

**DIY for Course Reserves:  
A Student-Driven Service in an Academic Library**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

With the proliferation of electronic information, there is a growing emphasis on self-service and on information control in academic libraries. This is indicated by the development of service standards as exemplified by LibQual+ and other quality assessment programs. The Texas A&M University Libraries is no exception and in an effort to empower students and faculty as well as increase both customer access and information control, they have made changes to their course reserves service to elevate the user experience. Specifically, they have allowed students and faculty more physical access to print and electronic reserves as well as more input into and control over what is purchased and placed online to support curriculum interests.

## **ACCESS & INFORMATION CONTROL**

Most course reserves collections have had a history of being closed to the public, requiring a staff member to retrieve requested items. In 1957, it was reported that there was a “de-emphasis of closed reserves and the greater use of open-shelf reserves” (Shepherd, p. 24) but the experiences of the authors at numerous academic libraries shows that closed reserves are indeed still in use. In 2007, Dietz, Birch, and Goldner reported that “closed-reserves are common services available for print and some electronic materials” (p. 23-1). As recently as 2009, Ohio State University-Marion “faculty still utilize the closed reserve area” (Blankenship & Wood, p. 134).

As had been the case for many academic libraries, access to the course reserves collections at Texas A&M University had been strictly controlled. Materials had been kept behind the service desks and had to be requested by call number; browsing was not even an

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option without checking the items out. In some of the four campus libraries, the books were checked out to individuals for four hours but not even allowed out of the building. The emphasis was on the security of these high-demand items rather than on student access to the critical course information.

Limited access was not only an issue with print materials in the course reserves collection. Audiovisual collections have contained items such as records and films which were only accessible by physically visiting the library. Numerous academic libraries are now providing streaming audio and video content. In speaking of academic libraries' use of streaming audio technologies, Mason and Wiercinski stated that these "technologies offer the possibility of remote, around-the-clock access to collections that may otherwise be underused." There is a heightened expectation that audiovisual materials should be fully accessible online as they are with "social networking sites..., online digital media stores..., and subscription-based streaming music services" (2009, p. 70).

Streaming technologies can also give more information control to the teaching faculty. At Brown University Library, "faculty members can add different forms of media for their classes in one place" ("Add Video," 2007, p. 13). In addition to electronic media, there are other opportunities for patron control over course material. Faculty have traditionally decided what would go onto their course reserves. If a student thought of a book that might be helpful to classmates, he/she would not usually have the authority to add or even request that item. This is one of many enhancements that Texas A&M University Libraries has considered.

## **COURSE RESERVES LANDSCAPE**

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Students at Texas A&M University are served by four different libraries on campus that provide specialized services, including course reserves, for its defined departments and clientele. The central campus library, Sterling C. Evans, is the largest and has an entire unit, composed of 10 personnel, dedicated to processing and serving course reserves for the majority of the departments on campus as well as overseeing the media collection. The West Campus Library (WCL) works with the Mays Business School and has a staff member who coordinates and processes their reserves. In addition to other access services responsibilities, two staff members from the Medical Sciences Library (MSL) assist the Colleges of Medicine, Veterinary Medicine and Rural Public Health with their course reserves. The smallest library is the Policy Sciences & Economics Library which serves the Departments of Political Science and Economics and the Bush School of Government and Public Service. PSEL, as it is known for brevity, has one staff member who works on reserves and other access services functions in addition to technical support and student supervision. In spite of its size, or possibly because of it, PSEL is able to work very closely with students and faculty in its constituent departments to meet, and sometimes anticipate, their needs. In fact, as illustrated in Table 1, PSEL processes almost as many course reserves each term as the main campus library.

In our approach to making reserves more accessible and responsive to both faculty and students, our efforts were almost concurrent, but it was recognized that the primary users of course reserves are students. Since the library fee is listed as a line item on student fee statements, students knew, to the penny, how much they were paying for library services. The library also enjoys a strong and mutually informative relationship with its student advisory committee. These facts, along with the libraries' obligation to provide the best service possible

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to its students, prompted significant changes in reserve policies, processes, and even its physical space.

### **THE IMPETUS BEHIND THE CHANGE**

A number of factors have pushed libraries toward being more actively innovative with regard to course reserves services. Financial issues related to economic downturns and to the increasing costs of attending college, particularly the expense of textbooks, have been overarching factors that have the attention of university administrators and state legislators as well as parents and students. For example, a textbook expense question in a survey of students at another land-grant university, Oregon State University, found that “40 percent... spend \$150 to \$250 per term, 28 percent spend \$251 to \$300 and 22 percent spend more than \$300” (Christie, Pollitz, & Middleton, 2009, p. 497). Just as patrons of public libraries flock to their sanctuaries of free information access, students who may find themselves unable to afford textbooks can go to their academic libraries which may just have the title they need in the stacks or course reserves. In addition, the growing admittance of “non-traditional” students, the proliferation of technology in classrooms and the increasing popularity of distance education programs have changed what is demanded of the library and how students want to access the information needed to support their classes.

