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### Texts on Repeat: Examining the Persistence of Assigned Course Materials

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# Texts on Repeat: Examining the Persistence of Assigned Course Materials

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## Abstract

Many academic libraries' collection development policies have discouraged the acquisition of assigned textbooks, but recent trends to support textbook affordability, student success, and online learning have caused some library personnel to rethink this approach. Through recent efforts at our library to purchase available e-copies for assigned course textbooks, we became curious about title persistence, or the frequency with which a unique title is assigned across multiple semesters and within a single semester across multiple sections. In this presentation we provide some background and context for our textbook affordability efforts and examine several years of assigned textbook data at Illinois State University for title persistence, prevalence within fields of study, and the relationship between title persistence and specific publishers.

# Introduction

Many academic libraries have long limited textbook purchases for a variety of reasons. They are expensive, frequently updated, ephemeral in their relevance and appeal, and their coverage of content is either too basic—recording general knowledge and not serious scholarship—or too specific. In recent years, however, this perspective has shifted. 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. Unfortunately, librarians' abilities to act on this philosophy are often limited. The long-standing and popular library service of placing print texts on physical course reserve has lost relevance not only due to recent shifts toward online and hybrid instruction but also because of single-user digital access models. Inclusive access arrangements between textbook publishers and academic institutions often allow few opportunities for involvement from the library.

To set up our discussion about title persistence, we offer a look at Illinois State University (ISU) and what we have been doing to help with textbook costs. Illinois State is a Carnegie R2 public research university with around 20,600 students. About 30 percent of our students are Pell-eligible, 17 percent are first-generation, and nearly 30 percent come from underrepresented groups. Around 160 degrees are offered from six colleges. Since 2017 there have been efforts at the university, library, and state levels to address textbook affordability. ISU has a campus-wide textbook affordability committee that is part of our shared governance structure. The committee has surveyed ISU students and faculty in recent years to determine the extent to which textbook costs may be a problem for students and to learn what is important to faculty when they select course materials.

Some statewide initiatives are also on our radar. The Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI) joined the Open Education Network in 2017. CARLI is currently in the middle of a multi-year, \$2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to support the creation of new OERs by faculty at Illinois post-secondary institutions. And the state has a task force doing work right now as part of the Illinois College Course Materials Affordability and Equitable Access Collaborative Study Act.

Finally, Milner Library is engaged in textbook affordability in several ways. The library's strategic plan has language that supports open and affordable resource initiatives, and in that vein a working group has been active for the past one and a half years to provide opportunities for library personnel to better learn about and engage with these materials along with promoting library services in this area. A separate working group—those of us presenting today plus our Electronic Resources Librarian colleague Rachel Park—has focused on increasing the library's collection of e-books assigned as textbooks. In response to challenges magnified by COVID, we have since Fall 2020 purchased 736 unique e-textbook titles used across nearly 1,000 course sections. Each semester we follow a workflow that begins with acquiring textbook selection data

that is made publicly available by the University Registrar's Office, and it is that data—going back several years—that we examine in this presentation.

## Impact on Student Learning

We wanted to offer insight into how we see the connection between acquiring assigned course materials and the impact on student learning. Our working group very clearly identifies a relationship between student access to textbooks and student success—beyond academic impacts, like removing barriers to learning by enabling first-day access to textbooks. Our efforts make the college experience more affordable for our students. These personal and educational benefits are the primary motivation for the work we have been undertaking at ISU.

As previously noted, our working group has provided eTextbooks for students for the last five semesters at Illinois State. At the end of our pilot semester, we conducted student focus groups and a survey for those in courses using an eTextbook provided by the library. At last year's Charleston conference, we shared a poster about incorporating student feedback in our project (Jallas et al., 2021). The key takeaway was that the student experience was overwhelmingly positive, and students were grateful for the financial savings. We gleaned that library-provided eTextbooks would potentially impact the course selection of students in future semesters – a majority of our survey respondents said they would be very likely or somewhat likely to register for future courses that utilize eTextbooks from the library.

