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Loaning Books by the Semester: a Case Study at a Community College Library

By

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Abstract

During the spring and fall semesters of 2016, and the spring semester of 2017, Kingsborough Community College, part of the City University of New York, launched an initiative to loan over 5,000 books for the entire semester to students in its Learning Communities and other special programs. This paper is a case study that describes the challenges of implementing the Textbook Learning Initiative by the Access Services department of the college's Robert J. Kibbee Library and its ongoing work as all of these specially purchased titles are now in the general collection for all students on a first-come, first-served basis.

Key Words: case studies, semester loan, learning communities, college libraries, community colleges

INTRODUCTION

In 2016 Kingsborough Community College (KBCC) launched the Textbook Lending Initiative (TLI), a program that made specially purchased textbooks and course materials available for semester-long loans to nearly 1,500 students enrolled in its Learning Communities (LCs). The initiative was one of several strategies, including Open Educational Resources (OERs) and the elimination of library fines and fees, being tried by academic libraries across the country to vastly reduce the cost of print textbooks for students. This case study will examine how the TLI was implemented by the library's Circulation and Reserves department, from having new shelving built to house more than roughly 5,000 additional books, to distribution, workload and ultimately, to making the materials available for all KBCC students on a first-come, first-served basis.

BACKGROUND

About Kingsborough

KBCC, an urban commuter school that is part of the City University of New York (CUNY), is located in the Manhattan Beach neighborhood of Brooklyn at the borough's southern tip. Its 71-acre campus sits on a tract of land that had formerly housed a U.S. Coast Guard training station (www.kbcc/cuny/edu). KBCC enrolled its first class of 468 students in 1964; in 2016, it had a student population of 15,968, with 11,702 enrolled full-time. More than two-thirds (44%) of its students are foreign born, with the highest percentage coming from Asia (38.6%). Slightly more than half (54%) of all students come from households with annual incomes of less than \$20,000 (www.kbcc/cuny/edu). KBCC offers two-year associate degrees in fields including Business Administration, Culinary Arts, Fashion Design, Maritime Technology, Nursing, Speech

Communication and Theatre Arts, among others. The most heavily-populated major is Liberal Arts, which in 2016 had enrolled in it some 4,611 students (www.kbcc/cuny/edu).

The library provides bibliographic instruction to students, staff and faculty at the reference desk, and additionally to students through information literacy and basic library orientation classes. Its Circulation and Reserves department occupies the same space in the library, with the circulation desk manned by eight College Assistants who work part-time on a rotating shift basis. The department is supervised by a librarian, and coordinated by a full-time office assistant who also serves as reserves manager. Students may borrow regular-loan books for four weeks with the possibility of up to three renewals, and reserve books for a period of four hours in the library. Reserve titles are kept in alphabetical order by title for easy staff access, but are cataloged and barcoded so that they are searchable in the OPAC or in the library's electronic reserve database, which also contains records of personal copies of books loaned to the library by faculty. Students who fail to bring reserve books back or bring them back late are subject to fines and fees that are higher than those for overdue stacks books.

Literature Review

ASAP and the Kingsborough Learning Communities

Launched by CUNY at six community colleges in 2007, ASAP (Accelerated Study in Associate Programs) admits students who are “fully skills proficient” (www.kbcc.cuny.edu/asap) or who need no more than two remedial classes in math or English, will take no fewer than 12 credits during the fall and spring semesters, and are in good academic standing with a GPA of 2.0 or above. The program, which provides services for three years, also offers a host of other benefits including financial help with purchasing textbooks and enhanced academic support. ASAP

students in LC links that had partnered with the program during the TLI's three semesters were eligible for the semester-long loans.

Research conducted on ASAP at KBCC, Borough of Manhattan and LaGuardia community colleges by CUNY and MDRC, a non-profit research group that focuses on education, found that enrollment for those students was “substantially increased” (Scrivener and Weiss, 2013 p9) and that the average number of credits earned, as well as their graduation rates, were higher than that of a control group. Of 896 students who participated in the study beginning in 2010, those randomly assigned to the ASAP group earned over a two-year period an estimated average of 7.6 credits more than those assigned to the control group – 37.9 as compared to 30.4. Those 7.6 credits, the study states, represents roughly 13 percent of the college-level credits required to earn a degree. Two-year graduation rates were also boosted: 14.5 percent for the ASAP group versus 8.7 percent for the control group. “...the program increased the proportion of students who graduated within two years by almost 6 percentage points — a 66 percent increase over the control group’s graduation rate” (p9). Semester-to-semester enrollment was also found to have improved. During the fall and spring 12-week terms, ASAP’s estimated effects on enrollment rates during the second-, third- and fourth- semesters of the period evaluated showed a rise of 9.8, 7.7, and 9.5 percentage points, respectively.

