

Investigating High-Cost Ebooks Purchasing Workflows to Support Course Reserves

Kerri Goergen-Doll and Taylor Ralph

As academic libraries have increasingly shifted to purchasing ebooks that are licensed rather than owned, and are more expensive than print books, challenges to the acquisition and budgeting of textbooks for course reserves have increased. These challenges associated with online textbooks impact how libraries approach initiatives to enhance student affordability. This three-year study analyzes the usage data of high-cost (i.e., those costing more than \$500) ebooks purchased as course texts by the library. The analysis demonstrated that the number of titles and the overall cost were relatively low. In contrast, the use of these ebooks was high (exceeding 200 uses per month), especially compared with other ebooks the library had acquired to support curricular and research needs. This data enabled the library to revise the acquisition process, removing the cost-based approval step, which improved the acquisitions workflow and students' access to titles.

Introduction

In academic libraries, one unresolved question is whether acquiring textbooks and supporting course reserves should be a library service. Until the global coronavirus pandemic, Oregon State University Libraries (OSUL) had a policy prohibiting the purchase of textbooks to support courses. This policy was enforced inconsistently. Since 2014, OSUL has encouraged the use of open educational resources (OERs), but adoption has not kept pace with the growth of class offerings. Approximately 41 percent of class sections at OSU offer low- or no-cost course materials.¹ Faculty generally continue to prioritize texts that align with their course content, despite being aware of affordability issues, and still grapple with questions of quality between OERs and commercial options.² The Oregon state legislature passed two bills related to textbook affordability in 2015 and 2019. Despite the research, the institutional focus on affordability, and state legislation, the adoption of OERs has lagged behind the actual need.

Student needs for online learning materials have grown because of the many ways learners can pursue their education at OSUL. Overall, enrollment has increased by 16.3 percent over the last five years. The primary growth has been in distance learning enrollment, and this trend is expected to continue. Supporting an online student learning experience means leaning heavily into electronic collections.

The library initiated a purchase on demand (POD) service through the Interlibrary Loan unit in 2009; based on the usage of content purchased through that program, the POD service has remained in place.

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Faculty and students identify titles for the library to purchase and indicate whether the title supports a class or research. Titles purchased through the POD workflow typically see higher usage than titles purchased just in case.³ Because of that data and a limited collections budget, OSUL continues to lean into POD acquisitions for books (both print and digital).

Because the physical libraries shut down in March 2020 during the pandemic, the policy restricting the library's purchase of textbooks for course reserves was temporarily paused. To support student success during a worldwide pandemic when student finances were strained more than usual, OSUL initiated controlled digital lending (CDL) and secured institutional access to unlimited-user ebooks required for courses. In 2022, the collection development policy regarding textbook purchasing was updated to allow the purchase of course materials when possible. The focus on course material support aligned with the values of learner affordability in the OSUL's Collections Values Framework.⁴

Many procedural changes were needed as OSUL began shifting work to meet the new demands of textbook acquisition and CDL. Because it was unclear whether the same high level of usage (i.e., exceeding 200 uses per month) of library-provided access to course materials would continue post-pandemic, any ebooks priced at \$500 or more required additional approval from the director of collection development. This extra check required time for an employee to gather details about the class (class size, location, required or supplemental reading) and the required text (ebook license type, platform access, edition availability), and time for the director to view that information and respond with a decision.

After about six months of this approval procedure, the director inquired whether data could be collected to determine whether the additional steps to purchase high-cost ebooks were necessary. The delays in access caused by the multiple steps appeared to be a barrier for students and an added cost in employee time, particularly for the limited number of texts that met the price threshold. In addition, very few of the requests for high-cost ebooks were denied. Typically, the requests were denied because of limited availability of an electronic book with a multiuser license.

To determine whether the existing approval procedure and limits were necessary, we asked the following questions:

- Is the course reserve usage of ebooks different depending on the license cost?
- Would there be significant impacts on the collections budget by removing or changing the price threshold?
- Was there an overrepresentation of subject headings in the high-cost data set? If so, would continuing to mediate those titles delay access to students in specific fields of study?
- Is the data provided by vendors/publishers robust enough to answer the questions?

The results of this study support data-driven decision-making related to the mediation process for high-cost ebooks requested for course reserves. Additionally, this work provides a model for collecting and evaluating use and cost data to determine the return on investment of providing course reserves as an academic library service.

