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STUDENTS INCREASINGLY PREFER DIGITAL MATERIALS

As digital natives arrive on campus with years of online access behind them, preference for digital course material is on the rise.

DIGITAL NATIVES are flooding college campuses with mobile devices in hand and a lifetime of easy access to the online world. Demand for e-textbooks and multimedia courseware is coming right along with them.

Digital textbooks have long offered substantial benefits, including cost savings, mobile and multi-device access, and the ability to search content and share notes. As the market matures and publishers add features to distinguish their offerings from paper texts, including multimedia content and analytics, digital courseware offers tougher competition to the tried-and-true paper textbook. The best student success rates with digital courseware occur when a program is coordinated through the campus bookstore and adopted campus-wide—a model known as inclusive access that is becoming increasingly common.

Students clearly realize the value of digital materials. According to a study by Wakefield Research and commissioned by VitalSource®, 87 percent of students thought they would get better grades with interactive textbooks. Students today spend most of their lives online, both academically and socially, "and most of their content is consumed online," says Mike Hale, vice president of education in North America for e-textbook and digital content provider VitalSource.

Hale says when an institution adopts a campus-wide digital courseware program, even if it's mandated by a dean or provost, students end up preferring digital. In fact, many inclusive-access programs allow students the opportunity to "opt-out" of the digital materials and less than eight percent of students are doing so. Additionally, Verba Software's Connect™ platform manages inclusive-access programs for college bookstores and allows students to opt back in after initially opting out. Colleges utilizing Verba's Connect are seeing opt-out rates drop to around four percent.

Those numbers are driven largely by the fact that students using digital texts quickly realize the benefits, which include multi-device access and searchability. "Once they go digital, they don't go back, because they'd lose the ability to search across all of their content, including highlights and notes," says Hale.

Those search capabilities include not just personal notes and highlights, but any shared content, including instructor notes. With inclusive-access programs, faculty gain the ability to guide students' study within assigned course materials. They also gain powerful insights into student engagement. When all students have access to content on day one, on the same digital platform, instructors can see how students are interacting with course materials in ways that are impossible with print. This helps them intervene with students who aren't engaging early and often.

There are numerous other advantages to rolling out a campus-wide digital courseware program. Cost is among the biggest. Just as the price of tuition has soared—it has more than doubled in the past 30 years—so too has the cost of textbooks. Students now spend an average of $1,200 a year on textbooks and supplies. That can equal 14 percent of tuition at an average four-year college or university, or an astounding 30 percent of tuition at a community college. In fact, the cost of learning materials has shot up by 86 percent over the past 10 years.

On the other hand, studies show students buying digital over paper texts can save from 20 to nearly 70 percent. Students are also open to having digital textbook fees folded into tuition. The recent Wakefield Research study found 77 percent of students are interested in paying for course materials as part of tuition costs.

Today's students were raised on digital access. They clearly understand and appreciate the advantages of digital course materials, including a lower cost, mobile and multi-device access, searchability, and interactivity. As adoption rates increase and students demand educational solutions that appeal to digital natives, the future of digital courseware seems clear.

MANAGING DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

DIGITAL ACCESS ON DAY ONE DRIVES STUDENT SUCCESS

When students can access all course materials affordably on the first day of class, they're far more likely to succeed.

TWO OF THE BIGGEST benefits behind institution-wide e-textbook programs, known as inclusive-access programs, are reducing the high costs of course materials and giving students immediate access to materials on or before the start of a course. For example, Hinds Community College in Mississippi recently chose an e-textbook program that provides students with immediate and affordable access to all course materials.

Hinds recognized that because of the high cost of textbooks, it's common for students to delay or even completely forgo buying course materials. A recent study by Wakefield Research shows 88 percent of students have delayed buying course materials due to cost. Not surprisingly, not having access to course materials leaves students subject to falling behind, resulting in dropped courses or poor performance. Avoiding or delaying purchasing course materials negatively affects their grades, according to 45 percent of students in the Wakefield study.

Although some courses and instructors at Hinds were already using digital textbooks, the college had no official program in place. "We wanted a consistent experience for students, and one in which we could support and help work through any issues that may arise," says Jeremy Elliot, instructional technology coordinator at the college. Hinds chose to partner with VitalSource to deliver its e-textbook program. The program gives students access to electronic materials on the first day of class. They can download textbooks regardless of publisher, device, platform or operating system.