KBCC began offering collaborative learning opportunities to students in 1995 when an intensive ESL program was created linking five courses: ESL, Speech, the First-Year Seminar, Career Exploration, and a General Education course (www.kbcc.cuny.edu/LC), thus creating the first Learning Community. In the 23 years since, the program has grown to include Opening Doors, an LC for incoming freshmen, many of whom may have placed in developmental English after taking CUNY assessment tests in English and reading, an LC for students who are

continuing their education, and an LC for multilingual first-year students who require ESL support.

Zhao and Kuh (2004) note that the structure of an LC is intentionally designed to encourage students to “connect ideas from different disciplines” through linked courses that help students become “members of a community focused on academic content” (p117). This outcome is also achieved through the social interactions of the students who continue their academic path with the same peers over the course of the program. Zhao and Kuh go on to state that this model allows LC participants: “...to further develop their identity and discover their voice as well as integrate what they are learning into their worldview and other academic and social experiences” (p117).

While LCs may differ in some characteristics, the core concept of such a program remains as thus: the co-enrollment of a cohort of students in two or more classes whose curricula are linked around a particular theme. Opening Doors, for instance, offers a three-course curricula that includes developmental English, a general education class, such as Sociology, History or Psychology, and a freshman orientation course (Parisi and Graziano-King, 2011). Kingsborough librarians provide the LCs with information literacy instruction, Libguides and other research support at the request of discipline faculty or LC instructors, and maintain a significant role in the program. Sessions have been facilitated for Opening Doors links on gender and identity, existentialism and free will, political repression as seen through the science fiction films of the Cold War years, the American Dream and immigration, and the problem of false convictions, among many other topics.

Weiss, Mayer and their co-authors (2015) state, “the integrated curriculum of learning communities might require that students learn various elements of essay writing and

argumentative rhetoric in their English course, and then use those techniques to write a paper in their sociology course exploring the relationship between income status and race. Learning communities tend to involve faculty collaboration, which enables teachers to communicate about their shared students and to integrate the curriculum across courses” (p13). Follow-up research to a 2008 study of *Opening Doors* (Scrivener and Weiss) in which some 1,534 KBCC freshmen were assigned to either a cohort eligible for the LC, or a control group that received the college’s standard courses and services, found that a positive effect with regard to credit accumulation remained even after seven years (Weiss, Mayer et al. 2015).

Textbook Costs versus Open Texts

The rising price of academic textbooks in the United States has been a prime mover behind the launch of strategies including the TLI, the creation of reserve collections, reduction of fines and Open Educational Resources (OERs). All such initiatives are aimed at reducing or eliminating textbook costs for students in the hopes that retention and graduation rates will improve, as the obstacle posed by the necessary acquisition of expensive books and materials is removed. Particularly in the case of community colleges, the cost of textbooks – which approached \$1,000 a year when studied by Rampell (2008) – can add significantly to the overall cost of higher education for students (Hilton and Laman, 2012). In their case study of two groups of Houston Community College students, each a cohort of 370, those who used a free online psychology text during the fall 2011 semester were found to have a higher grade point average than those who had used a traditional text in the spring 2011 semester – 2.0 as compared to 1.6. Furthermore, those who used traditional texts withdrew from the class at nearly twice the rate as those using the open text – 14 percent as compared with 7.1 percent. And final exam results were higher for those using the open text – 71.1 percent – as compared with the other group – 67.6

percent. Hilton and Laman (2012) acknowledge that while the data collected from their study appears straightforward, other factors might have at least partially been responsible for the results, making causality between the online text and the improved grades and enrollment difficult to determine. Yet the results are impressive.

