Suffolk University Offers eBooks in a Digital Library to Reduce Student Costs while Increasing Access to Information

LexisNexis® Digital Library provides value for students, faculty and alumni

**Business Need**

Suffolk University places a high value on technology and innovation that prepares students for the future of the legal profession. For example, the Institute on Law Practice Technology and Innovation teaches students how to develop software and apps for streamlining legal practice. The University offers a legal technology and innovation concentration and an Accelerator-to-Practice program which, in addition to teaching Black Letter Law, also focuses on the mechanics of running the business side of a solo practice. Most graduates of Suffolk University Law School work in government, the public interest and small or solo firms.

When Ron Wheeler was hired as director of law library & information resources, he was given a mandate to reduce the footprint of the John Joseph Moakley Law Library, reduce the size of the collection without reducing access to information, and innovate to create a more modern experience for faculty and students. In pursuing these objectives, he had service and savings in mind.

“One of the things I was trying to do was figure out a way to serve students better and reduce their ever-increasing educational costs,” said Wheeler. “Another goal was to use the ever-shrinking dollars I have in my budget more strategically and get more bang for my buck. And, frankly, modern students and lawyers use information differently, so I wanted to explore models for online access to information.”

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**Location and Mission:** Suffolk University Law School in Boston, MA, is dedicated to welcoming students from all backgrounds and circumstances and educating them to become highly skilled and ethical lawyers who are well prepared to serve in their local communities, across the nation and around the world.

**Customer Profile:** Founded more than 100 years ago, Suffolk is now the seventh-largest law school in the country with thriving day and evening programs. Ranked among the top 10 for legal technology, Suffolk trains students to use legal practice technology and prepare for the future of the legal profession.

**Business Situation:** The Law Library at Suffolk was given a mandate to innovate and reduce its physical footprint. In the last two years, the library’s acquisitions budget has shrunk by 50 percent. The library director needed to take steps to reduce the size of the collection without reducing access to information.

**Solution:** Suffolk adopted the LexisNexis® Digital Library as a resource for e-textbooks, study aids and other publications students and faculty can access online from virtually anywhere using a variety of mobile devices and e-readers. Practice-area publications are also available to alumni.

**Product Summary**

Students and faculty sign in to LexisNexis Digital Library to borrow LexisNexis® casebooks, study aids like the Understanding series and Questions and Answers series, books published by the American Bar Association (ABA) and numerous stand-alone titles. Students and faculty can access eBooks from anywhere and take advantage of note-taking and highlighting capabilities within the electronic downloads.
Setting the Stage for Change

Wheeler, an associate professor of legal research, was also focusing on the idea that library services transcend the walls of the law school. “Students should feel like they have access to a librarian when they’re on the train or when they’re at home, not just when they walk through the library and pass the reference desk.” At Suffolk, librarians now carry Apple® iPad® devices around the Law School building—going beyond the physical library. They make eye contact with students and offer to help with their information needs. When students are in the cafeteria, for example, they can ask librarians a reference question.

Going beyond its physical research and study areas, Suffolk University’s Law Library is innovating to offer more online options for access from anywhere.
“I've always thought that in modern libraries we do ourselves a disservice if we aren’t meeting people where they are. One thing we know is that students are online. If we can meet them online, that’s where we can capture them. Our librarians tweet, and we have a Suffolk Facebook® page. But what I really wanted to stress to students is that they have access online to trained law school librarians, and they can take advantage of that without walking into the library. One way to drive that home is to have librarians walking around with devices demonstrating to students that we engage with information the same way they do.”

Taking that approach a step further, Wheeler sought to give students access to study aid material from anywhere. Without a digital option, even students working across the hall from the library could not access study aids—those were on reserve and had to be checked out for up to three hours without being removed from the library. “That made no sense to me at all,” says Wheeler. “I wanted to find a solution where students could read their course reserve materials on the train or at lunchtime at the law firm where they work or while they’re on the beach at the Cape. Since we have the technology to provide those remote resources, it was time to just do it.”

Shortly after starting his role at Suffolk, Wheeler also began spending time with local law firm librarians. “My experience has been that law firm libraries tend to be 5 – 10 years ahead of academic libraries. So I went to an Association of Boston Law Librarians (ABLL) meeting and they were talking about the LexisNexis Digital Library solution. A couple of the law firms had it and they talked about how much the attorneys really liked it.”

While all these developments were under way, Wheeler’s LexisNexis representative asked him if the LexisNexis Digital Library would be suited to his needs.

