

Caleb Nichols

In defense of course reserves

A review of California programs

In his 2015 opinion piece “No reservations: Why the time has come to kill print textbook reserves,” Librarian Donald A. Barclay makes an argument for getting rid of what has become a standard service in many academic libraries: course reserves. Barclay claims that textbook costs are out of control, and that while reserves programs are resource-intensive, they do little to ease the financial burden of most students.¹ While it is true that maintaining a healthy reserves collection can carry significant costs, the claim that students aren’t helped by reserves collections doesn’t hold up to scrutiny. Furthermore, reserves services do more for campus communities than simply save students a few dollars each term. Thoughtfully managed course reserves programs not only help mitigate the ever-increasing cost of textbooks, they also bolster student and faculty engagement, create opportunities for library outreach, and are one of many ways libraries are staying relevant and student-centered in the 21st-century academic ecosystem.

This article looks qualitatively at several academic libraries with course reserves programs at public and private universities and colleges in California. As the course reserves coordinator at the Robert E. Kennedy Library (REKL) at the California Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo, California, I compare our own reserves program with that of programs at the University of California-Santa Cruz and Berkeley, Stanford University, Humboldt State University, and the College of the Redwoods—a small community college in Humboldt County. What began as a fairly simple fact-finding mission left me feeling

energized and excited about the ways in which course reserves can enhance the library and the campus community.

Cal Poly State University is a large public polytechnic university in San Luis Obispo, California. Serving nearly 25,000 staff, faculty, and students, REKL is the sole library on campus with holdings of approximately 379,060 volumes of print materials, 296,466 e-books, and several departments and service points, which work together to meet the information needs of the campus community. One of REKL’s most popular services is course reserves. Over the course of the academic year 2017–18, REKL had a total of 3,561 items on reserve for 1,529 courses, and these materials circulated 106,682 times.

REKL operates a closed reserves system, where materials on reserve are held on shelves behind the main circulation desk, shelved by course code, and are available for students to check out for periods between one and 48 hours. Materials are allowed to leave the building, and, in some cases, students may take items home with them overnight. Collection management of course reserves materials at REKL is instructor-driven. Instructors request books to be placed on reserve and choose the duration of the loan period. A large percentage of REKL’s materials on reserve are private instructor copies. For example, in fall 2017, of the 1,145 items on

Caleb Nichols is course reserves coordinator at Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic University-San Luis Obispo, email: cnicho17@calpoly.edu

reserve, 63.5% were instructor's personal copies and 36.5% of items were library copies.

Reading the literature

Two articles offer an excellent overview of current course reserves-related literature, including Stephanie Pitts-Noggle and Ryan Rafferty's 2017 work on piloting an open reserves collection, and a 2009 piece on the UCLA Library's strategic partnership with their campus bookstore by Anne Christie et al.^{2,3} Both of these articles point to a study by the Government Accountability Office in 2005 that found that textbook prices since 1978 had increased at twice the rate of inflation and suggest that many academic libraries responded to this finding by offering expanded course reserves services in an effort to reduce some of the textbook-cost burden on students. Pitts-Noggle and Rafferty show that although significant work has been done legislatively and in the academy to bring down prices, textbook costs have remained the same. This is a compelling argument for the continued need for reserves collections. The high cost of textbooks is a deeply entrenched problem, and students who are in school now deserve equitable access to learning materials.

Library visits

In an effort to better understand how REKL's reserves services compared with other institutions, I visited several academic libraries in California in July 2018 at schools including University of California-Santa Cruz, University of California-Berkeley, Humboldt State University, and the College of the Redwoods. I also conducted a phone interview of staff at Stanford University. These visits consisted of informal interviews with library staff, as well as tours of library spaces. It was useful to be able to compare what we are doing at REKL with a variety of other institutions, and I learned a lot from my counterparts on other campuses. For the sake of the privacy of my colleagues I won't go into specifics in this section, but will offer an overview of my findings here.

