

A close-up, slightly low-angle shot of a young woman with dark, curly hair. She is smiling broadly, showing her teeth, and looking down at a laptop screen. She is wearing white wired headphones. Her hands are on the laptop's trackpad. In the foreground, a white cup of coffee with a light brown beverage is partially visible. The background is a blurred indoor setting, likely a cafe or library, with warm lighting and other people in the distance.

Algonquin College's Success Story

Overview

As a public institution of higher learning, Algonquin College is committed to improving the accessibility and affordability of education for all students, as well as increasing achievement. Algonquin's strategy for reaching these goals relies heavily on technology. The college began implementing digital delivery plans in the early 2000s, updating its campus infrastructure for Internet access, initiating a laptop program, and implementing a bring-your-own device (BYOD) program. When the BYOD program reached 95 percent penetration in 2012, introducing eTextbooks was the next logical step. Algonquin launched its eTextbooks initiative with a pilot in 2013. Thus far, the school is pleased with its progress and is targeting to achieve 100 percent eTextbook usage by 2016.

College Profile

Province/Country

Ontario, Canada

Institution Type

Public 2-year college

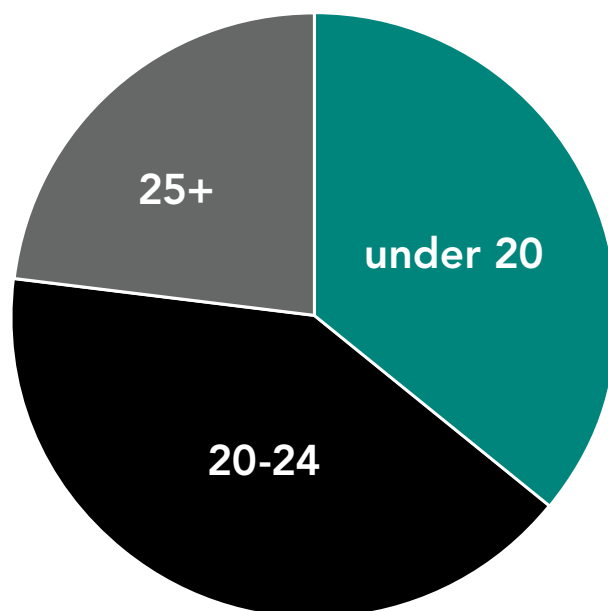
Enrollment

Full-time students: 19,853 students

Continuing education registrations: 37,002

Age

- 36% under 20 years old
- 41% 20–24 years old
- 23% 25+ years old



Challenge

Algonquin believed that using eTextbooks would overcome some of the shortcomings of printed textbooks, which are heavy, not accessible to students with visual disabilities, and expensive. In contrast, eTextbooks can be accessed by students on digital devices and offer variable font or audio functionality for students with visual disabilities. Algonquin anticipated that publishers would be willing to reduce textbook costs for students if they were guaranteed that every student in course would use the digital version. And with all students having access to course materials, school administrators hoped that eTextbooks would have a positive impact on student achievement.

To begin this ambitious initiative, Algonquin conducted open discussions with four of its textbook publisher partners, including Pearson. All agreed to work together on a pilot program in January 2013 that included 32 instructors, 750 students, and 2,300 eTextbooks. The pilot showed promising results, so Algonquin decided to slowly expand the program in a five-phase approach starting in the fall of 2013.

As the etextbook initiative grew, Algonquin faced issues of scale. Beyond the pilot program, the school had to negotiate payment terms and procedures with all the publishers, find an efficient way to deploy the correct materials to students based on their courses, streamline the eTextbook adoption process, and address student and faculty concerns.

“Last fall, our project made 2.5 million in eTextbook purchases on behalf of the college. That represented almost a million dollars of savings to students if they had bought traditional textbooks.”

— Larry Weatherdon
Manager of Digital Resources





Solution

Algonquin worked closely with its publisher partners to implement an institutional pay model whereby eTextbook costs are included in students' course-level, nontuition-related ancillary fees. This model gives all students registered for a course access to the materials, increasing the number of students using them and allowing publishers to discount the eTextbook price. Since 2013, use of this model has expanded from the original four publishers in the pilot program to about thirty of Algonquin's publisher partners.

After utilizing a third party to deploy materials in the early phases of the trial, Algonquin decided to implement its own code-based Digital Resource Portal system in the fall of 2014. The Digital Resource Portal system receives data from the registrar's office, matching the student with the course, section, and required course materials, and then generates an access code that allows students to retrieve their eTextbooks on the first day of class. Larry Weatherdon, Manager of Digital Resources, described the new system as being extremely user

friendly. "Students log in, see their account, and the books that have been preselected for them. The eTextbooks are available to the student at no charge because they are labeled "prepaid." Students put them in the shopping cart, and when they close the cart, an application programming interface (API) call goes out and gets the access code number, downloading the correct eTextbook to the students' learning shelf. We do not have to teach students how to purchase online."

