VitalSource®

Case Study University of Missouri

Tackling the course materials affordability crisis with powerful results—$7 million over three years in student savings.

Tuition. Housing. Dining.

Most incoming college students anticipate these elements of higher education will be costly. Unfortunately, the learning materials required for their courses can also be very expensive.

When the price of course materials is an unbudgeted-for-surprise, students are often faced with a risky temptation. And unfortunately, too many students make the decision to delay or avoid purchasing their required learning materials. Alarmingly, 50 percent acknowledge that this attempt at saving money costs them in a different way: suffering grades.

"We actually did a survey that revealed 75 percent of our students delayed buying a textbook until they saw how important it was going to be to the class," says Danna Wren, Director of Educational Technologies at University of Missouri.

The University of Missouri System knew this widespread issue was impacting its four campuses. Leadership at its campus stores had been trying to solve this problem for some time.

"I would say we have been trying to get the cost of course materials low for students our entire existence here," says Sherry Pollard, Director, University of Missouri Campus Stores. "First through used, then rental, then digital."
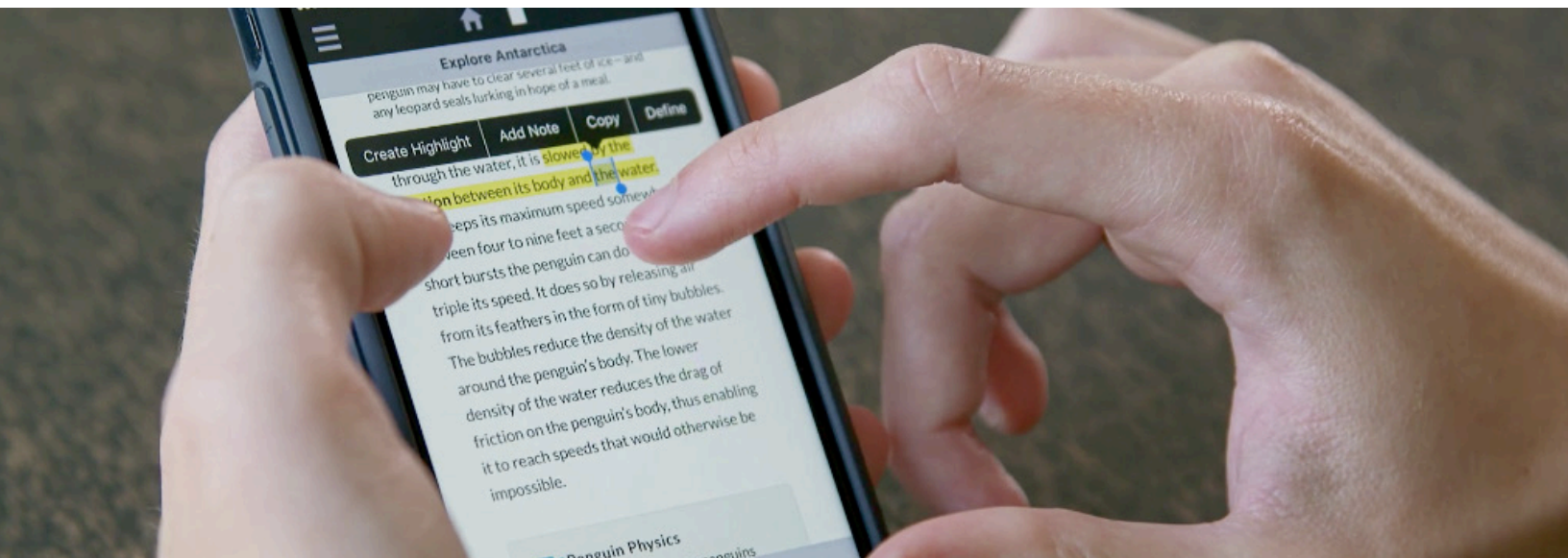
The next step in the progression of affordable course materials for Missouri student came in 2014, with the inception of the AutoAccess program. AutoAccess would ensure all students would not only pay affordable prices for their materials, but would receive them on day one of classes.