In addition, we had some illuminating quotes in our open responses on the survey. One student shared, "It allows me to have more money allocated to what most college students actually struggle with like eating, housing and mental health. I can gain peace of mind knowing that finances isn't one of the factors hindering my academic experience here at the university." Responses like this and others we gathered illuminate the student experience and have been critical as we demonstrate the impact and value of our program.

We see our work fitting into a larger landscape of OER & Textbook Affordability Advocacy. Like many, we consider the efforts of libraries acquiring course texts on a spectrum of affordability options for students. Open Education Resources are part of this spectrum and our Library and campus have various groups advocating for the adoption of OER. We truly view our work as increasing awareness of how low and no-cost textbook options can drastically benefit our students. As I mentioned earlier, during our pilot semester for eTextbooks, we collected data from students and faculty that participated. With that, we've been able to advocate for funding from campus partners. We've grown from 10k in one-time funding for a semester to securing a total of \$65,000 across a few semesters in grant funds from our Associate Vice President for Student Success.

All this funding and support on campus is raising the library's profile as a partner in textbook affordability and student success on campus. This cultivates more opportunities to increase awareness about all ranges of textbook affordability—including OER. In addition to raising awareness, it also has us considering the long-term implications of acquiring the course materials- for all the reasons mentioned at the beginning of the presentation, we wanted to explore the efficacy of spending more campus funding on textbook acquisition.

# Data Collection and Description

We wanted to make sure we were spending campus money responsibly when purchasing e-textbooks by analyzing how much reuse the typical textbook we purchase might see. Unfortunately, when we reached out to the Registrar's office to inquire about this data, we were informed that they had switched to a new system in 2015 and no longer had any historical textbook data prior to that point. After following several leads with the Office of Information Technology we ultimately were able to recover the textbook data all the way back to 2012, but unfortunately not in time to include it in this current analysis. We will incorporate this data in the future and share it in another format.

In some departments instructors submit their textbook selections to an administrative assistant who handles the data entry, while in others individual instructors enter everything themselves. Unfortunately, this results in instructors entering their data in a highly inconsistent way, and sometimes even the most important of the required fields such as title, author, and ISBN are left blank. Some will enter the same ISBN every time they select a particular work, but others appear to randomly google the ISBN every time they enter it, sometimes entering the hardcover, other times the paperback, or the looseleaf edition, and sometimes even substituting an e-book ISBN while indicating in the text that the print copy will be used. This means our analysis would be inaccurate if we only tracked a work by ISBN. In order to actually capture the persistence of a work from semester to semester, I took several weeks to go through the entire 54,000-line spreadsheet by hand and group together the ISBNs that apply to the same edition of a work in different physical formats. I also had to group all editions of the same work together and fill out critical missing information such as the book's name or edition before I could start analyzing the descriptive statistics in Excel. This took multiple weeks.

After analyzing the approximately 54,000 text assignments made during the twenty-two semesters we examined, there are about 11,200 unique ISBNs. Because there were often multiple ISBNs that appeared in the data equating to the same edition of a text, there were actually approximately 10,000 unique editions, meaning that about 11 percent of the unique editions had more than one ISBN associated with it.

Because we knew we wanted to track the persistence of a work from semester to semester, we also had to categorize each unique ISBN by work. For example, six separate editions of *Constitutional Law for a Changing America* were assigned. Similarly, there were frequently multiple editions of fiction works or classical works assigned. Every edition of *Frankenstein* was categorized as the same work, though there were many unique editions with different editing and commentary. Classical works like Plato's *Republic* were assigned with multiple different translations. These were all considered the same work, but separate editions.

We also tracked the formatting of the editions associated with each ISBN. For example, while the 6th edition of *Organizational Behavior* was assigned to many sections of MQM 221, some sections were assigned a hardcover copy, while some were assigned a bundle of the hardcover plus an access code, and still others were assigned only the access code for the electronic copy. Image 1 shows the format of assigned texts during the period under investigation.

