Getting an Affordable Learning Solutions Program Back on Track: California State University, Dominguez Hills

Founded in 1960 as part of the California State University (CSU) system, California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) is in suburban Carson, 13 miles south of downtown Los Angeles. For the academic year 2020-2021 it had a total enrollment of 17,763, with 15,873 undergraduates and 1,890 graduate students. With 55% of the students identifying as the first in their families to go to college, CSUDH serves one of the highest percentages of first-generation college students in the CSU system.

These students also skew older (average age 25), and 65.2% percent are Hispanic/Latino. “Our demographics are not atypical for California, but I think on a national level they would be considered atypical, a minority-majority student body,” says Hallie Clawson, who is CSUDH’s Affordable Learning Solutions (AL$) Coordinator and a Reference/Instruction Librarian.

Having just started in November 2021, Clawson is still getting a sense of the AL$ program as it was developed across all the CSUs by the Chancellor’s Office, which distributes grant funding to participating campuses. “Each school makes the program their own,” explains Clawson. “In some cases, it’s run out of the library. In other cases, there are other faculty members who are the coordinators.”

The university is in a unique position, she notes, because it was one of the early pilots when the initiative was launched in the fall of 2009 to combat rising textbook costs. “We all know the statistics, right? It’s like an average $1,200.” The shape of the AL$ program at CSDUH was determined by Clawson’s predecessor, now-retired head of reference Naomi Moy. “It was largely focused on faculty—trying to do outreach, trying to convert faculty to using open educational resources, or to purchasing library copies of ebooks and textbooks so we could provide them for free.”

Textbook Rentals, Bookstore Partnership, Ebooks

Among the different pieces of the AL$ program is the Toro Textbook Library (TTL) Program, which the library launched to rent more expensive and high-use textbooks from the university bookstore and make available to students through course reserves. The 2021-2022 CSUDH AL$ annual report states that the TTL program, in renting 375 high-cost textbooks, saved students $23,832. Three hundred faculty members were recognized at the 2022 Affordable Learning Solutions Faculty Recognition Awards Ceremony.
“We are very lucky,” says Clawson, observing that the university bookstore is a key partner in the school’s AL$ program. “The manager and the textbook materials manager are very passionate about affordable solutions.” Its DH-Immediate Access program, which includes negotiating special pricing and course packs directly with publishers, saved students an estimated $610,181 for AY 2021-22.

Usage of the physical reserves, Clawson acknowledges, decreased for pandemic-related reasons but the library did lend 94 print textbooks in the 2021-2022 period. More than 1,600 e-textbooks in the library’s collection are accessible and free to students (the most frequently used digital title is Community Health Nursing with over 9,000 individual uses), and the library purchased 22 new ebook and print titles to support faculty requests. “In previous years we were able to buy a lot more ebooks that had unlimited use,” she comments. Unfortunately, many publishers are now limiting access to either a single user or, at most, three-user licenses.

ZCCM, LCCM, and OERs

Another component to saving students money is the state (Senate Bill 1359) requirement that CSU and California community colleges identify classes in their registration portals that have either zero cost (ZCCM) or low-cost (LCCM) course materials. Each semester CSUDH faculty will report to their course scheduler with the pertinent details. If they are not sure if their course qualifies as ZCCM or LCCM, they will contact Clawson to verify.

Clawson reports that much of the CSUDH faculty are already drawing on Open Educational Resources (OERs) sources like OpenStax and MERLOT. “Our mathematics department has an extremely high uptake of OER materials. I think it’s like 60% of the classes in the math department don’t require students to purchase a textbook.”

What she hears from faculty is that it is not so much a matter of wanting to use OER materials as it is which materials are available. Introductory subject textbooks can be easily found in OERs but tracking down texts in more specialized fields is more difficult. Writing a textbook is an option but that takes time that many faculty members lack. The challenge for Clawson and her AL$ team is: “How do we make it more feasible to provide resources to support faculty to create their own OERs?”

Honoring Faculty and Rebuilding Relationships

This past April the 2022 Affordable Learning Solutions Faculty Recognition Awards Ceremony was held virtually for the second year to recognize the 300 faculty members who reported course savings. Also showcased were four professors who saved each of their students at least $200. During the 2021/22 academic year the AL$ programs and faculty saved its students over $1.2 million, a figure Clawson thinks is low. “My goal is to get back to previous years when those numbers were as high as $3 million or $8 million.”

Clawson attributes the lower results to the program’s lengthy transition period between her predecessor’s departure and her arrival. Because there had not been a consistent person in the position to maintain established faculty relationships, many of those connections fell by the wayside, and new faculty arrived unaware of AL$ options. Going forward, she would like to be part of new faculty orientation once again, and this summer Clawson will be sending out a survey to faculty and students to assess their awareness of the program, “Do people know that we exist? Where are the opportunities for increasing awareness?”

Student outreach is also a big priority. Earlier this year Clawson launched an AL$ student ambassador program, hiring three students to help with outreach and data collection. They have already assisted at on-campus tabling events, including Open Education Week, and have done some social media. Her other major project for the 2022-2023 school year will be to reactivate and update an AL$ database listing not only textbooks through the library but OERs and other sources. “San José State University has a similar database,” explains Clawson, “and we’re trying to make that work for us too.”