

# Supporting Student Success:

## Textbook Access Initiatives at the Hannon Library

by **Holly Gabriel**

(she/her)

Open Access & Government  
Information Librarian,  
Southern Oregon University  
[gabrielh@sou.edu](mailto:gabrielh@sou.edu)

and by

**Emily Miller-Francisco**

(she/her)

Collection Development  
Librarian,  
Southern Oregon University  
[millere@sou.edu](mailto:millere@sou.edu)

and by

**Jasmine Waters**

(they/she)

Resource Sharing  
and Fulfillment Lead,  
Southern Oregon University  
[watersj1@sou.edu](mailto:watersj1@sou.edu)



HOLLY GABRIEL (she/her) is the Open Access & Government Information Librarian at Southern Oregon University (SOU) in Ashland, Oregon. She received her MLS from Emporia State and her Master of Public Health from Northern Illinois University. Holly is passionate about textbook affordability initiatives and open education to improve equity in higher education. Holly enjoys the fun activities that southern Oregon offers including hiking, outdoor music venues, and live theater.



EMILY MILLER-FRANCISCO (she/her) has been working with electronic resources for over two decades and is currently the Collection Development Librarian at Southern Oregon University. When she isn't wrangling ebooks and other library resources, she likes to read eclectic fiction, go on short hikes, and admire the ocean. She sometimes tries to add a hobby, like learning to play the oboe.



JASMINE WATERS (they/she) is the Resource Sharing and Fulfillment Lead at Southern Oregon University. An SOU alum, they graduated in 2021 with a Bachelor of Arts in English. Their professional interests include copyright, neutrality in libraries, and solving citation mysteries. Outside of work, they enjoy fiber arts, puzzle games, and reading Terry Pratchett's Discworld series.

It is no secret that the costs of getting a college education are steadily increasing. At the Southern Oregon University (SOU) Hannon Library, we are seeing the way our students struggle increasingly to afford tuition in addition to rent, food, and other necessities, and the high cost of textbooks and other course materials is only exacerbating this problem for certain student demographics. SOU students face particular financial challenges that make reducing

the cost of education in any way possible a priority for campus faculty, staff, and administrators. SOU is a public, regional university with 4,224 undergraduate students as well as a few master's programs (Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2023). Although a large portion of our students come from the immediate region, we have students attending from throughout Oregon, and many more that come from California and other western states. We serve many first-generation students as well as nontraditional students. It is common for our students to work multiple jobs to be able to afford their education, and many report that they are unable to meet college expenses with their expected resources (Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2023).

When students face barriers in affording and obtaining their required textbooks, it is much more challenging for them to be successful in their courses. Furthermore, the cost of textbooks often presents a greater financial burden for Pell Grant students, who are economically disadvantaged, and for first-generation students, who may assume that textbooks are included in their tuition. According to the 2021–22 Oregon Higher Education Universities Snapshot for Southern Oregon University, out of the total 4,224 Oregon undergraduates at SOU during the 2021–22 academic year, 894 students (21%) received Federal Pell Grants, and 1,783 students (42%) received another form of financial aid. The Snapshot reports that 54 percent of students were unable to meet expenses with expected resources of family contributions, students' earnings, and grant aid. In addition, a greater percentage of first-generation students (57%) were unable to meet college expenses with expected resources compared to non-first-generation students (51%).

Understanding the ways that textbook affordability has become a real barrier to success for so many SOU students, we wanted to do our part to reduce the cost of course materials for students by focusing on providing access to currently required texts in print or digital forms and by promoting the use of open educational resources across campus.

### **History of Hannon Library Textbook Support**

Purchasing and maintaining a textbook collection is a costly proposition, because individual volumes are expensive and new editions are released every few years. In the past, Hannon Library, like most academic libraries, did not maintain a collection of current required textbooks and left textbook purchasing to individual students. Normally, students purchased traditional textbooks as well as any other books required for their courses, while the library focused on buying books and other materials that support student research. If overlaps occurred, it was by chance, and either the faculty member requested that the library put its copy of the required text on course reserves, or the first student who thought to check the library catalog for the required book found it and checked it out.