There are several different ways to operate a reserves library, and the choices we face in how

we deliver services depend on a number of factors, including, but not limited to, the needs of students, department budgets and other funding sources, instructor enthusiasm, and overall campus culture. Accordingly, each of the libraries I visited had unique services to offer. Differences included funding or lack thereof for reserves collections, whether collection management is instructor-driven or library-driven, or a hybrid model, and how engaged students and faculty were with reserves services.

All of these categories looked different across the institutions I visited, yet common themes emerged. In terms of funding, two out of the five schools I visited had dedicated funding for purchasing reserves materials annually, while three did not, or had intermittent funding through campus partners like Associated Students Inc. Those reserves programs that did have their own steady sources of funding, also tended to have mostly library-driven reserves collections. At these campuses, librarians and staff worked to select materials to be placed on reserve, rather than waiting for instructors to initiate requests.

Perhaps the most interesting finding of my trip was the wide range of student and faculty engagement. Two of the five campuses I toured had levels of engagement and circulation numbers that were similar to what we experience at REKL. One of the smallest campuses I visited had the highest numbers of items on reserve, with high circulation numbers to match. And it's no coincidence, perhaps, that this particular library had dedicated funding for reserves and staff that were highly involved in collection development.

Two of the campuses I visited had seen huge declines over the last decade in their reserves usage and collection. Interestingly, staff at these campuses were surprised when I told them about the numbers at REKL and similar institutions. The proliferation of ebooks and other web-based resources is often offered as an explanation for any dip in reserves statistics, but I would argue that although digital media may be displacing books in the stacks, this is not necessarily the same for a reserves collection, which functions in different ways

for different users. While some students rely on reserves as the only access they have to textbooks—extremely expensive STEM textbooks, for example—many students at Cal Poly use reserves collections to supplement their own. For instance, if a student has an hour to kill on campus, but doesn't want to lug that impossibly dense Organic Chemistry text all over the place, they know that they can borrow a copy to read in the library for one or two hours, sparing them the hassle and future visits to the chiropractor.

My findings indicate that the decline in reserves at campuses has more to do with a lack of engagement, outreach, and communication, than it does with a dearth of student demand. All of the campuses that I visited that had robust reserves programs had a few things in common: dedicated staff, engaged faculty, and sustained outreach to the campus community and stakeholders. More research is needed to understand how these factors interact and affect course reserves usage on college campuses.

Student Library Advisory Council

REKL is particularly engaged in working with students, from our student assistants who work in all departments of the library, to our Student Library Advisory Council (SLAC). SLAC is comprised of students interested in voicing student concerns with issues affecting the library community. As an advisory body, the group is chaired by library faculty and staff, and makes recommendations and suggestions to be delivered to library administration. Our Access Services department has been actively seeking input from SLAC over the past year, a collaboration that has yielded much for the campus community.

SLAC and Access Services have partnered together since spring 2018 on a course reserves donation program, branded as the Textbook GIVEback, which, in its pilot quarters (spring 2018 through fall 2018), successfully received donations of hundreds of textbooks, added to the reserves collection, and increased circulation. One hundred eleven books were added to the collection, representing a “new”

value of approximately \$10,000 and an 11% increase in the size of the collection. It is clear that the time and effort that went into our pilot of this program yielded a great return on investment for the campus community, perhaps soliciting donations could be a good solution for acquiring books for campuses, like ours that lack funding for reserves.

Another strategy for acquiring costly textbooks, especially for replacing an older edition with a newer one, are instructor desk copies, which can be requested gratis by instructors (although not by librarians, alas). This is another aspect of the instructor-driven reserves model that yields value and could be a useful cost-saving tool for departments that want to collect reserves but have little in the way of budgets to do so.

