Helping Students Get an Education Through Low-Cost Textbooks: Marshall University

Founded in 1837 and named after John Marshall, the fourth Chief Justice of the United States, Marshall University (MU) is a public research institution in Huntington, West Virginia, with additional campuses in South Charleston, Point Pleasant, Teays Valley, and Beckley. As of fall 2021, full-time enrollment (FTE) stood at 9,492, a 6.7% drop from the 2020-21 academic year. "Prior to COVID, we had probably 12,000 to 13,000 students," says Collection & Resource Management Librarian Angela Strait. “Of course, after the pandemic, everybody's dropped.”

Birth of a Textbook Loan Program

At Marshall Libraries, Strait coordinates the Textbook Loan Program (TBL) “We try to do as much as we can at the library to help students facilitate their education and continue on without having to worry so much about the little things that pile up.” In 2014 in response to West Virginia legislation requiring universities to offer low-cost textbook options to students, the University College Student Success department (now the Center for Student Success) launched the TBL as a student-support initiative in conjunction with Marshall Libraries. Because the textbooks were held on library reserve from the very beginning, the main campus library eventually took over the program's management.

Every semester Strait receives from the campus bookstore a list of faculty course adoptions, which she uses to select the titles for the TBL collection. “When professors request a title to be added to the textbook loan program, they are supposed to commit to using that textbook for at least two years,” explains Strait. “That keeps us from having to buy a new textbook.” Many of the textbooks Strait purchases are for gateway and core curriculum courses. She will also acquire digital versions if the library is able to get an unlimited license.

There are 147 textbooks listed in the currently available catalog but the number is continually changing. Titles rotate in and out of the collection as professors switch textbooks from semester to semester. Under the TBL guidelines students can check out the materials for three hours of in-library use.

The Highlights

The Challenge:
While MU was already doing good work with a Textbook Learning Program, the pandemic shook up the program's engagement.

The Solution:
MU began building up its existing OER program through training workshops, OER review stipends, and grant opportunities.

The Results:
Library OER efforts have saved MU students over $526,506 in textbook costs since 2018.
From the program’s inception in 2014 to fall 2019, total checkouts totaled 12,685. But then the pandemic put the lending of physical textbooks on hold. “We were fully closed and online by March of 2020 and had access to eTextbooks via the opening up of textbook resources from vendors such as RedShelf, VitalSource, and OpenLibrary.org,” explains Strait.

**The Pandemic’s Impact**

But to her surprise TBL’s circulation numbers shrank after the university fully reopened. “Our campus was on a phased reopening with only freshman students and those students with in-person labs allowed on campus for 2020-2021.” During this time the library’s stacks were closed and physical book lending was limited, but the TBL program did offer digital chapter loans. (This practice recently ceased because of digital rights issues, but the library is investigating the practicality of Controlled Digital Lending.) “Fall 2021 was our first fully open semester, and we went back to open stacks and full lending models,” says Strait.

In the fall of 2019, there were a total of 1,601 checkouts. The fall semester of 2021 saw a startling drop to 139 checkouts. “I am anxious to see if this trend continues in the coming semesters,” says Straits, who credits the change to many faculty already adopting digital Open Educational Resources (OER) for their classes. “A large portion of the TBL program wasn’t utilized or needed.”

**An OER Plan Becomes More Essential**

Although MU Libraries had initialized an OER plan in 2018 and the math and chemistry departments began pilot programs of open textbooks, many faculty members weren’t interested until the pandemic struck. “There were professors who didn’t even know how ebooks worked prior to COVID because they never used one,” comments Strait. But during the lockdown it became apparent how necessary it was to make learning materials more easily accessible.

From January 2020 to the present, 73 instructors have attended the library’s Open Textbook training workshops. Faculty are also paid a $250 stipend to write reviews of textbooks available in the Open Textbook Library, supported by the Open Educational Network, of which MU is a member. Stipends paid to date total $13,500 for 54 Open Textbook reviews.

Thirty-two MU faculty members have also taken advantage of the new Open Learning WV Initiative, which provides $1,000 grants for faculty to use OER in their courses. Launched in spring 2021 by the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (HEPC), it has resulted in a savings of $450,000 for 3,000 students. In recognition of their role in implementing OER, two MU librarians—Dr. Monica Garcia Brooks and Larry Sheret—recently received inaugural Open Learning WV awards.

Earlier this year the state passed legislation that requires academic institutions to indicate no-cost or low-cost materials in their course registration. “That’s a project we’re working on now,” says Strait, who notes that instructors who used to spend their Christmas break picking their spring materials are now required to submit their choices 90 days before a semester’s start. “Before the fall semester begins, they’re supposed to have everything submitted for the spring.”

Strait reports that the number of MU course sections designated as OER totaled 1,022 in the 2021 fall semester. The figure for spring 2022 was 977. She estimates that library OER efforts have saved MU students over $526,506 in textbook costs since 2018. “We learned that cost of textbooks was keeping students out of class and causing them to drop a course. Looking at that information has been a real eye-opener for the professors who were resistant and has helped them get on board.”

Currently a 1st vice president on the 2022 executive board of the West Virginia Library Association, Strait advocates for publishers to expand the number of users for digital textbooks and to lower the price point of books that can be, and are, used as textbooks. “We want students to get their education. We don’t want the cost of a textbook to be a hindrance.”