Aside from an effort to be service-oriented and meet the information needs of library patrons, the Libraries have also been very accountable to students in fiscal terms. The Texas A&M University Libraries have been increasingly dependent on the Library Use Fee (LUF) for almost 15 years, and it now makes up almost 100% of the Libraries’ operating budget. This allows for the addition of new resources and new technology-based services when many other

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institutions are cutting serials expenditures and reducing their hours of operation. This reliance on student fee money, which is currently the highest student fee at the university, has resulted in extreme transparency so students can see exactly how much of their money goes to the libraries and how it is being spent. In spite of economic anxieties and the push to lower tuition, the libraries have always had the support of students for the LUF, even when it was necessary to ask for increases. Part of this success is due to the solid relationship between library administration and the student body, with regular meetings of a student advisory committee being held to discuss issues and address student priorities. This committee was created by the Texas A&M University Libraries in an effort to acknowledge that “One of the decade’s strongest trends in higher education is the call for accountability. As student costs rise, students are voicing stronger opinions on what they want from their educational dollar” (Benefiel, Arant, & Gass, 1999, p. 113). These efforts have gone beyond discussion to implementation: in an effort to be responsive to students’ concerns and continue to evolve and enhance library services, there has been a concerted effort to gather relevant information from students as well as from faculty members about their specific needs and to follow through by meeting those needs.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDENT-CENTERED MODEL**

In 2008, Texas A&M University made an effort to have a single access point where students could go for all of their course reserves. One student made the following comment in LibQual+: “It would be way more convenient if Evan's Reserve was online!!!” This is where students look for their information first so having a single online point of access was critical. Therefore, it was decided that the electronic reserves system at the time, ARes, was to be used as the central access point, including links to other content systems for streaming video and print

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reserves information. Links to items in the library catalog were included in the e-reserves system's course listing so that students could see all of their print reserves materials, in which library they were located as well as the items' holding status, all with just one click.

In addition to the improvements that were made to already established reserves services, the libraries collaborated with another university department that supports technology and systems for distance education to create a new reserves service that supports streaming multimedia files for course use. This service had already been successfully offered to distance education classes through this nonlibrary unit. Now the Libraries can facilitate access to this service for instructional faculty who in the past would have come to the library with their students to watch videos or listen to music. The new service allows faculty to manage their own media materials and, due to the copyright issues involved, authenticated access is then granted to students after their NetIDs are checked electronically against class rosters. With this new service, students can access these multimedia files at any time from any location.

We also sought to improve the course reserves experience for students, further empowering them by enacting several enhancements or changes in policies and procedures:

- Allowing any person (faculty, student or librarian) to request that a book be purchased and placed on course reserve (instead of only faculty, as was previously the case)
- Merging of the textbook and reserves collections with a commitment to a growing collection (resources used: collection development policy statement, bookstore list, frequent recalls report)
- Focusing on electronic access - digitizing notes/exams, links to articles, scanning of chapters, and purchase of e-books
- Seeking copyright clearance to place more readings online

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- Following through on student request for a clearinghouse for course syllabi
- Opening physical access to the reserves collections to students and faculty (only at PSEL)

Because of high student demand for textbooks, a policy was written to ensure consistent service with the following points:

1. Selectors purchase books according to a Collection Development Policy and Approval Plan. Sometimes textbooks that may or may not be used for classes are purchased for the general library collection when the book meets the needs of the collection and requirements as stated in the Collection Development Policy.
2. Textbooks for classes of 50 students or more are purchased from the textbook list provided by the campus bookstore each semester and placed on course reserve.
3. Students and Faculty may generate User Purchases of curriculum materials that cost \$150 or less, using the Library's online Purchase Recommendation Form.
4. Materials are purchased only in print or electronic book format.

Each of the four campus libraries had some latitude to modify or make exceptions to these policies, depending on the specific needs of their clientele. For example, the criteria for purchasing print copies of textbooks varies: Evans typically only purchases textbooks when requested while WCL and PSEL's textbook orders usually preceded any requests. WCL purchases one copy of a textbook for every 50 students enrolled in a course (with a maximum of five textbooks) while PSEL orders one copy of every book, whether required or recommended, to add to its collection.

In addition, through discussions with patrons and students, student workers in some libraries have also been empowered to do all but the most intricate stages of processing reserves.

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While staff supervision and quality control are priorities, the benefits to having student workers processing course reserve items and interacting with both faculty and students are considerable:

a) student patrons are more likely to report issues or concerns and are more receptive to taking instruction or criticism from their peers; b) student workers, as students themselves, understand the importance of having materials up in a timely, accessible and printer-friendly format; and c) student workers get immediate feedback and see the product of their efforts which increases both the quality of their output and the investment in their work.