Literature Review

Even with state and federal support aimed at minimizing the overall cost of postsecondary education, including related fees such as textbooks, the cost of tuition and fees continues to increase.⁵ While tuition increased by 4.7 percent between February 2020 and January 2023, textbook prices increased by 7.2 percent.⁶ That three-year increase is on top of the 86.7 percent increase in textbook prices between 2006 and 2016.⁷

With the increase in textbook prices, it is no surprise that student behavior has shifted toward avoiding the purchase of course-related texts. The Association of American Publishers reported a 57 percent decline in student textbook purchasing over the last decade.⁸ Libraries and bookstores support access to textbooks that avoid the primary issue of publisher pricing of textbooks. The National Association of College Stores promotes equitable access programs to comply with the Affordable College Textbook Act, which was enacted as part of a larger higher education act in 2016. Both Equitable Access and Inclusive Access programs are opt-out programs. If a student does not opt out, they are billed. In Equitable Access plans, a flat fee for textbooks is added to students' tuition bill, regardless of the number of registered classes they are taking.⁹ These programs offer prices below retail for textbooks but still burden the student with the need to purchase the textbook. For institutions that are not adopting those models, textbook prices remain unsustainable.¹⁰

Textbook affordability programming at the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member institutions was seen as either focusing on providing access and incentives for OERs or focusing on boosting the use of library-acquired materials that are free to use for classes.¹¹ Although the review of the 104 ARL members' work in textbook affordability is not generalizable, it does demonstrate the tension of using limited, and oftentimes shrinking, library budget dollars to support either OERs or library acquisitions to address the national issue.

Multiple institutions have initiated pilots to study different aspects of electronic course support for students and the library. The pilot projects to purchase e-textbooks at East Carolina University and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro demonstrated cost savings, with more than \$38 returned for every \$1 spent. Additionally, they found that student achievement was not negatively impacted, based on a small sample of class averages before and during the pilot. There was also high usage of the material.¹² Student achievement was also found not to be negatively impacted in the research study on e-textbooks at Kennesaw State University.¹³

An Indiana University study on student preferences of print or electronic course material found that some students will still print out parts of electronic course content, but even in those cases there is still cost savings for the students based on the cost of course packs. The authors also discovered that their student preferences leaned toward electronic access to course materials.¹⁴ This finding could be partly a result of the increase in online and hybrid classes. Students at Illinois State University shared that e-texts allowed them to do keyword searches, take and share notes, and more easily connect to related content in the library. Beyond the positive logistical elements of accessing an e-text for a class,

the students also noted that the access saved them time from trying to locate the least expensive place to purchase the course material, and the online version worked from any location, thus reducing their stress levels and helping them focus on the class content and learning.¹⁵ A Rutgers University initiative to provide Open and Affordable Textbooks demonstrated additional benefits beyond costs to students. Their students indicated that utilizing note-taking and collaboration features positively increased the overall experience.¹⁶

In the research conducted by Illinois State University on the value of providing ebooks in their library course reserves program, they found that not only were there cost savings to the students but also increased usage of assigned ebooks over nonassigned ebooks, and use of those assigned texts was seen over multiple terms.¹⁷ The existing literature demonstrates that students use e-textbooks and find several benefits to reading texts in this format. However, there has been little published work using data to understand whether financial limitations on acquiring e-textbooks are necessary. Building on the work of Illinois State University, this research focuses on ebooks required for courses that cost more than \$500 to license.

Methods

To inform a decision about changing the approval process for high-cost ebook purchases, library employees at OSUL collected data about high-cost course reserves requests over three fiscal years, from July 2021 through June 2024. All course reserves requests are submitted via a Course Reserves Request form on the library website and are routed to relevant library staff in the Resource Acquisition and Sharing (RAS) department. At the time, high-cost requests over \$500 were then forwarded for approval to the Director of RAS, the department responsible for purchasing library materials. During this time period, the collection assessment librarian was also included in the email to the RAS director to keep track of the request information. Library employees tracked information on a shared spreadsheet that included bibliographic data for each requested title, such as the author, publisher, ISBN, subject area, supplier, cost, and license type, as well as data about the course for which the title was requested, such as the instructor, course number, and maximum number of students able to participate in the course. This level of bibliographic data tracking was limited to high-cost course reserves because these titles required the approval process, whereas lower-cost course reserves did not. The data and analysis used to inform the policy decision are included below. It is important to note that OSUL purchases unlimited-user, DRM-free ebook titles, unless that license type is not available. The next best choice is the selection of a license that provides the greatest amount of access for the lowest cost. Once we had a list of titles, the collection assessment librarian gathered usage data for each title broken down by month.

OSUL subscribes to the Alma library management system (LMS) and uses Alma Analytics to create usage reports for COUNTER usage data harvested via the Standardized Usage Statistics Harvesting Initiative (SUSHI). COUNTER is an organization that works with publishers to supply a standard set

of usage reports and metrics for electronic resources. SUSHI is the Application Programming Interface (API) mechanism that harvests the usage data so that library employees can aggregate and access it. A custom list of titles from the high-cost course reserves request forms was entered into Alma Analytics, and the system displayed an analysis with usage information for each title. The project is referenced from TR_B1 reports, a specific title report in COUNTER that displays full-text activity for all content that is not Gold Open Access. This workflow included tracking usage on a monthly basis, beginning with the month following the purchase of the ebook. In addition to exporting and analyzing usage data, the collection assessment librarian created reports that displayed the license type, platform, and Library of Congress (LC) subject classification for each title in Excel after extracting that data from additional analyses in Alma Analytics.