“It was like a convergence of all these things happening at once,” says Wheeler. “The LexisNexis Digital Library Solution really made sense as a way to solve some of our problems and make changes in line with my mandate.”
Solution Details

LexisNexis® Digital Library gives students and faculty access to authoritative legal eBook content on a variety of major mobile devices and desktop platforms. Right now the subscription includes more than 2,000 volumes, including full-text LexisNexis casebooks, study aids like the Understanding series and Questions and Answers series, books published by the American Bar Association (ABA) and numerous stand-alone titles.

“I wanted to get the textbooks and study aids available in the Digital Library,” says Wheeler, “but I also wanted to make sure we had a practice-oriented set in all the major practice areas so I could market this to alumni. We have titles for a wide range of practice areas.”

The solution is provided through a combined offering from LexisNexis and OverDrive, the digital library solutions provider chosen by 25,000+ libraries, schools and colleges worldwide. Law students and faculty can borrow eBooks to read using a browser on their computer, tablets or smartphones—or they can use eReader apps like the Amazon® Kindle® or OverDrive® app.

The University uses this offering to share eBook titles among multiple users, purchase eBooks centrally and manage its eBooks library efficiently via one central, electronic platform.

Patrons sign in to browse or search for content. After selecting a title they can read the book in their browser or (for most eBooks) download an EPUB or Kindle version. When reading the book in a browser, users can also download a copy for offline use. They can highlight text and create notes, which are synced to their account so that they can be accessed again from a different machine.

This sign-in screen gives Suffolk law students and faculty easy access to the LexisNexis Digital Library.
LexisNexis® eBooks include active links from citation references to statutes, cases, treatises and other materials via the Lexis Advance® research solution. This fosters a seamless transition from book research to online resources.

Textbooks for law students are very expensive. Suffolk University Law School estimates that full-time students spend $1,250/year and part-time students spend $920/year on textbooks. With that in mind, Wheeler arranged his budget and program in such a way that, for classes where Suffolk University professors are using LexisNexis e-textbooks, they are available to students at no extra charge.

**Implementation, Promotions and Training**

In late 2014, Suffolk committed to two professors that e-textbooks would be available to their students before the start of the 2015 spring semester. After an accelerated development process, the technology was in place. “The process was far simpler than we thought it would be,” said Wheeler, “and the students didn’t have any problem once it was live signing in and checking materials out.”

How was the solution received? Wheeler realized that polling students about the LexisNexis Digital Library before they saw it would not be a fair test of its value. And when students saw it, they liked it. Faculty and students are increasingly embracing the Digital Library approach. “I know for sure there are students who prefer to have a physical book in their hands, but even those students have told me, ‘When I’m off campus, I’m so happy to have electronic access.’”

Suffolk has more than 80 full-time faculty members—some in support of eBooks and some in favor of a more traditional approach. “There’s a small but vocal group of faculty members who are against having laptops in the classroom and have been resistant to the use of electronic textbooks,” says Wheeler. “They have been voicing concerns about the use of electronic texts during exams, for example. But what’s been great is there’s also a less vocal but adamant group of early adopters who immediately chose LexisNexis e-textbooks for their classes because it’s what students want and it saves them a little money.”
To bring faculty onboard with the digital library, LexisNexis sponsored a lunchtime training event. “That was great,” says Wheeler. “It helped inform the people who were a little skeptical. And it helped put those who were prone to early adoption over the edge.”

During a student rollout event, LexisNexis staff was available in the library with various electronic devices—Android® devices, iPads, Microsoft® Windows tablets and a tabletop device. Students could engage with the Digital Library solution using those devices. If they logged in to the digital library at the event, they were entered in a drawing for an iPad.

“My hope was to create a festive atmosphere, and I think we achieved that,” says Wheeler. “The number of students who signed in and checked out items even the first day exceeded my expectations.”

In addition, to help students easily access case books, a librarian was assigned to each class where the professor had assigned a LexisNexis casebook available in eBook format as part of the digital library. Students in those classes received special email instructions on accessing the e-texts and were encouraged to contact a librarian with any questions.

Wheeler also arranged a training session for reference librarians, who now keep their iPads at the reference desk so they can instruct students on how to access the Digital Library. In addition, non-librarians who work the circulation desk and elsewhere in the library attended a Digital Library Webinar so they are aware of what’s available and how to access it.

Within five months after launching LexisNexis Digital Library, about 20 percent of prospective users had adopted the online resource, and 964 eBooks had been checked out.

“Being able to access study aids like Understanding or Q&A anytime, anywhere without having to worry about them being checked out by another student has made my life less stressful.”