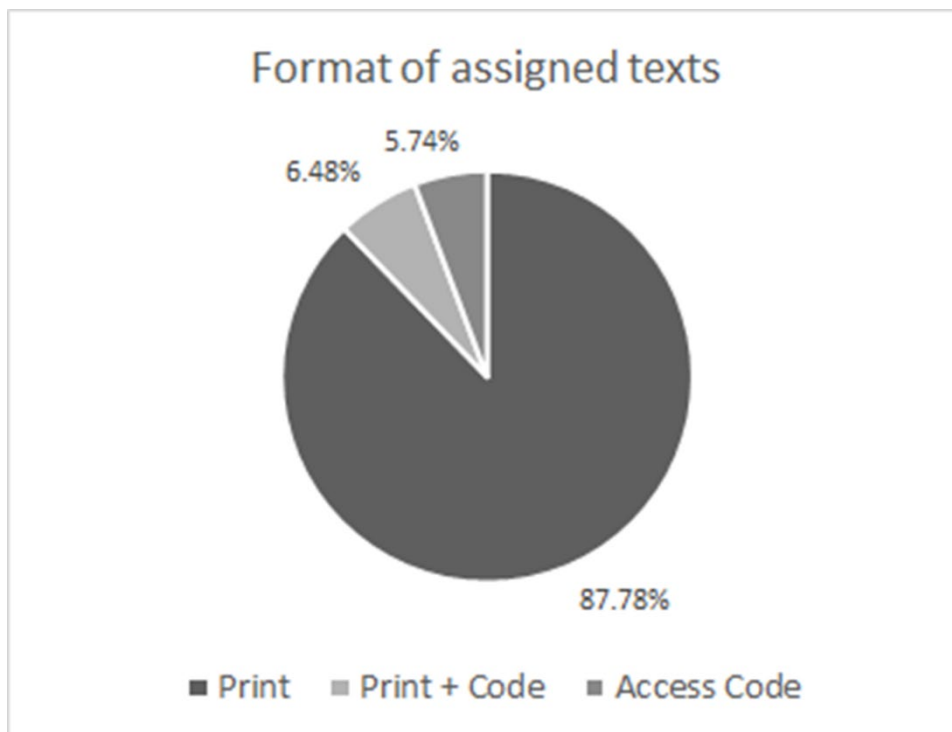


Image 1. Format of Assigned Texts

At first, we were very surprised by how many editions were only used once--45 percent. When we saw that 44 percent of all works were used only once, that number started to make a little more sense.

It appears that there's a high rate of professors trying out new works. It may take them several semesters to settle on one that they like. When they find a text that they like, they tend to stick with it for an average of five and a half semesters. Sometimes this means using the same edition of the same work for many years, but if a work is being assigned more than one semester, on average the edition is updated every 4.6 years.

The frequency with which different sections use the same textbook is obviously heavily influenced by the assignment of professors. When a professor is teaching multiple sections of the same class, they will almost certainly use the same textbook for all sections. Unfortunately, the file the Registrar's Office was able to produce for us lacked any information about professor assignment, so this influence is impossible for us to track.

At our institution, departmental policies on textbook selection vary widely. Images 2 and 3 present two examples from a pivot table tracking the use of a work by section number within each class in Fall 2015. In some departments, like History or English, the textbook choice is completely up to the individual professor. In others, like Accounting and some of the sciences, all sections of a class must use the same work and the work is selected by committee.