As college costs continued to rise, however, Hannon Library wanted to do something to help students access costly course materials. In 2012, we began to manage a textbook purchasing program offering print access to a portion of textbooks required that year. The program, called "Textshare," was originally funded by the SOU student government through student fees. The program purchased all required textbooks over \$75, and staff worked with the campus bookstore to identify and purchase those books. The onset of the pandemic marked a

shift as the student government reduced funding for the program in 2021, prompting a move to purchase textbooks only upon request from students or faculty. Student government ended funding altogether in the spring of 2022. After a brief pause in service, Hannon Library received temporary funding for the 2022–23 academic year through a partnership with the SOU Bridge Program, utilizing the program’s 2022–23 competitive grant award. The SOU Bridge Program is available to students graduating from Oregon high schools and serves individuals who have been historically underrepresented at college, such as first-generation students, low-income students, and students who have overcome extraordinary challenges. Since using the Bridge Program funding, we have worked to secure continued funding for our textbook purchasing program.

### **A Tripartite Approach to Textbook Affordability: Our Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) Grant Project**

For the transition period of 2023–24, we decided to write a proposal for the federally funded Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant to focus on textbook affordability initiatives. Our successfully funded project has three goals related to textbook affordability:

1. Provide more multi-user ebooks that are used as course materials so that students have free access to the material from the library.
2. Increase the number of classes using open educational resources in order to reduce the long-term expense of our course reserves program.
3. Pilot controlled digital lending for at least seven required textbooks to increase digital access to course materials.

In order for this grant project to be successful, we needed buy-in and support from our library and campus colleagues, so we reached out to our Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning colleagues and several faculty partners. Having a team approach allowed individuals to bring their diverse experiences and perspectives to the project, resulting in more innovative activities and outreach to campus stakeholders.

### **Part One: Targeted Ebook Purchasing**

Academic libraries are exploring the use of multi-user ebooks for course materials, giving students free access to these materials to help address affordability issues (Rokusek & Cooke, 2019). In the same vein, we have spent approximately \$2,000 per term (fall, winter, and spring) to purchase required course texts as ebooks since the fall of 2022. Before the term begins, our Resource Sharing & Fulfillment Lead obtains a list of required textbooks. She uses this as a resource for purchasing physical books from the bookstore when students request them. The Collection Development Librarian also uses the list to determine which books are already in our collection as ebooks, and then which ebooks are available for purchase with unlimited-user licenses. We purchase as many of these as the funds allow, preferring versions without digital right management (DRM).

So far, we have usually had enough funds to purchase all of the unlimited-user books available for each term. Some terms had funds left over and we have opted to purchase additional ebooks with more limited licenses. In these instances, we have preferred nonlinear licenses when possible. These allow a certain number of uses (usually over 300) each year, but they can be simultaneous.



Our hope is that this will still provide enough access to be useful for a class. Once the ebooks have been purchased and added to the collection, the Resource Sharing & Fulfillment Lead flags them as course books in the discovery layer and sends the links to the faculty so that they can share them with students and post them on their course web pages (see Figure 1).

If there are still funds available for the term, we purchase licenses restricted to three users at a time. These are flagged in our system as course books, but they are not sent to the faculty so that there is not an expectation that all students will be able to use the books simultaneously. We further try to prevent frustration for these by limiting the loan period to four hours so that



Figure 1  
A Course Reserve as Displayed in our Discovery Layer

the book loan is analogous to physical course reserves. So far, we have purchased ebooks for seven terms, starting in fall of 2022. Over that time, we have spent \$13,895 to purchase 122 ebooks with multi-user access.

To give a sense of the success of this program, the fall 2023 term serves as an example. For this term, we were able to provide access beyond a single-user license to 56 ebooks out of the 229 required texts. Most of these were for access with unlimited simultaneous users, but also included 11 nonlinear licenses and seven licenses restricted to three users. For 19 of the titles, we already had unlimited access predating the textbook affordability initiative, usually through a subscription or an Evidence-Based Acquisitions package. In addition, 13 of the titles had already been purchased for the initiative during the previous academic year. Our new books for the term included eight new unlimited-user licenses, 10 nonlinear licenses, and seven three-user licenses.

The newly purchased titles were used 350 times (unique title requests) over the course of the term from September to December. Required titles that were purchased the previous year were used 212 times. Titles that we had from sources outside of this program were used 98 times, totaling 660. These usage statistics indicate that the program is having a significant and lasting impact.

## Part Two: Promoting Open Educational Resources (OER)

Increasing the number of classes using open educational resources is another main goal of our LSTA grant project. Open educational resources (OER) are teaching resources that are free of cost and access barriers allowing professors to freely edit and use the materials, while students are able to freely access them. Examples of open resources include textbooks, syllabi, tutorials, assignments, tests, lectures, and videos. Studies demonstrate that the use of OER has a positive impact on student retention. For example, a recent meta-analysis of 11 OER studies covering over 78,000 students determined that courses with OER textbooks had withdrawal rates 29 percent lower than those with commercial textbooks, while also finding equivalent student learning outcomes (Clinton & Khan, 2019).