As faculty participation in the etextbook initiative increased, Algonquin decided it needed to streamline its adoption process for digital materials. Before, multiple systems were involved and there was a lot of opportunity for human error. To improve the adoption process, Algonquin is implementing a new system based on a Publisher Asset Library, an institutional-specific resource database for both print and digital assets. The database is being tested now, and the plan is to eventually include all publishers who work with the college.



Solution Continued

There has been some stakeholder resistance to Algonquin's move toward 100 percent eTextbook usage. Students were initially concerned about not having access to printed resources and not being able to keep their textbooks for future reference. To address these concerns, Algonquin negotiated into its institutional pay model the capability for students to print the eTextbooks and retain access to the digital materials permanently. In addition, students' informational-technology fee allows them to print up to one thousand pages at a campus print center for no charge.

In reality, few students have taken advantage of the print option. Weatherdon reported, "We've been tracking students that use our print center to print the book and the page counts that they are allowed. Right now, that number is less than five percent. But the fact that it is offered has a bigger effect than the number of people who actually take advantage of the offer."

The change from print to digital has been challenging for some faculty members, but Algonquin has addressed this proactively. The college provides professional development courses to educate faculty about best practices for implementing digital materials in their courses. It has also created online resources to address the most common concerns, and it is considering providing online training modules so faculty members can fit professional development into their schedules more easily.

To increase buy-in and improve the eTextbook initiative, Algonquin has created an Advisory Board composed of faculty, students, and other stakeholders. The board meets monthly to discuss the initiative and is surveying users to gather additional feedback.

Results

After two years, the number of eTextbooks used has increased from 2,300 in the winter of 2013 to 32,000 in the fall of 2014 (see Figure 1). Approximately 50 percent of Algonquin's programs are using eTextbooks, reaching 10,000 students (see Figure 2). Faculty feedback on the increased accessibility has been positive. "You know that all your students have that book, so you can use that resource," explained Linda Crane, professor and program coordinator, Computer Engineering Technology.

The initiative has also decreased student textbook costs by 40 percent. Weatherdon explained, "Last fall, our project made 2.5 million in eTextbooks purchases on behalf of the college. That represented almost a million dollars of savings to students if they had bought traditional textbooks." Algonquin has set a target of saving 50 percent in costs in the future.

Algonquin is collecting data to measure the impact of eTextbooks on student outcomes like grades and withdrawal rates, but it is too soon to measure the impact of this program. Students feel, though, that the digital delivery system has helped them. Mackenzie Campbell, a third-year student studying business administration - material and operations management, commended, "The eTextbook search function speeds up my studying process, so that I can spend less time searching and more time actually learning the material."

When asked what has enabled Algonquin to make the eTextbook program succeed in spite of the obstacles it encountered, Weatherdon replied, "The direction has to come from the administration. Regardless of the problems or the challenges, our mandate is to make it work and find solutions."

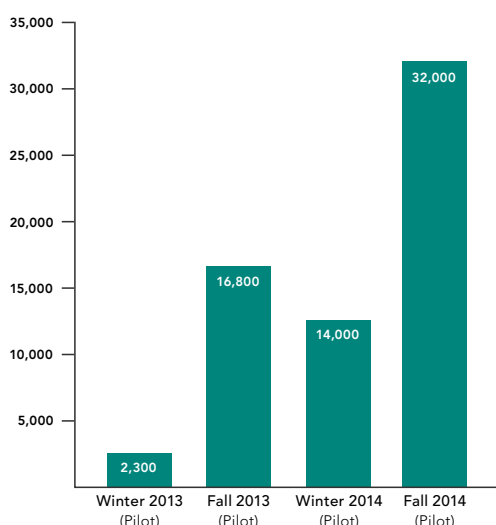


Figure 1

Number of eTextbooks used at Algonquin College, Winter 2013–Fall 2014

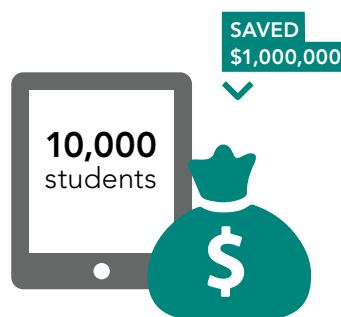


Figure 2

Student usage of and savings from eTextbooks, Fall 2014