



Creating Equitable Access at Southern University Law Center



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SUMMARY

Adoption of the *Digital Bookshelf* has saved students more than 50% of the average cost of their course materials. By giving students digital access to their course materials and learning aids on or before the first day of class, this institution is setting their students up for success, making sure they are prepared and equipped for the rigors of law school.

Background

Founded in 1947, Southern University Law Center (SULC) in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is one of the country's most diverse law schools. With a significant population of students of color, first-generation students, as well as nontraditional students, student success is of the utmost priority to the administration and faculty.

A few years ago, Chancellor John Pierre noticed that due to the rising cost of law books and a lack of funds, many students struggled to purchase their textbooks and supplemental course materials. Additionally, delays in financial aid affected students' ability to receive their books on time, which consequently affected their ability to do well in school.

"How can you be prepared for the future if you're not prepared on day one?" asks Phebe Poydras, Director of Library Services and Associate Professor of Law. "If students don't have the materials for class, they're automatically in a deficit."

Affordability of course materials was the biggest issue, and the administration sought a solution. SULC recognized that the cost of eBooks was significantly lower than the cost of print textbooks and saw eBooks as the ticket to providing equitable access for their students.

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for the future if you're not
prepared on day one?"*

*– Professor Phebe Poydras,
Director of Library Services,
Southern University Law Center*

The Digital Bookshelf Solution

Partnering with Aspen Publishing and additional publishers, in 2019, SULC leadership instituted a *Digital Bookshelf*, giving all students online access to their course materials on or before the first day of class. Additionally, students receive iPads to ensure that everyone has a device on which to access their materials. While the program was initially made available to first-year students, the program was expanded to all in year two. Summarizes one student of the benefits gained: “I didn’t have to spend a significant amount of money on books, and I didn’t have to wait long to access a textbook for class.”

To pay for the program, administrators at SULC evaluated all the costs students incurred and chose to institute an eBook fee, issued annually at the start of the Fall semester. SULC pooled additional resources so that students could also receive study aids and supplemental materials as part of the cost. Says Pierre, “With the *Digital Bookshelf*, we cut student costs by more than half. Compared to the typical \$2000 or more students would be spending on books and supplemental materials, it was an easy sell to our board and to our students who saw this program as a huge benefit.” The eBook fee may also be financed with financial aid.

“With the Digital Bookshelf, we cut student costs by more than half.”

– Chancellor John Pierre,
Southern University Law Center

“I benefited from the opportunity to have full access to all that Casebook Connect offers. I was able to use the material right away at the start of classes, versus waiting to purchase due to lack of funds.”

– Student, Southern University Law Center

Implementation

To make sure materials are available and training can take place, Director of Library Services Phebe Poydras finalizes the faculty booklist in advance of the semester start. The institution is not charged until after the add/drop date and enrollment numbers are confirmed. The library services department strives to promote to students all that is included with the *Aspen Learning Library* and *Connected eBooks*. Library staff also help faculty get up to speed with the technology via one-on-one meetings, office hours, and video tutorials.

In addition to eBooks, the *Digital Bookshelf* gives students access to a suite of learning tools and study aids that will help them throughout their law school journey. Shares Poydras, “We wanted to move into a 21st century mindset, to give students the materials that will make them competitive.” In the past, students would often forgo purchasing important study aids due to limited resources. Continues Poydras, “Now there’s no excuse for not being prepared. We’re bringing everything to the table to help students to be successful.” She references the easily searchable *Connected eBook* which includes practice questions, as well as highlighting and notetaking options. For times when a print copy is preferred, loose leaf versions of all eBooks are ordered by the institution and distributed to students. Says Poydras, “Everything is at their fingertips, and there is something for all kinds of learners.”

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*– Professor Phebe Poydras,
Director of Library Services,
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Impact

In addition to saving money with the *Digital Bookshelf*, students are also benefiting from the simplified process of accessing their books. Said one student, “It was less of a burden on me. I didn’t have to go out and search for the required text or ask around throughout the law school for used versions of the text.” Shared another student, “There was no confusion as to whether I was buying the right materials or not.”

Chancellor Pierre notes that many law schools now include a technology proficiency standard for their students. He adds, “Technology affects everything we do now as lawyers. The *Digital Bookshelf* increases students’ competence with technology and will impact their success as future practitioners.”

Faculty at SULC also feel positive ripple effects from the program. They have the academic freedom to choose their own course materials, and, in fact, their options may be more open than before. Professor Ryan Stoa recalls the days when many of his students would purchase older editions of the class text in order to save money. “As an educator, you want your students to know the most modern cases, but it’s hard to ignore the high cost of the newest edition textbook. The *Digital Bookshelf* removes the quandary from the equation because now everyone has access to the most up-to-date material.”

Professor Shandrea Williams uses both a *Connected eBook* and *Connected Quizzing* from Aspen Publishing in her classes and calls the quizzes “impressive.” She shares, “I used to have to create assessments for my students – I don’t have to do that anymore.” She encourages her students to use quiz questions as both multiple choice and essay question prep. Said one student on an end-of-semester survey, “The quizzes were solid...the short essay questions were a great way for me to practice for my exam.” Williams also emphasizes the efficiency and searchability that an eBook provides over a print copy. “Having accessibility of information that’s clear, concise, and direct is of utmost importance – this is what the *Digital Bookshelf* provides.” Finally, Williams sees all-digital access as a tool that removes the roadblocks that once kept students from achieving their full potential. She says:

“The digital divide is not as insurmountable... We simply are not seeing those levels of inaccessibility anymore.”

– Professor Shandrea Williams,
Southern University Law Center

“When our students come to their first day of class, they are prepared for the rigors of law school.”

– Chancellor John Pierre,
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Conclusion

Shares Chancellor Pierre, “We didn’t know the pandemic was coming. Having this partnership in place made it so much easier for us to pivot and continue to provide educational services to our students. As one student noted, “The pandemic threw out buying physical books out the window. Going virtual meant that other avenues needed to be utilized. This option gave us access to our books when needed by the first day of class.”

Pierre views the *Digital Bookshelf* as “a big book scholarship.” He recalls when he was once in law school and a very special person gave him a bookstore voucher to buy whatever he needed. It was a thrilling moment for him as a law student. “The *Digital Bookshelf* is like having a voucher that gives you online access to any educational material that you could ever want, but you’re not paying for every piece of it – it’s all included.”

While many of the students at SULC could be considered at risk, Pierre notes that, “They do well because we provide them with digital access to course materials and a lot of support. We have benefited tremendously from this partnership. When our students come to their first day of class, they are prepared for the rigors of law school.”



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support@aspenpublishing.com.