknowledge limitations around calculating the maximum potential student savings using the provided cost of materials in the University bookstore and including all enrolled students. Studies have shown that students have a variety of means of accessing assigned content; many of these options are at a significant discount to the prices offered by the official bookstore and some students will not avail themselves of the library provided e-book

(Florida Virtual Campus 2018).

Several scholars and advocates are doing important work on considerations related to licensing versus ownership of digital content (Library Futures 2022). Although the authors acknowledge several problems with current e-book licenses, they have made the decision not to wait for a perfect license to be in place and have even purchased licenses with limitations on the number of concurrent or total uses. The head of collection development receives notices for turn-aways when a non-linear title has a limited number of loan days remaining. This may suggest that using non-linear licenses for assigned e-books is viable, *assuming librarians monitor usage and can expand access*, by adding another non-linear copy, an unlimited user license, or otherwise, as needed. There are, of course, instances in which access cannot be expanded and this reiterates the importance of checking enrollments before promoting a non-linear or other limited license as an effective textbook replacement to instructors. Librarians make the best choices for their community's immediate needs and realities—i.e. no expectation to collect comprehensively, a variety of demands on physical space, and flat or decreased budgets—and select from less than ideal options. The value of assigned e-books makes sense in the authors' institutional context due to their relatively high benefit-cost, use, persistence, sufficient quality, and, of course, patron support. The authors appreciate that the overall value of assigned e-books, like any given resource or service, will depend on one's institutional context.

Despite these limitations and challenges, the authors plan to continue and even expand this program. The longer this strategy is pursued, the more relevant e-books will be available for faculty to incorporate into their instruction. The increasing number of previously licensed titles included in this program demonstrates a growing pool of available assigned texts. The strategy is not simply to increase our inventory of e-books, but rather to convey to campus constituents that

librarians are willing and eager to license the texts that instructors select for their courses. Instructors increasingly reach out to library personnel to inquire after the availability of texts or to request that materials be purchased for an upcoming course. The value of this project is cumulative and reinforcing; the longer it continues, the more e-books will be available with perpetual and unlimited user licenses, the larger the title inventory from which instructors may select, and the more instructors will be aware of these offerings and incorporate available texts into their respective courses.

Future Directions and Conclusion

The findings related to usage of assigned e-books align with previous studies that demonstrate how e-books purchased for a specific need or user will outpace those purchased “just in case” (Walker and Arthur 2018). This reality emphasizes the importance of instructors alerting students to the availability of the e-book, helping them find it, and encouraging them to use it. Even when instructors did not participate in the pilot project or notify students that the library had licensed their assigned text as an e-book, these titles still received over four times more usage than other e-books. The usage of titles licensed in spring 2021 and not assigned in fall 2021 provides evidence that assigned texts contribute value to the overall collection and receive usage outside of the context of their initial course assignment. The usage persistence—that is, how materials are used beyond their initial assignment—contributes to the e-books’ overall value and merits further study.

It is worth clarifying that this study does not attempt to measure the quality of books that instructors assign in their courses. Text assignments are, of course, beyond the control of librarians and not subject to librarian approval. Rather, this question sought to explore the intersection of the quality of assigned texts as measured by their inclusion in RCL with their

availability for library licensing at terms that offer cost-savings to students. That texts included in this pilot were twice as likely as other texts assigned in courses at ISU to be designated as OATs in RCL suggests that these are indeed good books that would generally benefit an academic library collection. Analyzing DDA purchases for the same period provides comparable data that makes a case for using RCL to investigate the quality of these additions. Further investigation into RCL measures of quality could target assigned texts that are unavailable for libraries to license on good terms.

As noted, the above text persistence analysis does not account for texts like *Teaching High School Science Through Inquiry*, which has been assigned in multiple courses (Chemistry 301, Biology 161, Biology 231, and Biology 307) within a single semester, or *The Political Classroom*, which is assigned across multiple sections within a single semester. The use of texts across multiple course sections and courses is quite common at ISU. Titles available for the library to license may not have as much persistence as commercial textbooks, however, this phenomenon merits further investigation beyond the scope of this exploratory study. The authors can safely conclude that e-books are assigned with greater frequency than detailed above and the duplication of text assignments within a semester adds considerable potential value from the library's perspective—assuming an unlimited, DRM-free, or other sufficiently robust license can be procured. Further study of assigned textbook persistence over longer periods of time is needed to understand the impact of title persistence on library collection strategies. An investigation into the relationship between high title persistence and e-books that are and are not available for institutional licensing, especially, warrants further study.

The literature shows that librarians have long been interested in providing assigned materials to students, whether through print or electronic reserves, bookstore partnerships, OER

initiatives, or textbook affordability programs. This study found that an investment of \$10,000-\$14,000 a semester yields a total potential student savings of around \$200,000 to \$260,000; assigned e-books are used at a rate of at least four times e-books that are not assigned; licensed, assigned e-books are about twice as likely to be designated as an Outstanding Academic Text; and around 40% of titles are assigned more than once in a four-semester period. This study, read alongside the authors' previous work exploring student and faculty perspectives on textbook affordability, highlights alternatives to relying solely on usage data or benefit-cost analysis in making a case for academic libraries to contribute to affordable course materials and invest in student success. By studying title persistence and investigating RCL quality considerations of assigned materials, this study provides novel mechanisms for exploring the overall value of licensing e-books assigned in courses.

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