Although tracking the high-cost request titles for our analyses through forwarded emails captured most of the purchases for high-cost ebooks, we discovered that the data represented in the shared spreadsheet did not match all of the title results displayed in the Alma Analytics reports, as some of the titles were missing from the shared spreadsheet. Since 2021, acquisitions employees have coded every purchase using the reporting code function that can be configured in Alma. In 2023, library employees in the RAS department redefined those reporting codes so we could keep track of all titles purchased for course reserves, even if they were purchased using a specialized library gift fund instead of our designated course reserves fund code. After redefining the reporting codes, the collection assessment librarian entered the codes as criteria in an Alma analysis to obtain a full list of course reserve titles. Twenty-one high-cost ebook titles purchased between July 2021 and the end of June 2024 had not initially been included in the shared spreadsheet. These titles were added to the list, bringing the total number of high-cost course reserve purchases over this period to sixty-six titles.

There are limitations to data retrieval in Alma Analytics. For example, the current acquisitions process for course reserves does not include adding metadata related to course or instructor requester information in Alma. Although this information is available through the request form and forwarded emails, some of this information is lost between the request and the purchase. As a result, this project does not include data at the college or department level. It does, however, include LC subject classification data for each title, which provides a more general idea of which disciplines generate high-cost course reserve requests.

In July 2024, after gathering three years of bibliographic, course, and usage data for high-cost course reserve title purchases, the collection assessment librarian began to dissect and analyze the data. This analysis highlighted three focus areas of data that could best inform a new high-cost course reserves policy: usage data, license-type and platform data, and subject data. The usage data analysis did not only include our high-cost course reserve ebook titles but also all other course reserve ebook title usage, as well as the usage of the titles in our two major ebook subscription collections during that time. The analysis also compared the license-type and platform data and the subject data of our high-cost titles with other course reserve titles to examine any discrepancies or trends between the two lists, possibly to determine why some titles cost much more than others.

Results

Return on Investment Analyses

Over the course of three fiscal years, OSUL has invested \$50,933.83 on high-cost ebook purchases and \$72,876.20 on all our course reserve ebook purchases, bringing our total three-year expenditure for course reserve ebook titles to \$123,810.03. At an average of more than \$40,000 per year, this investment is not insignificant, but it accounts for only about 1 percent of our total yearly collections budget. During three fiscal years, OSUL purchased sixty-six high-cost course reserve ebook titles and 545 course reserve titles that were below the \$500 threshold, for a total of 611 course reserve purchases.

To contextualize the return on investment of our high-cost course reserve titles, the collection assessment librarian first compared TR_B1 COUNTER usage of our high-cost titles with the usage of all other course reserve request titles and the usage of our other two major ebook packages subscribed through EBSCO and ProQuest. After calculating and adding together the median monthly usage across titles and dividing that usage by the number of titles for each collection, it became apparent that our high-cost course reserve titles are very heavily used, with average title usage consistently around 200 uses per month. Only thirteen of sixty-six (19 percent) high-cost titles were used fewer than one hundred times over the past three fiscal years. The library's other course reserve titles also perform very well, but only about two-thirds as well as the more expensive titles. The ebook package usage was much lower, and data showed that many of the titles in the packages have never been used. Figure 1 shows the median monthly usage per title for each of our ebook collections: our high-cost course reserves, all other course reserve titles, our EBSCO ebook package, and our ProQuest ebook package.

The cost per use for each collection category was calculated by dividing the annual expenditure for each category by the number of TR_B1 unique item requests recorded during each respective fiscal year. Figure 2 presents the resulting cost-per-use values. Purchases designated as high-cost course reserves, other course reserves, and the ProQuest Ebook Central package each demonstrate low costs per use, all falling below \$0.20. The EBSCO package is excluded from the figure because of its significantly higher cost per use, averaging \$3.00, and its inclusion skewed the graph scale in a way that obscured differentiation between the ProQuest and course reserves data.¹⁸ In the most recent fiscal year (FY24), high-cost course reserve titles exhibited a lower cost per use compared with other course reserve titles.

This data demonstrates that the high-cost course reserve titles are used at a high rate, and on average are used more than the titles in our other ebook collections. Despite the high cost of these titles—the most expensive costing almost \$2,000 for an unlimited-user license—they exhibit a low cost per use overall.