When Hinds Instructor Joyce Brasfield-Adams compared student completion rates at the end of a semester, 63 percent of her students using VitalSource completed the class. Only 29 percent without access finished.

This is particularly important given that first generation college students and students from economically-challenged backgrounds already experience higher drop-out rates than any other group.

Saving money on course materials can substantially affect affordability, especially for community college students. At Northeast State Community College in Tennessee, for example, students are saving an average of 52 percent on course materials after the college moved to an e-textbook program. And at Hinds, the average student is saving nearly half off the cost of paper texts using VitalSource.

To maximize savings and increase the effectiveness of an e-textbook program, a campus-wide rollout is important. This ensures students have immediate access,

and instructors can share notes and other course materials with everyone in class. An institution-wide deployment means getting buy-in from everyone who will be affected, including students, faculty, instructional designers, deans, and bookstore personnel.

The University of Cincinnati included all those stakeholders when it standardized on a single source for its e-textbook program. The university chose VitalSource, which is seamlessly integrated with the LMS and provides the largest number of titles and publisher agreements of any solution the school considered. After rolling out the program to two test groups, the university is now planning a campus-wide roll-out for as many courses as possible.

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DIGITAL CONTENT: READY FOR PRIME TIME

Digital courseware technology has long, well-tested history, and continues to evolve.

DIGITAL CONTENT in higher education has grown steadily. At least some course content is now available digitally at nearly every college or university. Coordinated, campus-wide rollouts of a course-material delivery are next for many campuses in the evolution of digital materials. These department-wide and campus-wide programs, known as inclusive access, ensure all students have affordable access to course materials on the first day of class, which is critical to student success.

"Where you can really have an impact is when everybody gets all course content easily on day one," says Mike Hale, vice president of education in North America for VitalSource. With a campus-wide program, students begin class on day one with all the materials they need to be successful in the course. Students and faculty gain additional benefits from inclusive-access programs, such as the ability to share notes and highlights, and the ability for faculty to assess student engagement with course content to determine how students are using the material and where they may be struggling.

Any technical issues in rolling out electronic courseware campus-wide have long been resolved. In fact, Hale points out that in the for-profit higher education space, e-textbooks have been prevalent for many years. Those institutions have long ensured every student receives affordable electronic course content on the first day of class. "The issue [of immediate access to content] has been solved there," he says. "In two- and four-year schools, it's just a question of implementation. The technology is ready and tested."

In fact, as early as 2000, Hale says, five of the top dental schools in the country moved to deliver all relevant course content for a four-year dental program digitally through VitalSource on day one. "People sometimes seem to think that day-one digital content is something new," he says, "when in fact we've been delivering to institutions and students for a very long time, and at scale."

In the past 12 months, 5.7 million learners have accessed content using

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VitalSource worldwide. Of the 22 million titles delivered to these users, the majority are the result of an institution adopting an inclusive access program of some design. Furthermore, those users have generated more than 2.4 billion page views in that time period, so "the scalability is clearly already there," says Hale.

One critical factor in a campus-wide adoption of a digital course materials program is ease of use. "You need to make the program easy to implement into whatever LMS the institution has on campus," he says. With more than 3,000 integrations worldwide, VitalSource works closely with a wide range of institutions to ensure a smooth rollout.

"Students go into their course within the LMS on day one, and click," he says. "We take care of all the backend integration." To meet federal Department of Education regulations, VitalSource provides opt-out solutions which allow students to easily remove themselves from the program if they choose.

Working closely with campus bookstores is also critical to ensuring the success of a campus-wide digital courseware program. "We make it easy for those already on campus managing course and content to play a role," he says. To that end, VitalSource has also announced their intent to acquire Verba Software, the leading provider affordable course materials tools for college bookstores, including Verba Connect™, the leading course materials management tool for inclusive access.

After a digital courseware program is up and running, bookstores' jobs actually become easier, says Jennifer Solomon, director of market development at VitalSource. Transactions are simpler when the bookstore is the single source for e-textbooks, and students use the campus store much more than when they're left on their own to purchase textbooks.

In the end, that ties bookstores back to their institutions. "The mission of a university is to give students the best opportunity to be successful in their courses," says Hale. "This type of program puts the bookstore right at the center of student success."