Reserve Holdings

A review of the literature on the possible benefits of increasing loan periods to semester length found very little that is directly on point. However, the scholarly literature of library science and education does examine the utility of reserve collections as well as outcomes for those academic libraries that have chosen to eliminate fines and fees. These are all basic elements of access services that were unnecessary for the students who participated in the TLI. Obviously, having a semester-loan book eliminated the need for LC students to take out those same books on reserve, as this paper will show, thus cutting down on the number of students who incurred fines after failing to bring it back within a four-hour period. Moreover, a decision was made by KBCC administration overseeing the initiative and LC faculty that LC students who brought TLI books back late would not be charged overdue fines, but would have to replace any books that were lost or damaged beyond further use.

Leung, in his 2010 study of usage by students of reserve and regular loan books at the College of Professional and Continuing Education, an affiliate of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, found that use of reserve books as compared with regular loan items were “discipline sensitive” (p11) as well as dependent on the “instructional mode” of professors (p11). Students studying business, tourism and hospitality were found to have used reserve books more often than those in nonbusiness disciplines, who checked out the regular loan versions of titles even when those books were available for the shorter loan period. Stated Leung: “...though the

teachers were successful in having their students use the book titles they specified, their students did not want to use the copies they set aside, i.e., the reserve copies, by and large because of the loan period” (p12). Librarians at George Mason University launched a print textbook reserve program called TextSelect in 2009 when research found that students who needed titles in the subject areas of IT and Engineering were using Interlibrary Loan in lieu of purchasing these very expensive items (Ferguson, 2016). The library put those subject area titles already in its collection on reserve, and then expanded TextSelect in 2012 to accommodate freshmen and transfer students who represented the highest retention risk. TextSelect, which allows students to borrow books for a two-hour period, receives “heavy use” (p3) with some 47,000 circulation transactions annually. Some 1,400 items are kept on reserve at any given time, with approximately 400 new titles added each year. With regard to the efficacy of charging fees for overdue books, a five-year systemic review of circulation policies at the College of William and Mary’s Earl Gregg Swem Library led to the adoption of new policies in 2013 that included eliminating the collection of all general fines (Boyce, 2014). The result has been a “dramatic decrease in the number of manually applied bills,” falling from 196 in Fiscal Year 2012 to 48 in Fiscal Year 2013 (p10). Staff time spent on billing also dropped significantly, from 46 hours per 16-week academic semester in FY2009 to 24 hours during that same period in FY2013.

PROGRAM EXPERIENCE

Purchasing and Processing

The Library first became involved in the TLI in the fall semester of 2015, when the college was awarded a \$350,000 CUNY Strategic Investment Initiative grant it planned to spend primarily on assigned textbooks, workbooks, reference works and novels that students from its LC, ASAP and Honors programs would keep for entire semesters. This project was implemented in close collaboration with the then Office of Associate Provost and LC faculty and staff. A liaison from the Honors Department was assigned as point person to coordinate the many different strands of the Initiative and to troubleshoot for us in Circulation and Reserves. Some 340 different titles were purchased for a total quantity of 5,248 books. In all, \$309,626 was spent. They were purchased for the project by the reserve manager either through the college's bookstore, or straight from the titles' publishers, using a list of titles that came from the library's reserve collection, plus additional books requested by LC faculty. These books were to be used for three terms; instructors in these programs would not be allowed to update their selections during that period. Of course, students could borrow other textbooks from either the reserve collection or regular loan during this time. But no new books would be bought with the grant money. Once the TLI ran its course, all of the books purchased for it were released into the general collection.

The cost of individual titles ranged from \$2 for each copy of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, to \$227 for each one of *Introduction to Criminal Justice*. Number of copies purchased were also disparate, from two copies of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* to 60 copies of *75 Readings: An Anthology*. Besides Criminal Justice, textbooks purchased on academic subjects included American Government, Ancient History, Biology, College Algebra, Psychology and Sociology. Cataloged under the names Learning Community and Gateway, the Learning Community titles were those items designated for the program's linked courses. Gateway was the name given for

titles that were assigned by faculty teaching Learning Community students in their non-linked or regular classes. During the 2016 spring and fall semesters, and the 2017 spring semester, 1,468 Learning Community students checked out semester-loan books. Of those, 398 also received Gateway books for their non-linked courses. A decision was made by the Associate Provost's office and LC faculty that during the summer and winter semesters – when no linked classes are held – LC students would be allowed to borrow semester-loan Gateway books for their other courses. This offer was taken up by some 40 students. During those three semesters, LC students borrowed 5,035 semester loan books, including titles the library already had on hand that had been purchased for a STEM program not in session those semesters.