—Suffolk University Law School Student

At this launch event, students explored the LexisNexis Digital Library using a “device bar” in the library.
“Particularly in the snowstorms, access to the eBook has been an amazing resource. I recently had a massive flight delay but thanks to the OverDrive app, I was able to prep for class on my phone.”

—Ragini N. Shah, Clinical Professor of Law & Director of Clinical Programs, Suffolk University Law School

Results
Despite the 50 percent decline in the library’s acquisition budget over the past two years, Wheeler says, “Thanks to solutions like this, we have not reduced the amount of information our library users have access to. If anything, it has expanded.”

What about Wheeler’s mandate to reduce the library’s footprint? The library occupied floors 5 – 7 of the seven-story law school building. Several months after the launch of the LexisNexis Digital Library, Suffolk began condensing the library and eliminating seldom-used hardcover publications to decrease the library by an entire floor. This step was not a result but a move parallel to the digital library adoption.

The library now occupies one floor less while offering more information than before.

Suffolk expects to continue offering hard-copy books as well for the foreseeable future. “But we’ve been able to buy just one print copy of a study aid or textbook instead of three or four previously,” says Wheeler. “That’s been huge. Reducing the number of copies we buy is a very big deal for us.”

And for many students, the Digital Library means not just reduced spending on books but also better productivity. “What I hope is that students become more productive because they are able to access information in what would otherwise be down time,” says Wheeler.

Here’s one Suffolk law student’s comment on that advantage: “Being able to access study aids like Understanding or Q&A anytime, anywhere without having to worry about them being checked out by another student has made my life less stressful.”
“What we know is that libraries are not going to look the same as they do today in five or 10 years. So we might as well start trying these new things, taking risks and seeing what happens. I think that’s what we’re supposed to be doing.”

—Ron Wheeler, Director of Law Library & Information Resources, Suffolk University Law School

The same advantage applies to professors. For example, Ragini N. Shah, clinical professor of law and director of clinical programs, adopted a LexisNexis casebook available as an e-text for her immigration law class. She later emailed Wheeler and other colleagues to say, “I just want to plug this service that Ron and his team have negotiated for us. I adopted the Lexis® immigration text for the first time this year to both change to a more problem-based teaching method and save the students some money. ... Particularly in the snowstorms, access to the eBook has been an amazing resource. I recently had a massive flight delay but thanks to the overdrive app, I was able to prep for class on my phone.”

How has the digital library worked out overall? Says Wheeler, “I have found it extremely valuable in ways I did not anticipate. Beyond the cost savings and increasing access for students and faculty, getting students and faculty thinking about library resources and information delivery is a big deal. That’s an unintended consequence that’s been huge for me.”

Looking Ahead

Wheeler says the LexisNexis Digital Library has potential to help draw more law students to Suffolk. “I think the fact that it has the potential to save students some money at a time when legal education costs have skyrocketed is in itself a big deal,” says Wheeler. “Coupled with all the initiatives that Suffolk has launched to brand itself as the technologically forward-thinking law school, it’s bound to be attractive to a certain subset of future law students.”

Wheeler has several next steps in mind:

- Keep engaging the faculty. “I think some faculty can be persuaded to adopt e-textbooks,” he says, “so I want to push the envelope there.”
- Do another rollout event for students, especially incoming students for the fall semester. “We’ll have about 300 incoming first-year students,” he notes, adding, “We may have another iPad event in the fall.”
- Continue connecting with alumni. “I have done a little informal focus group outreach with a couple of alumni and asked them about the Digital Library as an offering for alums,” says Wheeler. “I’m asking them what additional titles they would want in the Digital Library Solution.”
Wheeler has developed additional perspective through his involvement with the American Association of Law Librarians (AALL)—he’s preparing to take on the vice president/president-elect role. When he talks to colleagues about the future of law libraries, he tells them, “What we know is that libraries are not going to look the same as they do today in five or ten years. So we might as well start trying these new things, taking risks and seeing what happens. I think that’s what we’re supposed to be doing.” He adds, “The idea that we’re spending most of our huge budgets on print materials is ridiculous to me. So we’ve got to try something new.”

About Suffolk University Law School

Suffolk University Law School is a private law school located in downtown Boston, MA, and is the seventh-largest law school in the country. Ranked among the top 10 for legal technology, Suffolk trains students to use legal practice technology and prepare for the future of the legal profession. Suffolk also has top-ranked clinical, legal writing, dispute resolution and intellectual property programs.

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