License Type, Publisher, and Platform Analyses

Data for the license type and platform of the high-cost course reserve titles and those of all other course reserve titles were analyzed to determine whether license type and platform are significant

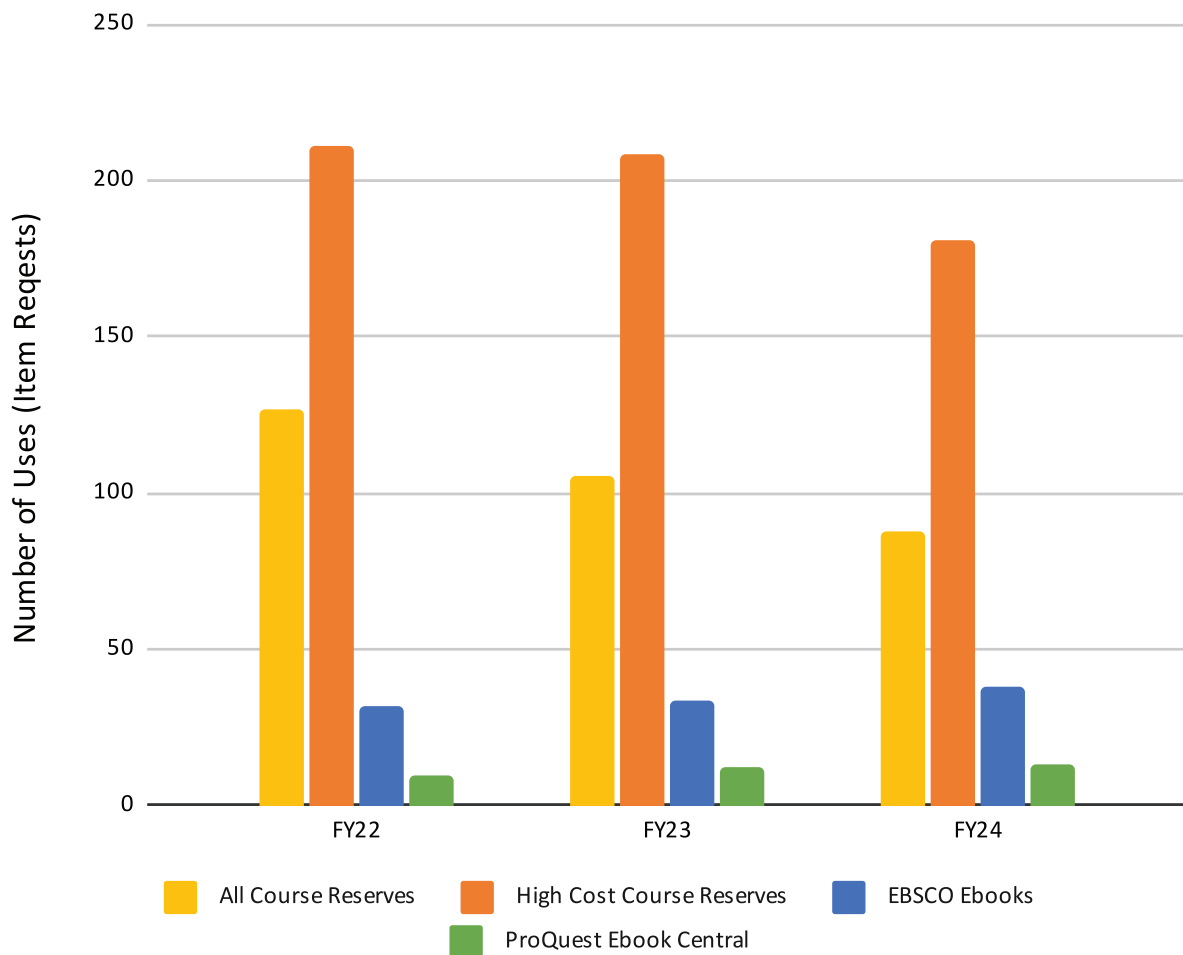


Figure 1. Median monthly uses per title.

factors in ebook pricing. The goal was to determine whether OSUL's policy to mediate high-cost titles might unintentionally delay the purchase of titles with unlimited access models. As a practice, OSUL purchases the license type that allows the greatest number of users, with unlimited-user DRM-free licenses as a preference irrespective of cost. The same concern about our current policy applied to publisher platforms: would there be a delay in the purchase of titles available on only certain platforms because of cost? Following the analysis, however, we determined that those anticipated scenarios do not match the reality for OSUL's course reserve purchases. Figures 3 and 4 display the distribution of license types for high-cost titles and all other titles purchased for course reserves. Interestingly, most of the high-cost course reserve titles were purchased with a three-user license, while the most common license type for all other course reserve titles is the unlimited-user license. This may be because of the fact that traditional textbook publishers do not provide unlimited-user licenses for their content. None of the high-cost course reserve texts have been purchased with a concurrent user license, although a few concurrent user licenses have been purchased for other course reserve titles. The data disproves an



Figure 2. Cost per use by collection. *EBSCO ebooks are not represented in Figure 2 because of the scale of visualization; EBSCO ebooks averaged \$3.12 cost per use in FY22, FY23, and FY24.