BEFORE THE DELUGE

Implementation

We thought the most challenging aspect of the initiative for us in Circulation and Reserves was going to be figuring out how these semester-loan books would be stored and subsequently distributed at the Circulation desk, and we were right. These additional titles had to be in a space where they were easily accessible to the College Assistants that would be checking them out to LC students, eager to get all of their textbooks at once. As noted, Circulation and Reserves occupies the same pocket of the library. The shelves we had for reserve books could not accommodate this influx of new items. The only space available in Circulation was the copier room. The library also had an unused classroom on its eighth floor. KBCC's architect and the college's Buildings and Grounds department retrofitted both these spaces over a number of weeks with floor-to-ceiling metal shelves, and the college's IT department set up a terminal so that someone working in the eighth-floor storage room would have access to KBCC's Integrated Library System (ILS). There was some urgency about all the physical aspects of the TLI because

the shelves had to be installed by the time the books were ready to be placed on them. And before the books would be ready for the beginning of the spring 2016 semester, they had to have due date slips inserted. All of this activity took place during the winter session of the fall 2015 semester.

Another pressing issue we faced as it came time to distribute the books in March 2016 was how to keep LC students separate from regular students with both groups waiting in the same line at the circulation desk. KBCC's student ID cards serve as the school's library cards and they do not distinguish on their face which students are in the LC, Honors program, ASAP, or just regular undergraduates. There was concern in Circulation that students who were not in one of the TLI groups would try to get semester-loan books. Also, we needed to be able to give these students all of their required books at once, with minimal time spent retrieving them from either the copier room or the eighth-floor storage room. The plan we ultimately came up with addressed both of these problems.

Prior to the beginning of the term, we were given a list of the books that belonged in each of the linked LC classes. Our plan was to create bundles or packets of books for each of these links. We knew how many students – 25 per link – were going to be in each one of them. These packets were created on the eighth floor, and then brought down to the copier room where we could keep 10 to 15 packets of books per link on shelves in numerical order – 25 to 30 links per semester. Circulation had received permission to hire three more College Assistants to work specifically on this project. These three assisted the reserves manager in carrying out the physical work of opening up over 50 cartons of books, checking the book list against the shipments and helping to organize it so that our Cataloging department could process the thousands of titles.

Our new College Assistants were also tasked with creating and labeling the packets. These generally contained two to three books each.

To solve the problem of identifying LC students, a voucher in the form of a letter was created that had the student's name, the link, and the books required for it. Students were given these letters during their LC classes by instructors, they then needed to take them to the Honors Department to be signed by either the director of the LC program, or the TLI's coordinator in the Honors Department. After that, students were free to join the line at the Circulation desk to receive their books. The bundles were organized so that when a student came to the desk with a signed letter, circulation staff had these bundles at hand, ready to go. One of our new College Assistants was assigned the task of going up to the eighth floor to either retrieve or create packets as we depleted the number of bundles we were keeping at the circulation desk.

Reserve Statistics

Before the launch of the TLI in spring 2016, we planned not only for the usual long lines of regular students coming to check out reserve and stacks books, but the hundreds more each day we were expecting from the LCs who would be trying to get all of their books in the first week or so of the term. The chart below represents the number of stacks, reserve and semester-loan books checked out during the first months of KBCC's fall and spring semesters, including the 2015 fall semester, before the TLI was launched, and the 2017 fall and 2018 spring semesters, when the semester-loan books purchased for the program were made available to all students.

In March 2016, the initiative's first month, Circulation and Reserves loaned out 5,774 reserve books, plus an additional 2,039 semester-loan items. In September 2016, the first month of the TLI's second semester, 4,959 reserve books were borrowed, with an additional 1,432 semester-loan titles given to LC students. Spring 2017 was the TLI's last semester. That March, Circulation and Reserves loaned 1,205 semester-loan books and 5,279 reserve books. Once we opened up the semester-loan items to all students, the number of reserve and stacks books borrowed fell. In September 2017, 2,626 reserve books were checked out and 1,902 semester-loan books loaned. In March 2018, 2,384 reserve books were borrowed with 1,886 semester-loan titles checked out. The number of stacks books borrowed also fell when semester-loan books were opened to all students.