The Open Access & Government Information Librarian chairs and coordinates our campus OER Advisory Group, made up of stakeholders such as the University Librarian, several faculty members, the Academic Scheduling Coordinator, the Bookstore Manager, and a student representative. This group has created a campus Textbook Affordability Plan and leads campus activities related to textbook affordability. “Open Oregon Educational Resources,” a statewide initiative, offers many professional development opportunities and stipends related to open education. We use the SOU all-faculty email listserv and targeted direct emails to share these opportunities with all campus instructors.



As part of our grant activities, we planned a faculty OER workshop during Open Education Week in March 2024. Approximately 15 participants attended the workshop resulting in an engaging discussion about how OER impact student success as well as a need for departments’ promotion and tenure policies to better support faculty who create open textbooks. We plan to host another faculty workshop next year with time dedicated to searching for open materials, which we hope will boost faculty interest and attendance.



To increase awareness of OER, we purchased a class set of the printed open chemistry textbook, Chemistry 2e, which is used across three terms in general chemistry. This gave students the opportunity to use either the print book or ebook, depending on their preferences (see Figure 2). Based on surveys of these students, the majority preferred to use the ebook version of Chemistry 2e. However, a few students commented that it was less distracting to study with a print copy, that it was more difficult to navigate the ebook, and it was easier to study diagrams in the printed version. We concluded that having a few copies of the print version available for loaning from the library could strongly benefit students who prefer printed materials.

**CH 314 (1235-FA23) - Chemical Research Comm I**

Course Settings Participants Grades Reports More ▾

▾ **General** Collapse all

 2023 CH314 Syllabus  View

 Scientific Papers and Presentations, 3rd ed. by Davis, Davis, and Dunagan.  View

Free electronic access to the class book is provided by Hannon Library: [Link to ebook.](#)


 Announcements

Figure 2  
Linking to an Item in our Course Management System



Figure 3  
Promotional Postcard for Course Reserves

OER awareness is gaining traction on campus, but there are still many instructors who are not aware that they can get assistance from librarians in finding quality open materials and appropriate library resources to use as course materials. In addition, many instructors do not know that the library offers a course reserves program for students. To increase awareness, we created postcards to send to all instructors highlighting OER and course reserves, which we will distribute shortly before the fall 2024 term begins (see Figure 3).

### Part Three: Purchase-On-Demand and Pilot of Controlled Digital Lending of Course Materials

Another segment of our textbook access efforts is purchasing textbooks on demand and piloting controlled digital lending. Since 2021, we have utilized an on-demand structure for our physical reserve purchasing. Using a request form, faculty and students can request the purchase of a course book, which is then placed in our reserve collection, available for a four-hour loan. Students can only request required course materials, but faculty members may request that supplementary materials be purchased on a case-by-case basis. We cross-check the books against a list of required materials obtained from our university bookstore and our library's general collection.

Based on availability, we purchase the requested items directly from our university bookstore or from Amazon. We prioritize turnaround time over potential discounts gained elsewhere, as

the majority of course books are requested after the term starts. When possible, we purchase used books in good condition to offset costs.

We have a total of 70 purchased textbooks currently in our reserves collection. Since September 2023, we have purchased 21 textbooks on demand. We have a total print budget of \$3,500 for the 2023–24 academic school year. Items are kept in the reserve for at least two years, matching the common length of time between class cycles. At the end of each academic year, staff review which items have not been used for a class in over two years, as well as items that have been replaced with newer editions in our collection. Items not chosen to be permanently cataloged are sold back to the SOU campus bookstore or recycled.

This academic year, the program saw a general increase in checkouts for our purchased textbook collection, with nearly 100 more loans than each of the previous two years. Books purchased through the program in previous years continue to see steady checkouts, and newly purchased items are seeing high checkouts compared to the rest of the course reserves collection.

Although we saw an increase this academic year in usage of course reserves, the program has not returned to the level of pre-pandemic usage. Anecdotal reports from students indicate preference for full-term loan periods or limited library hours conflicting with preferred studying times. In response to this decline, we have been exploring options to continue to provide access to textbooks. As a part of the LSTA grant activities, we have begun a controlled digital lending (CDL) pilot focused on items in our reserves collection. CDL follows a principle of digitizations being loaned out on a one-to-one, owned-to-loaned basis, where books are scanned and then made available for electronic checkout with users equaling the amount of physical copies purchased (Hansen & Courtney, 2018).