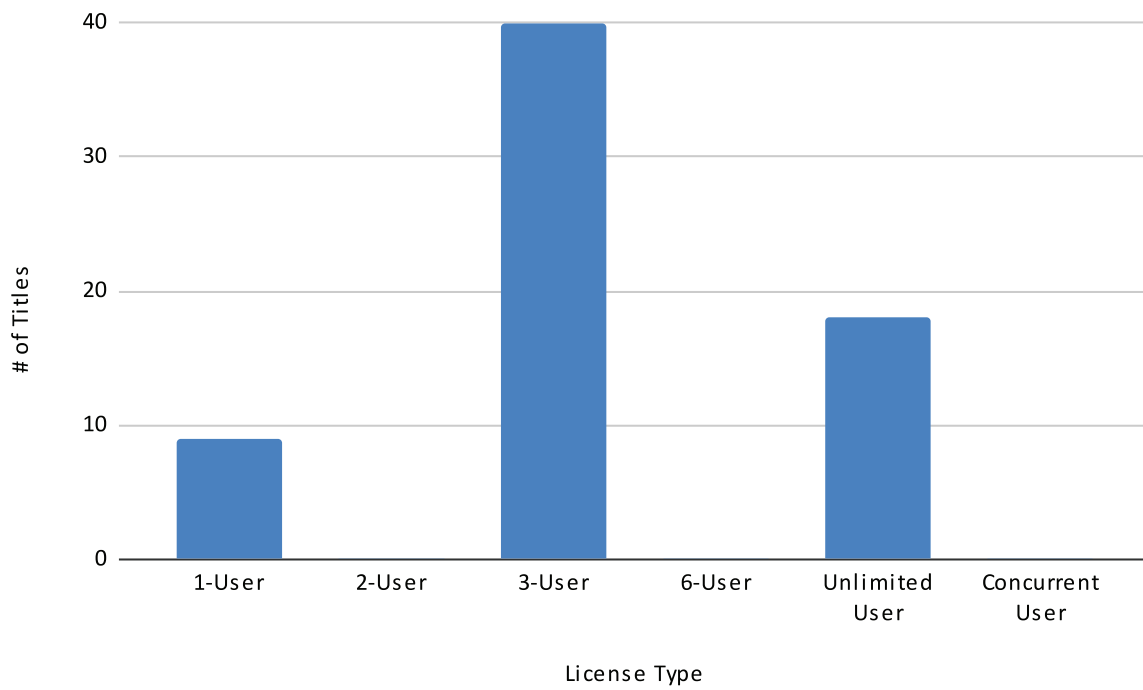


Figure 3. Number of titles purchased by license type: high-cost titles.

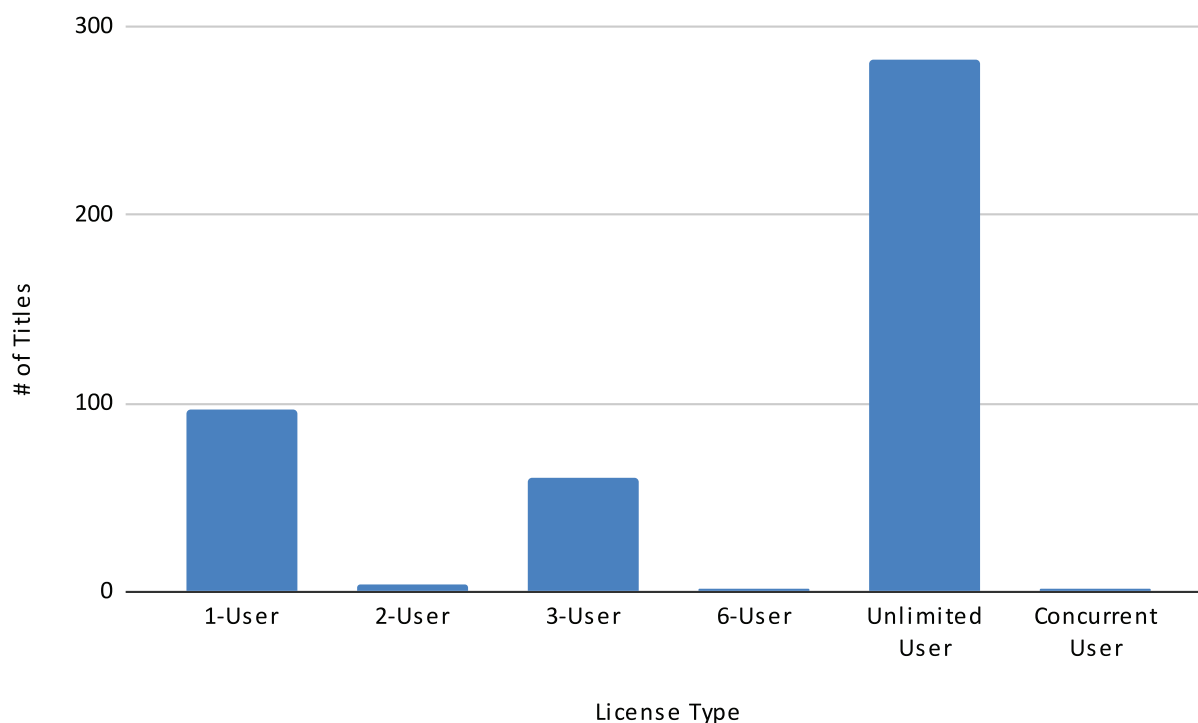


Figure 4. Number of titles purchased by license type: all course reserves.

assumption that unlimited license titles are always more expensive to purchase because there is not a large proportion of them represented in our high-cost analysis. The data also highlights the lack of that license option for more expensive titles, at least for OSUL purchases.