CAMPUS STORE DRIVES AFFORDABILITY

The campus store administrators and staff were the initial advocates for AutoAccess at Missouri, and they were critical for its successful implementation and continued upkeep, says Sherry Pollard.

"It takes a very dedicated staff to make AutoAccess successful," she says. "And we have a great staff in all of our stores. We couldn't make this program work without them and the passion they feel for saving students money."

That passion has been noted by Missouri leadership; Pollard's department was asked to serve on a system wide task force dedicated to textbook affordability.

Independent stores bring value to college campuses because they are owned and operated by the college. So all dollars made in the stores are contributed back to the campus they serve, Pollard adds.

"Our primary purpose in the store is to serve students and improve learning outcomes for them," she says. "A part of that is by providing course materials at a price point they can afford so they have the materials they need to be successful in class."

"AutoAccess is an 'Inclusive Access' digital-content program in which all students receive access to digital content for their classes through their learning management system [LMS])," says Dale Sanders, Senior Associate Director, University of Missouri Campus Stores. "If they stay enrolled in the course, they're charged the cost of that course material to their student account automatically."

"AutoAccess give us the ability to negotiate price with publishers to get the price for students lower than anywhere else," adds Pollard. "What students pay is lower than market price and lower than rental."

Getting started successfully

Missouri found when implementing an alternative course materials delivery model, it was important to start slow.

"We began with one professor and one eTextbook publisher," says Pollard. "Once we saw it could be successful, we began to grow about 100 percent each semester since."

The professor who piloted AutoAccess had previously required a $200 textbook, and he knew many students weren't purchasing it. But with AutoAccess, he could guarantee the publisher would receive a sale from each of his 1,000 students. He was able to offer the eTextbook to students for only $86.

The difference was immediate, and the evidence was in accelerated learning. Where the class was academically after one week was where they historically had been after four weeks—because they all had their learning materials on day one of classes.

After that professor's successful experience, it was easy to get other faculty members on board.

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"We found very quickly that faculty are very interested in having all their students have their content on day one of the course," says Sanders. "With AutoAccess, they don't have to worry about the campus store running out of a title or shipping problems. Those concerns are eliminated."

Putting together the right team

After securing faculty buy-in, assembling the right players on campus is key for a successful, large-scale inclusive program.

"The prep work involved was really about setting our education technology team up with the campus store," says Wren. "We work together to make sure faculty know about the program and understand what it is and to make sure students know how to access their materials."

When AutoAccess first began at Missouri, the campus store and education technology teams worked directly with publishers to incorporate learning modules into the LMS. But they quickly realized having one solution such as VitalSource allowed them to streamline the process.

"By working with VitalSource, we can funnel all eBooks through one distribution method and have one LMS integration instead of worrying about and managing multiple, individual publisher integrations," says Sanders.

Making acquisition as easy as possible

Having their learning materials on day one means all students are equipped to succeed. As Teaching Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies Bill Horner points out, instructors assign specific books because they know the content is critical to students' ability to do well in the class.
"When our students don't have to make any effort to go get their books, that really increases the chance they'll read them," he says. "They figure, 'I've got it, why not read it?'"

The convenience of not having to go to the campus store to pick up her books is appreciated by Rebecca Mueller, student.

"The first day of a new semester is stressful enough," she says. "Just to know one thing is taken care of really helps with everything else I need to do."

TECH TEAM HANDLES SIMPLE INTEGRATION WITH EASE

When your number of students is 33,000, it's expected that any technology implementation will be challenging. But when Missouri implemented VitalSource, that wasn't the case.

"It's been very easy to do the integration between our LMS and the eTextbooks," says Danna Wren. "It's actually just been one connection we had to do."

There are few ongoing technological support needs either.

"We actually get a very small number of calls for tech support on VitalSource," says Wren.

"Once it's up and running, normally things are pretty straightforward from there," adds Eric Parson, Assistant Research Professor.

It's more than knowing a task is taken care of, though: It's knowing a task is taken care of correctly.