Our goal with the pilot is to provide access to our print reserves collection in ways that work best for our student body. We select texts based on several criteria, looking at whether an electronic version is already available, looking at books used for distance classes, and books used in multiple courses. We started with a limited selection of books, aiming for a total of seven this academic year. Of the seven books scanned for the CDL pilot program, we had the most success with an item created in response to the needs of a distance student who requested access to their required textbook. The scan of the textbook was only available for the second part of the term, but it had consistent usage from several unique users.

### **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

We have faced challenges in each aspect of our textbook affordability project. Some have been logistical, some material, and some financial. Each part of our project required additional work and time from librarians and staff members already faced with heavy workloads. Nevertheless, each challenge faced has helped us better understand the problem of textbook affordability and has enabled us to refine our processes and strategize future initiatives.

Developing the best procedures for purchasing required ebooks has been one of the challenges we have faced. The process always begins with the list of required texts, but that list comes in different formats and each one requires a different approach. It has also become apparent that, although ISBNs are the most realistic identifier for ordering, it is easy to miss that we might have a different edition of a text that might work equally well. We continue to work toward solidifying procedures in a way that is both sustainable and gives the most access for the funds.

Another challenge has been the timeline. Some faculty do not make final decisions about their course books until close to the end of the previous term. We want to include as many of

the books as we can, so we wait until a couple weeks before the end of the previous term to get the list and begin purchasing. At that point, we try to process the list as quickly as we can so that the purchases have time to be activated, flagged, and shared with faculty. This can make for a very tight timeline, especially at the end of winter term when we have only a one-week spring break between the terms.

Ebook purchasing has been challenging due to the shortage of unlimited-user licenses. Many books do not have this option. We mentioned above that we sometimes purchase the nonlinear licenses or three-user licenses. However, these are frequently insufficient and we get turn-away notifications as students attempt to use these books beyond the license limits. Many books only offer single-user licenses or have no institutional ebook formats available. Also, our licenses are institutional and do not have the interactive options that some coursework requires.

In addition, ebooks, especially unlimited-user ebooks, are very expensive. And so, although we would like to see a higher number of books available this way, we are forced to make difficult choices about which ones to purchase with our limited funding. We have also learned that the most expensive licenses are often the three-user options. Some of these costs are astronomical and are beyond our purchasing power for the foreseeable future, especially as they can only serve three students at a time.

One real challenge to the adoption of OER is that not all subjects have appropriate open materials available for adoption. For many lower-division courses, instructors across North America have developed quality materials for other instructors to easily adopt. With upper-division courses, there are fewer options to choose from and with some specialized topics, there are zero quality open materials. For example, for a criminal justice course focused on race and crime, there is a lack of open materials, so several faculty members in Oregon are receiving stipends from Open Oregon Educational Resources to write an open textbook.

An additional challenge to adopting OER is the time needed to find, adopt, revise, or create open materials. The variety of faculty responsibilities related to teaching, service, and scholarship seem to continually expand. Finding the time to adapt or create new course materials can often be overwhelming. Fortunately, at SOU the librarians and instructional designers offer assistance with finding materials, researching copyright licensing, and revising course lesson plans, which can make adopting OER more manageable.

Lastly, many faculty are reluctant to develop open materials because the effort may not count toward their promotion and tenure. At SOU, promotion and tenure guidelines vary from department to department, and often a peer-review process before publication is a critical component of scholarship promotional activities. The peer-review process may be lacking in the creation of some open textbooks; however, more attention in the field of open education is being given to create options for peer review.

One challenge we faced for the purchase-on-demand program is outreach and awareness. Due to the limitations of the program during the global pandemic, staff departures, and the brief pause in service mentioned above, student awareness of the course reserve program as a whole is low. Identifying the areas where awareness can be improved and making plans to address it are long-term goals for the program.

Additionally, our CDL program has faced staff time and technical challenges. The time needed to digitize items and the time in between terms can both fluctuate and might conflict with each other. There are also steep learning curves for workflows and processes, which can affect turnaround time. To best support students, we aim for items to be available from the first week of term, which is not always possible.



### Conclusion

Based on institutional data, we know that many students struggle to obtain their course materials and the library can play an important role in reducing these financial barriers. Our library is taking a three-pronged approach to improve access for students. We focus on purchasing a greater number of ebooks, promoting OER, and using a combination of on-demand purchasing and controlled digital lending. Initial results show that these initiatives are already popular and impactful, and it looks likely that our Provost will approve funding to continue these programs into the future.

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