Challenges and Obstacles

We knew that trying to satisfy the needs of regular undergraduates who needed reserve and stacks books was going to be difficult. These students did not want to wait in long lines to take out a single reserve book for four hours when other students were getting all of their books for the semester. After the first day, we decided that a dedicated line was needed for LC students, creating a more efficient check-out and check-in process. This being Circulation and Reserve, at the same time that all students were seeking their textbooks, many students were also standing in line waiting to either settle fines or just return four-hour loan books. Being able to take the LC students out of that equation was a significant improvement to our plan.

There were also issues at the reference desk, particularly when students who looked in the OPAC could see that many of the books that they also needed for courses had not been taken

out for the semester. Some LC students never showed up to get their books or the instructor had decided not to use a particular title. Circulation was instructed that at a certain point in the semester when we were reasonably sure that everyone from the LCs, Honors and ASAP had already gotten their books, we could begin giving specific titles – primarily math and science textbooks - out to all students. Not all of the books were released into the general collection, because we wanted to ensure that they be readily available for the TLI at the beginning of the following term. As I mentioned earlier, we also ended up using previously purchased STEM books when we needed to come up with more of a particular textbook. To counter the discontent at the reference desk, the status that was used to catalog the TLI books was changed from one that read “semester loan” to one which read “restricted loan,” which made it easier to explain that these books were only for those students in particular programs. Unfortunately, this still led to confusion when students, who had never heard of the LCs, could not understand why one person could take out a book for the entire semester and another could only borrow the same title for a four-hour loan. At a certain point, a master list was created for the reference desk which listed those books that could be checked out for the semester regardless of whether a student was in the LC and when the availability of that title was depleted.

Other problems: IDs were not processed by KBCC’s Department of Public Safety until the beginning of the semester. When the LC students came to get their books on the same day as they got their IDs, the information was not always uploaded onto the ILS. The distribution of packets was slowed down because circulation staff had to spend time either creating records from scratch or linking student barcodes on ID cards to the library’s system. We sometimes had to tell students to come back the next day. This led to disgruntled students and disappointed faculty who had hoped that their LC classes would have all of their materials by the second day

of classes. It would have been easier had these students been able to obtain their IDs before the start of the term, but technical issues made this an impossibility. Other challenges included maintaining a balance between serving regular students at the circulation desk and fulfilling the needs of LC student. We had to balance the number of students coming for semester-loan books with what the circulation department could handle at any given time. At a certain point, we had to tell those who were signing the voucher letters in the LC and the Honors Department that we could not handle anymore LC students because of shift changes at the Circulation desk. It was not easy trying to get all of the departments that were involved on the same schedule, but we finally managed to make it work by limiting the number of students who could be sent at any one time and creating a cutoff at 4 PM. It took approximately two weeks for all of the LC students to pick up their books and for the number of undergraduates lining up at Circulation to return to normal.

Conclusion

There were still challenges ahead when we began providing semester-loan books to all. These titles are given out on a first-come, first-served basis, which means these books go fast. Moreover, the line situation at Circulation was as daunting as ever. Now, instead of just having LC students looking to borrow all of their textbooks, we had the entire school trying to get all of their books at the same time. One issue with the semester-loan books was how difficult it was for students to make the distinction between reserve and semester-loan books that were taken out at the same time. We in Circulation often listened to students complain when they were charged with library fines for failing to return four-hour loan books when they thought both items were checked out for the entire semester. By the second semester of these books being put in the general collection, spring 2018, that confusion had by and large ceased.

The increased use of Open Education Resources (OERs), however, may make the whole concept of a TLI, which was aimed at reducing the cost of textbooks for students, an old-fashioned concept. Having over \$300,000 to spend on books was a major infusion when KBCC was awarded the grant, but that figure is a bit dwarfed by the \$4 million each that New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has awarded to CUNY and the State University of New York (SUNY) for high-quality texts that can be downloaded and shared (nys.gov). However, KBCC library is not getting rid of its textbooks anytime soon, nor it seems, are other academic libraries.

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