Our limited sample size of sixty-six titles includes twenty-three different publishers. McGraw Hill represents the largest number of titles at twenty (30 percent), and Routledge represents the second highest number of titles with ten (15 percent). Thirteen publishers appeared only once in the sample. Interestingly, all of the McGraw Hill ebooks and all of the Routledge ebooks (except for one, which has a single-user license) were purchased with three-user licenses. In analyzing ebook costs per publisher, the median cost is \$760.50 per title. Median pricing for McGraw Hill titles is lower than the overall median price at \$650.43, and Routledge titles have a much higher median cost at \$913.20. Our lowest cost titles from the high-cost group all have the same price and publisher: \$540 for each unlimited-user license title from Cambridge University Press.

Figures 5 and 6 show the distribution of publisher platforms that host high-cost course reserve titles and all other course reserve titles that our library purchases. The breakdowns are similar, with ProQuest as the most represented ebook platform. ScienceDirect from Elsevier and Cambridge platforms constitute a higher percentage of titles for our high-cost titles, and unlike other course reserve purchases, JSTOR, Project MUSE, and Wiley are not represented in the high-cost analysis. Analysis of this data implies that the publisher platform does not significantly impact the cost for ebook titles. It

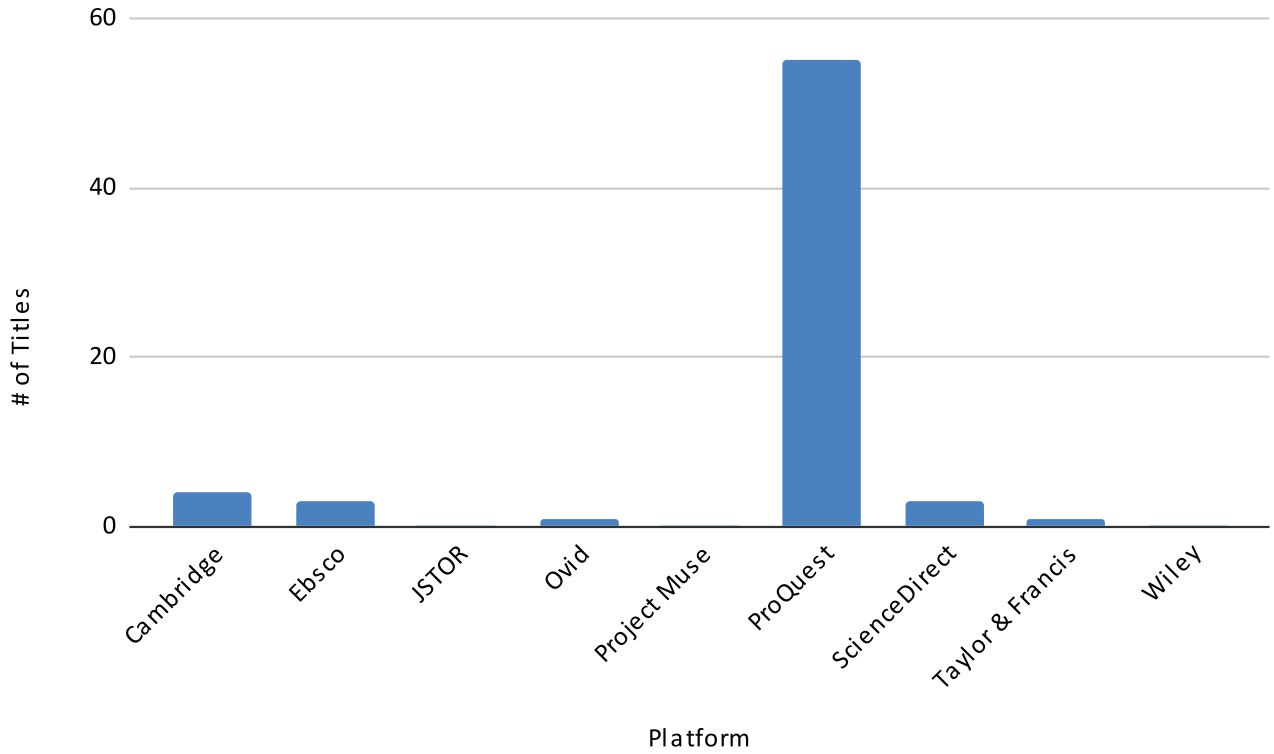


Figure 5. Number of titles purchased by platform: high-cost titles.