## ISSUES TO ADDRESS

While an open access reserves collection garners a positive response with fewer barriers to the material and the ability to browse and see what is there (or find “that green ECON book”), there was, as McCaskill, King, and Seel (1995) also report, “an increase in the loss of certain categories of short-term materials, particularly test answers, assignments and articles” (p. 49). For the most part, Texas A&M’s implementation had been very successful with some exceptions. The number of items permanently lost was moderate given the usage and time period, but there were many complaints about not being able to find items on the shelf (especially during exam time) that would turn up a couple of days later. In instances where instructors loaned personal copies to be placed on reserves, having to replace professors’ copies was a source of embarrassment for the library, and using state funds to replace personal copies required a strong justification. The majority of lost items were extremely expensive books, primarily in Economics. While the number of books lost was moderate, the cost to replace them averaged \$150 to \$200 per book (totaling in excess of \$5,000 in a year). The self-serve reserves model worked well aside from those instances when the books were not checked out before use,

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but those instances have become fewer as signage and staff oversight have become more prevalent. Texas A&M did not want to abandon the idea of self-service, but more security was desirable given the high demand of these items. As a temporary solution, the professors' copies were moved behind the service desk (a step backward in the effort to implement self-service) until the Dean of Libraries announced that the cost of replacing the books themselves was minor in comparison with the barrier to self-service and sense of mistrust that the students experience when the books are locked up.

## **ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS**

Interest in digitizing course materials has increased in tandem with the growing prevalence of courseware such as BlackBoard or WebCT Vista to support Web-based and distance courses. The incorporation of electronic reserves into these systems is a complementary next step. While implementing course reserves into the system the students use for their coursework is a natural extension of outreach into an electronic environment, there are a couple of drawbacks to using courseware systems for course reserves. The first is the use of multiple courseware systems by different departments at Texas A&M, which would require much effort in terms of collaborating with the appropriate units, getting staff training and updating materials. The second factor is that courseware is designed for the interaction, collaboration and feedback mechanisms that courses require but most do not have the document management features that have been traditionally desirable in a course reserves system (request intake and tracking, status updates, workflow, easy reprocess of items or courses and compliance with copyright fair use standards and licensing restrictions).

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Even if one does not go the courseware route, there are certain guidelines which can be followed when moving toward the future of e-reserves. Amato (2005) outlines the requirements for a library to institute a more open model for electronic reserves, including:

- Input of data (via Web form or proprietary system) should happen only once.
- All e-reserve documents should be listed in the library catalog.
- Access should be limited to those enrolled in the course.
- Faculty should be able to upload their own scanned documents if they choose.
- Faculty should be able to ask the library to scan course materials for them.
- Copyright law should be clearly defined and communicated to users.
- A link to e-reserves should be included on all academic course pages.
- There should be a standard format for documents: pdf or mp3, etc.

## **EXTENDING THIS EMPOWERMENT TO FACULTY**

What began as a courtesy service extended to a couple of instructional faculty who were comfortable with technology and craving more interaction with their electronic course reserves materials has evolved into a regular service offered to any instructor: their own ARes accounts and the capacity to configure, upload and change access to their course materials. Faculty members can manage their own established class accounts which include the ability to turn items off/on, set expiration dates, add materials and create directories within their course pages. So far, more than 20 instructional faculty members are managing their own electronic reserves course pages. One lesson that the PSEL staff learned, on the other hand, was that some faculty are just as happy *not* to be involved in the minutiae of putting their reserves materials online. The Policy Sciences & Economics Library has only six faculty members who manage their own

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reserves through the system, and they are also the only ones who submit their items through the online reserves system. So far the majority of instructors prefer to send a syllabus to the PSEL and have the library staff and students enter everything into the system as they begin processing the items.

## CONCLUSION

Having examined what has been accomplished in a student-driven service-oriented academic library, the question remains, what lies in store for the future of course reserves in a do-it-yourself environment? Libraries such as those of Texas A&M University are proceeding steadily down the path of customer empowerment, following the model of retail stores with self-service cash registers, and continuing to explore the newest available technologies. Anecdotal evidence suggests that open access course reserves collections and student- and faculty-empowered reserves services are promising, but another question remains: are library patrons satisfied?

When it comes down to it, customer satisfaction should always be the guiding force in any service operation. Libraries exist to provide information access to their users; the quicker and more complete the access, the more satisfied patrons will be. During the recent economic downturn, patron satisfaction with libraries generally appears steady, and library usage continues to grow. As a matter of fact, “Good Morning America, CNN, and other news outlets feature stories about the increase in library usage across the country” (Ayar, 2009, p. 31). Library visits in the United States grew by close to 78.5 million from 2006 to 2008, a year in which over 1 billion people visited U.S. libraries (American Library Association, 2008). It has become evident that “library use increases in a down economy” (Davis, 2009, p. 12). In this environment,

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libraries need to be proactive and provide innovative resources and services with patron satisfaction as a guiding force. The Texas A&M University Libraries will continue toward a path of providing proactive user-centered services while keeping in mind that although some groups welcome the power to “do-it-themselves,” others still appreciate the value in a face-to-face interaction.

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**TABLE 1**  
Number of Departments Served and Course Reserve Items at Texas A&M University Libraries

Library	# Departments Served	# Items on Reserve (Spring 2010)
Evans Library	72	2,109
Medical Sciences Library	15	117
Policy Sciences & Economics Library	4	1,818
West Campus Library	15	251

Source: Texas A&M University Libraries, ARes Reserves System