Future directions

Key findings from a review of the literature, library visits and interviews, and collaboration with students, all seem to point to one major factor in developing and maintaining a healthy and robust course reserves service: engagement. Libraries who want a highly successful program need to create positions for dedicated staff and possibly student workers. Staff need to engage with faculty, students, and other campus partners and stakeholders to ensure that course reserves services are marketed effectively to the community and are as accessible as possible. Engagement with other staff, faculty, and students should include a willingness and flexibility to regularly entertain new ideas and pilot programs, as appropriate. This means library administration and departments need to be flexible and supportive, and facilitate a culture where failure is an option, as piloting new initiatives will inevitably lead to some successes and some failures.

At REKL these findings specifically suggest that we look into several new directions for increasing course reserves holdings, including reconsideration of the library's role in reserves collection management. While we are lucky to

(continues on page 530)

Notes

1. Debra E. Kachel, "School Librarians as Equity Warriors: Advocating for All Students," *Teacher Librarian* 46, no. 2 (December 2018): 44–46.

2. Judi Moreillon, "Building Collaborative Relationships with Students," *School Library Monthly* 31, no. 5 (2015): 27–28.

3. Debra Kay Logan, "Putting Students First," *American Libraries* 39, no. 4 (January/February 2008): 56–59.

4. Mark Ray, "Aiming Higher for Successful Advocacy," *Teacher Librarian* 41, no. 5 (June 2014): 61–62.

5. Barbara Wildemuth, "Library Anxiety

Impedes College Students' Library Use, but May Be Alleviated Through Improved Bibliographic Instruction," *Evidence Based Library & Information Practice* 12, no. 4 (2017): 275–80.

6. Erin L. McAfee, "Shame: The Emotional Basis of Library Anxiety," *College & Research Libraries* 79, no. 2 (March 2018): 237–56.

7. Alison Cleveland, "Library Anxiety: A Decade of Empirical Research," *Library Review* 53, no. 3 (2004): 177–85.

8. Micki Holliday, *Coaching, Mentoring and Managing: Breakthrough Strategies to Solve Performance Problems and Build Winning Teams*, 2nd. ed. (Franklin Lakes, New Jersey: Career Press, 2001), x. ❧

(*In defense of course reserves,* cont. from page 522)

have a campus culture in which professors are extremely proactive in placing reserves requests and providing students with access to personal copies, we have an opportunity to increase access to materials by meeting professors halfway and being proactive in placing items on reserve on our own initiative. This work has begun with the pilot of our textbook donation program, but can be even further expanded as we move forward.

This is perhaps a good model to follow for campuses, like ours, who do not have dedicated funding for reserves collections, and is a creative solution to the problem of the expense of replacing damaged books. Additionally, it may be worth looking into seeking sources of funding to purchase new materials, as some campuses successfully do, to fill in gaps, especially in providing textbooks for large general education courses with multiple sections and expensive materials.

Lastly, it seems fair to suggest that engagement should also include understanding what the campus community wants from a reserves program. Survey research, perhaps in partnership with students in social sciences disciplines, is needed to assess what works currently for most students and what could use improve-

ment, and to solicit more ideas for where we could possibly go. Through these three types of engagement—engaging faculty and students through outreach, engaging library staff to be proactive, and engaging students by soliciting advice—course reserves services will continue to expand, increase access to important materials, and help continue to keep library services relevant and appreciated in campus communities.

Notes

1. Donald A. Barclay, "No Reservations: Why the Time Has Come to Kill Print Textbook Reserves," *College & Research Libraries News* 76, no. 6 (2015): 332–335, doi:10.5860/crln.76.6.9331.

2. Stephanie Pitts-Noggle and Ryan Rafferty, "Investigating Textbook Reserves: A Case Study of Two Models for Reserves Collections," *College & Research Libraries News* 78, no. 1 (2017): 66–79, doi:10.5860/crl.v78i1.16568.

3. Anne Christie, et al., "Student Strategies for Coping with Textbook Costs and the Role of Library Course Reserves," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 9, no. 4 (2009): 491–510, doi:10.1353/pla.0.0077. ❧