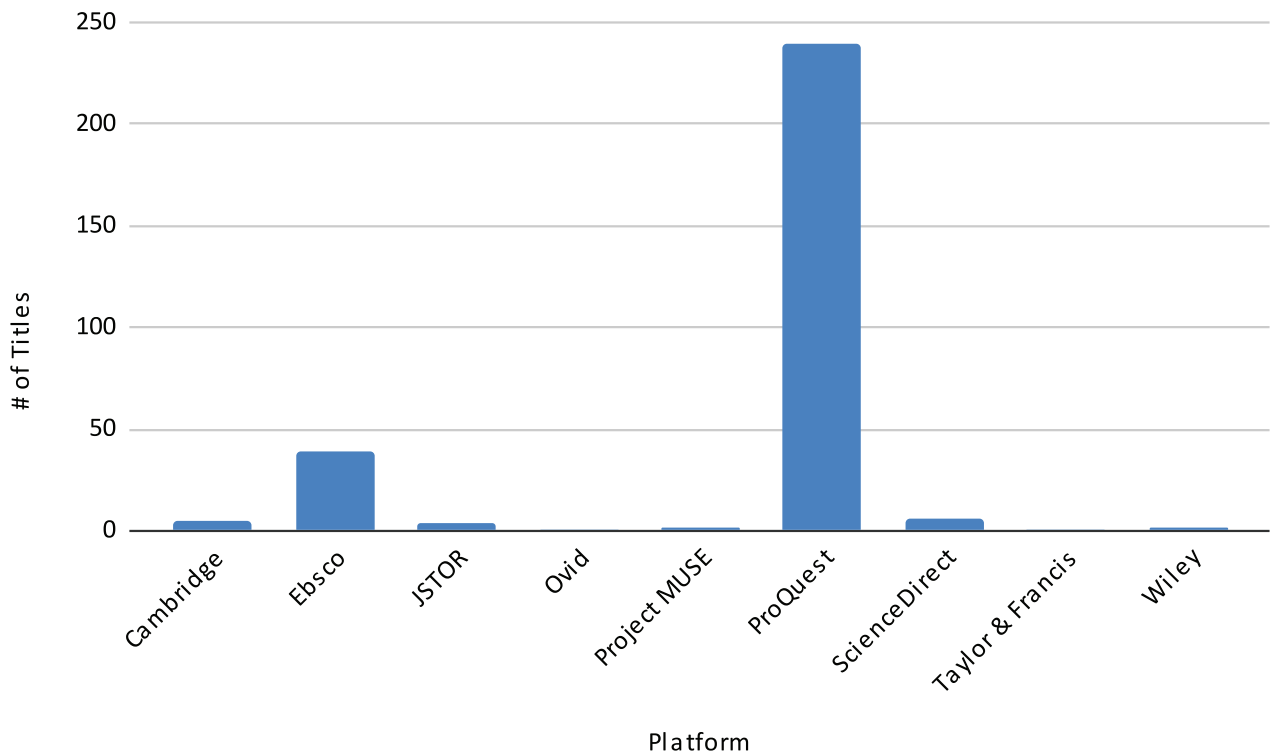


Figure 6. Number of titles purchased by platform: all course reserves.

is also worth noting that OSUL has historically preferred to purchase ebooks from ProQuest, followed by EBSCO platforms. This preference was in part due to the user interface, which is familiar to most students and researchers, and the quantity of these licenses. Illinois State University research noted their own EBSCO and ProQuest platform preference because of access and ability to pull usage, which is also a consideration for OSUL.¹⁹

Subject Area Analysis

The LC subject analysis highlighted the differences in subject distribution between high-cost course reserve titles and all other course reserve purchases, as shown in tables 1 and 2. The subject analysis is limited by the capabilities of OSUL's LMS and the availability of data imported from ebook packages. Therefore the subject analysis references the LC classification outline, and not specific subjects, in the included tables. As OSUL purchased 545 lower-cost course reserve titles in comparison with sixty-six high-cost titles, it was not surprising that the lower-cost titles represented a wider range of subject areas. For those lower-cost titles, Philosophy, Psychology, and Religion; Language and Literature; Social Science; and Science subject titles constitute the majority of purchases. This distribution for higher-cost titles skews more heavily toward the Science and Social Science subjects, which comprise more than 57 percent of purchased titles (compared with 31 percent of titles for the lower-cost purchases). A manual review of high-cost titles found that the majority of titles in the social sciences designation are finance and economic titles, and the science designations are mainly from the biology and chemistry disciplines.

GOBI's 2024 New Title Report shows that the most expensive texts cost about \$150 per title and fall under the Technology; Philosophy, Psychology, and Religion; and Law subjects.²⁰ Language and Literature and Geography, Anthropology, and Recreation subject titles are generally less expensive. The conflicting data may demonstrate that the individual texts chosen for course readings have a greater impact on cost than would be expected by individual subjects.