4	Row Labels	001	002	003	004	005	006	007	008	009
5	ACC 131	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
6	Cornerstones of Fin Acc	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
7	ACC 132	1	1	1						
8	Managerial Accounting	1	1	1						
9	ACC 167	1	1	1	1	1				
10	Skills for Success with Microsoft Excel [YEAR]	1	1	1	1	1				
11	ACC 168	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
12	WORDPRESS: VISUAL QUICKSTART GUIDE	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
13	ACC 230	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
14	EFFECTIVE WRITING: HANDBOOK FOR ACCOUNT	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
15	Horngren's Cost Accounting: A Managerial Emphasis	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
16	ACC 231	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
17	Intermediate Accounting	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Image 2. Assigned Texts in Accounting

Row Labels	001	002	003	004	005	006	007	008	009	010	011	012	013
HIS 111	5	5	3	3	1	2	4	4	1	2			
AMERICAN HISTORY(CUSTOM HIS 111)	1	1			1				1				
By the People (Fraser)						1				1			
CHEROKEE WOMEN							1	1					
CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT	1	1											
DIFFERENT MIRROR REV			1	1									
Go Set a Watchman	1	1											
HELP	1	1											
Immigrant Voices, New Lives in America, 1773-2000							1	1					
MEXIFORNIA UPDTD & REV							1	1					
NISEI DAUGHTER						1				1			
OUT TO WORK 20TH ANNIV ED W/NEW EPILOGU				1									
PROMISED LAND	1	1					1	1					
UNSTEADY MARCH				1	1								
What it Means to be 98 percent Cimbanzee					1								

Image 3. Assigned Texts in History

Image 4 shows a similar pivot table tracking the use of individual editions within each class over the course of multiple semesters. We found that when we differentiate by edition of the work, we see that classes with many sections often do not switch to the new edition all at once. Some professors will switch as soon as the new edition is released, while others take a semester or two before they change editions.

Row Labels	Fall 2015	Spring 2016	Summer 2016	Fall 2016	Spring 2017	Summer 2017	Fall 2017	Spring 2018
ACC 270	3	3	2	3	4	2	3	3
Info Sys: Manager's Guide to Harnessing Technology 1	3	3	2	1				
Info Sys: Manager's Guide to Harnessing Technology 2								
Info Sys: Manager's Guide to Harnessing Technology v4.0				1	1			
Info Sys: Manager's Guide to Harnessing Technology 4.0.1				1	2			2
Info Sys: Manager's Guide to Harnessing Technology 4.0.3					1		1	1
Info Sys: Manager's Guide to Harnessing Technology 5.0.1						1		
Info Sys: Manager's Guide to Harnessing Technology 6								1
Info Sys: Manager's Guide to Harnessing Technology 7.0.1								
MANAGING & USING INFORMATION SYSTEMS 6								

Image 4. New Editions in Accounting

## Data Trends: Publishers, Formats, and Frequently Assigned Texts

Although we are in the exploratory phase of our work, there are nonetheless some trends we're investigating that might be of interest. As noted, publisher information is entered inconsistently in the spreadsheet which introduces errors. Nonetheless, a preliminary analysis shows that

assigning texts from some of the major commercial publishers seems to be on the decline at ISU. Image 5 shows this decline over fall semesters in the past four academic years. The decline prompted the question of whether fewer texts are being assigned overall, whether there is more diversity of publishers, or something else entirely. The answer to all these questions is likely “yes.”