"In the past, I've definitely bought the wrong edition of a book," says Claire Souhan, student. "I would read the wrong pages, and then I would get to class and the lecture would be totally different than what I was expecting. Then I'd have to return the book. I knew if I just had the right textbook, I wouldn't have to worry about those things."

Improving the learning experience while improving affordability

Digital content facilitates the kind of anytime, anywhere learning that leads to more engaged students. Marcia Countryman, Assistant Teaching Professor, has found all of her students—traditional and non-traditional—"have adapted beautifully to using eTextbooks."
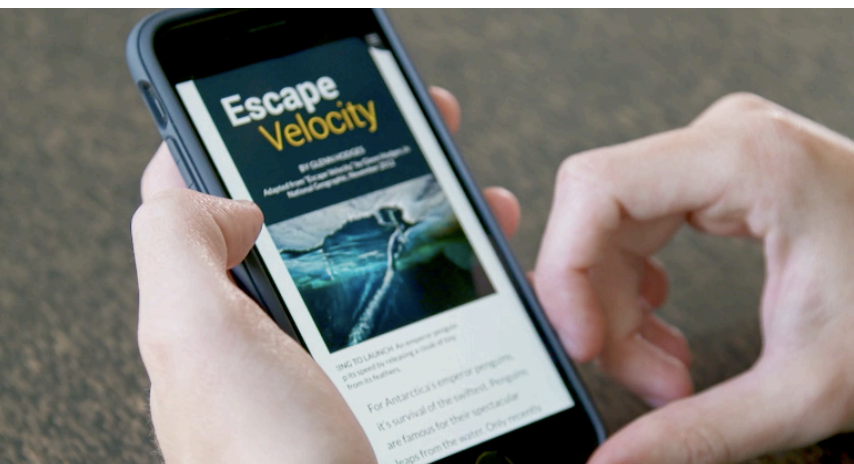
"The eTextbook works on their phones, tablets, and computers," she says. "Basically any technology they use, they can access their learning materials on the fly wherever they want."

Souhan agrees, adding she likes learning from eTextbooks because she likes to study in between classes and after she leaves her on-campus job. Instead of having to remember to carry specific books with her, when she has a moment to study or do some homework, she just finds a computer on campus, signs into her LMS, and dives into her digital learning materials.

And she knows that study time will be spent meaningfully. The interactive study tools, such as those found in VitalSource Bookshelf®, help students stay focused on their eTextbooks.

"I really appreciate that with Bookshelf I can make highlights and annotations on important sections," says Jacob Zimmer, student. "You can't really do that with physical books because it decreases their sell-back value."

The digital content in Bookshelf is responsive and interactive, elevating the learning experience from a "scanned-in PDF," says Zimmer.

"It can be very annoying to read content that's been scanned. It can be crooked and the quality poor," he says. "But with Bookshelf, the material is presented in a clear, readable format that helps me gain a multifaceted understanding of the materials."

Student Kristyna Kresic agrees, adding that before college, she thought it was easier to study out of a physical textbook. "But I actually find I'm studying a lot better and a lot more efficiently with the digital textbooks."

Achieving real savings for students

AutoAccess was created to save students money at the University of Missouri—and it certainly has. Marcia Countryman has saved her students $196,000, or an average of $130 per student, during the first three years of AutoAccess.

"Students are extremely excited to know we are saving them money. They are excited to know we're looking out for their futures as far as their financial situations are concerned," she says. "College is expensive. Once they get that tuition paid for, they want to decrease other costs as much as possible and I really feel that we're working on that and trying to do a great job."

Institution-wide, the average savings per title is $67. That translates to about $7 million saved in three years. For fall 2017, expected savings is approximately $2 million dollars.

"We've always been focused on affordability at the university, and AutoAccess has been a great initiative to really drive that point," says Dale Sanders. "We're saving students a ton of money. And the program is growing still. We feel the sky's the limit."

For more information on how Inclusive Access benefits every stakeholder at higher ed institutions, visit get.vitalsource.com/inclusive-access