Table 1. Number of Titles Purchased by Subject: High-Cost Titles

LC Subject	Number of Titles	% of Titles
Social Sciences	22	33.3%
Science	16	24.2%
Philosophy, Psychology, Religion	7	10.6%
Medicine	4	6.1%
World History	4	6.1%
Education	3	4.5%
Geography, Anthropology, Recreation	3	4.5%
Language and Literature	3	4.5%
Technology	3	4.5%
Law	1	1.5%

Table 2. Number of Titles Purchased by Subject: All Course Reserves

LC Subject	Number of Titles	% of Titles
Social Sciences	103	18.90%
Language and Literature	91	16.70%
Science	66	12.11%
Philosophy, Psychology, Religion	62	10.64%
Medicine	40	7.34%
Geography, Anthropology, Recreation	37	6.79%
History of the Americas	35	6.42%
Education	34	6.24%
Technology	23	4.22%
World History	15	2.75%
Law	14	2.57%
Agriculture	10	1.83%
Political Science	8	1.47%
Auxiliary Sciences of History	2	0.37%
Fine Arts	2	0.37%
General Works	1	0.18%
Military Science	1	0.18%
Music	1	0.18%

Discussion

This three-year study aimed to evaluate data over multiple academic years to determine both the value, in terms of use by students, and the financial burden of acquiring ebooks for course reserves. The focus was to determine whether any differences could be observed between high-cost ebooks that would necessitate continued mediation of purchases. In considering the work of multiple units and the timing demands to have material ready for classes, any avenues for streamlining the process were welcome. The example workflow from Illinois State University is a good representation of people, steps, and timing involved in this work.²¹ The differences in this three-year study demonstrate a higher monthly usage rate than lower-cost ebooks, resulting in an overall lower cost per use. The data supports the elimination of mediating high-cost ebook purchasing for course reserves.

The number of titles in the high-cost range was a small fraction of the overall purchases for course reserves. Understanding the average requesting patterns over three years provided confidence that high-cost ebooks could be processed without additional mediated steps and additional expenditure surprises. Tangentially, this work helps affirm the existing collection budget for course reserves.

The data gathered from ebook publisher and vendor platforms, combined with our LMS Alma, were robust enough to answer our research questions. Initial planning was required to ensure the data from Alma was consistent. One lesson learned from a multiyear project is to ensure that any system or procedure changes do not interfere with data collection. This can be challenging without regular communication with stakeholders.

The majority of the high-cost titles were three-user limited licenses instead of unlimited. It is interesting to note that the usage was not negatively impacted by a more restrictive license for high-cost ebooks. Because these limited license titles are so highly used, we might expect to see high instances of turnaways. However, we found significant turnaways for only one three-user license title and one single-user license title out of all of our high-cost group when conducting this analysis. This is something we may want to track in the future to determine whether a second copy purchase policy is needed. The data also highlighted the heavy use and reliance on ProQuest ebook single-title purchasing. It is unclear how that reliance on ProQuest might shift in the future for OSUL because of the recent vendor announcement to move away from the option to purchase single titles.²²

Future Considerations

Libraries provide course reserves to alleviate students' financial burdens. Government regulations and alternative OERs are not significantly impacting the rising costs of textbooks or the growing debt faced by those pursuing degrees from higher education institutions. Efforts to include expensive ebooks in the OSUL course reserves is one creative way to address the current issues with textbook affordability. This ability lasts only as long as the library can budget for these types of collection expenditures. It is unclear what percentage of overall classes are supported by OSUL course reserves. Even after three years, it is unlikely that we have met the saturation point for textbook needs. Libraries must continue to advocate for changes to the textbook market while also finding innovative ways to support their user communities.

Additionally, libraries remain reliant on the content publishers release in both print and electronic formats. In some instances, a print book is not released as an ebook, making it challenging to support electronic course reserves. Textbook publishers may see higher market values by participating in Inclusive Access programs sponsored by university bookstores, thereby displacing the library market and reducing libraries' ability to provide course reserves at any level.

In considering the need to remove barriers for employees in obtaining course reserve materials at the beginning of each term, and in recognizing the evolving nature of class structures toward online and hybrid formats, OSUL has committed to predominantly purchasing online materials. This commitment assumes that students have access to adequate computers and the internet to engage with online course content. The availability of current laptops and hotspot checkouts at OSUL underscores the ongoing need for students to maintain access to the tools necessary for success in higher education today. Elliott notes that access to the internet and a device is only one of three strata of the digital divide, and that

computer literacy and achieving outcomes through the use of technology are also essential strata to consider.²³ Further research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of online content, particularly ebooks hosted on various platforms with differing productivity claims, in achieving academic outcomes.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how OSUL improved staff efficiency and reduced the operational time to process acquired course reserve content, in service of the larger goal of lowering some financial barriers for students. These changes resulted from the use of data-informed decision-making. The data provides a concrete answer to shifting processes and policies within the scope of our needs but does not address the overall affordability of textbooks.

CRedit Author Roles

Kerri Goergen-Doll: Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

Taylor Ralph: Formal Analysis, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

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