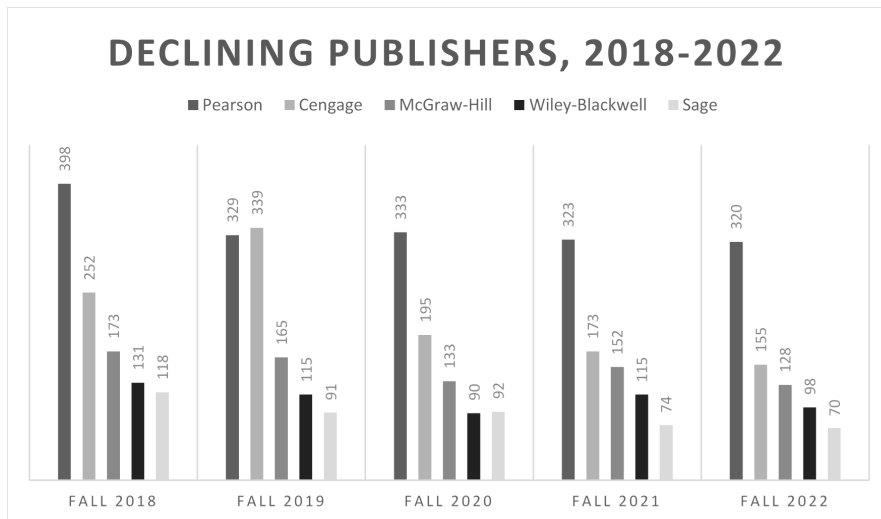


Image 5. Declining Publishers, 2018-22

On the whole, the number of texts assigned per semester has declined over the past eight years. The total number of publishers fell from 3,554 in fall 2016 to 3,022 in fall 2022. Of these, however, the number of unique publishers has remained stable, ranging from 432 to 448. So, the percentage of unique texts in 2016 and 2018 was 12 percent and in 2022 it is up to 14 percent. This suggests that even as the number of assigned texts has decreased, the variety of materials and diversity of publishers has not. Several factors play into this, most notably COVID and the need for digital availability of learning materials. We are also hearing concerns about traditional textbooks from faculty. One music professor summarized their main complaints about textbooks by saying: “textbooks are expensive, one size fits all, conservative, more about content than critical thinking, and you can’t change them.”

We are also exploring the assignment of access codes over the past twenty-two semesters. We expected that these might have dramatically increased over the past eight years, but as depicted in Image 6, that is not necessarily the case, at least not consistently so. In 2015, access code or print + access code equaled about 10.5 percent of all assigned texts. In Fall 2022, they make up about 13 percent of all assigned texts. When we investigate the use of codes at departmental levels, we see conflicting trends.



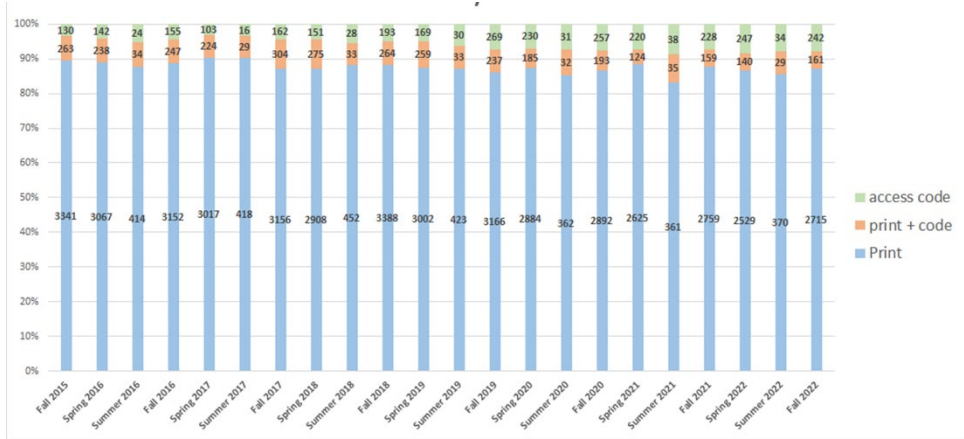


Image 6. Assignment of Access Codes

In Communications, for example, the use of access codes increased to around 50-60 percent of assigned texts beginning in Fall 2019. As you can see in Image 7, prior to Fall 2019, almost no access codes had been assigned.

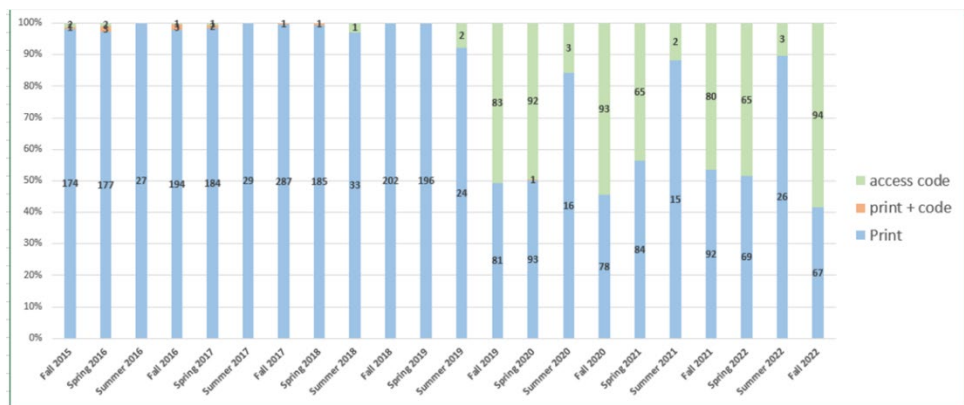


Image 7. Assignment of Access Codes in Communications

This trend is echoed in Business, where Print + Access Code was assigned in the most recent semester, while previous semesters had been almost exclusively print. Chemistry has been averaging around 10-20 percent access codes for a while, but this semester suddenly 40 percent of their texts are access code only. However, several departments that had previously heavily used access codes have backed off in recent years. As shown in Image 8, Kinesiology and Recreation previously assigned 30-40 percent for their texts as access code or print + access code. Since fall 2019, however, they have not assigned more than a handful per semester.

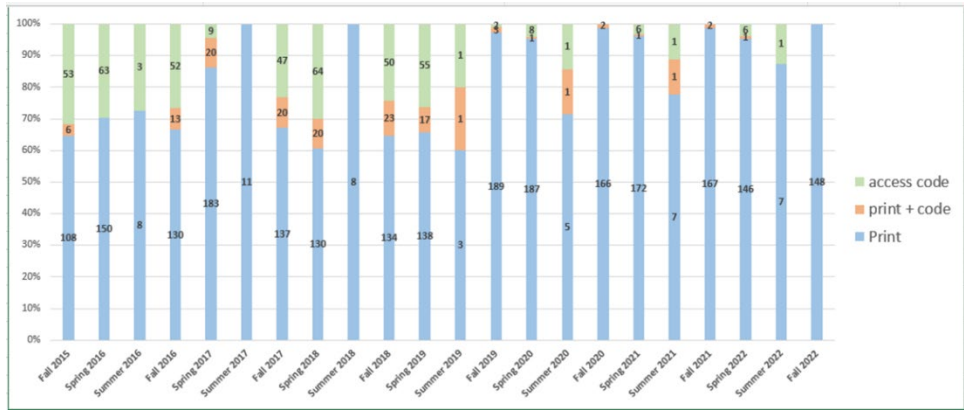


Image 8. Assignment of Access Codes in Kinesiology and Recreation

Courses and majors with high title persistence are another area we will investigate once our data are cleaned up. We’ve already addressed much of the low-hanging fruit by licensing the frequently assigned texts that are available e-books with an unlimited or concurrent user license. But these data may also suggest opportunities to discuss with faculty alternate texts that are available for the library to license.

**Implications for Publishers and Librarians**

There is a market for assigned texts. As noted, we’ve been able to secure increasingly large sums of money to spend on assigned texts over the past year and a half. We encourage publishers to make frequently assigned texts available to license as e-books on terms that support course usage, for example making them available DRM-free, and/or for unlimited users. In student and faculty focus groups and surveys, we repeatedly heard that frequent edition updates may drive faculty and students towards older editions and used texts. This is likely at odds with sales goals. Relatedly, student data from our research and other studies have shown that high prices inspire a variety of methods to avoid purchasing texts, such as sharing, illegally downloading, purchasing used copies in a different version, and other strategies.

We ask publishers to consider librarians’ concerns around direct to student models, including individual subscriptions, e-textbooks with codes, and inclusive access models. Such models prevent libraries and other campus support systems from providing alternate and affordable access to assigned materials for those who truly need it.

This September, Tweets from Karen Kohn, who serves as Collections Analysis Librarian at Temple University went viral. This substance of the Tweets—that libraries were told with no notice that a publisher would be pulling e-books from a subscription package—demonstrate why librarians cannot count on e-book subscriptions to support student access to assigned materials. Wiley did respond by restoring access to these titles into 2023, but this situation highlighted the lack of input librarians have in ensuring the availability of assigned materials to their students.

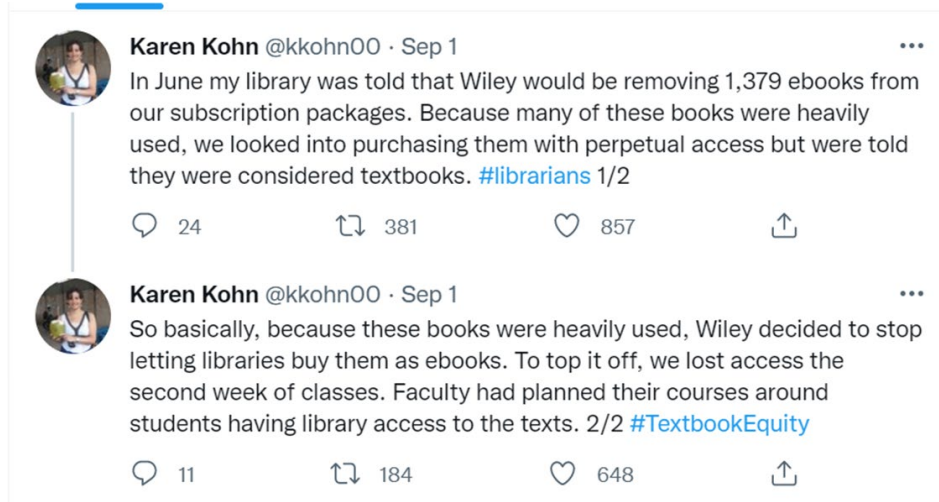


Image 9. Tweets by Karen Kohn

It has also been our experience that several frequently assigned texts are unavailable for library licensing, or at least licensing that supports, multiple simultaneous users. Given that librarians often have funds to license assigned materials, we ask what opportunities are there for publishers and aggregators to work with librarians on mutually agreeable and sustainable licensing?

In our preliminary investigation, we have determined that more than half of all assigned texts were used more than once in the period studied. The relatively high persistence of assigned texts at ISU compounds the value of the e-books we've licensed, both for the impacted students and our collections. We acknowledge that collection development is a highly contextual activity and offer a few considerations from our experience:

- Systematically investigating all assigned texts at your university may be a fruitful step in promoting textbook affordability. It has certainly taught us a great deal about some of the challenges and opportunities in this space.
- We have found that licensing frequently assigned texts delivers great value, regardless of whether our calculations focus on cost-per-use or potential student savings.
- Because of concerns that assigned texts might not be of sufficient quality to merit their inclusion in permanent collections, we have also used a quality-based metric for collection assessment to investigate the assigned texts we have licensed through this project. Using Resources for College Libraries, we compared the licensed assigned texts to e-books acquired via our patron driven acquisitions program or via firm order. The assigned texts had a higher percentage of "Outstanding Academic Text" designations than either of the other categories (Scott et al., 2022).
- Working with campus units to select and fund the acquisition of assigned text has generated goodwill for our library. When library collections are perceived as a service in support of the curriculum, librarians are appreciated as partners in education and affordability.

## Next Steps

We will continue to clean up data and integrate earlier data. We continue to have conversations, sometimes awkward, with publishers and aggregators around affordability. We hope these small acts of trust will lead to more opportunities for our students. Library and University administration have appreciated our focus on collecting and assessing data. Grant funds from the state board of higher education have been invested in assigned texts because we have shown their impact on student learning and affordability. Collecting and assessing data also provides opportunities to share our findings at conferences and hear from colleagues about their approaches. We welcome your questions, input, and ideas for collaboration.

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