# UFS Budget Brief: The Impact of Covid-19 on CUNY Library Collections

## Background

CUNY Libraries’ OTPS (other than personal service) spending on collections and subscriptions have been essentially flat for the five years preceding the pandemic, while publisher pricing has steadily increased. Campus collections budgets have declined drastically, some by more than 10% in multiple consecutive years.[[1]](#footnote-1) This pattern of cuts to library resources has been exacerbated by the constraints in place due to the Covid-19 crisis. Now, as the University ramps up for distance learning and a mostly online Fall 2020 semester, the libraries are caught between chronic underfunding and a teaching and learning modality that demands increased electronic resources to fulfill our academic obligations.

CUNY Libraries have a consortial relationship and established an intercampus delivery system (“CLICS”) in 2006 to facilitate the quick sharing of print books among the campus libraries. We relied on each other to supplement our collections, but that system has broken down during the pandemic, since one cannot share ebooks; they must be centrally licensed in order to provide access across campuses. Interlibrary loan services have long supported the needs of our doctoral students and faculty (the Grad Center alone processed +26,000 requests in AY18), but libraries nationwide have closed off their print collections, limiting this service to a single article or book chapter due to copyright constraints. In the best of times, CUNY Libraries must rely on our networks to meet needs; during the pandemic these efficiencies have all but disappeared.

Though all of CUNY faces budget reductions due to the severe state and federal funding situation wrought by the pandemic, the libraries are further restricted from spending our limited funds on new electronic resources (ebooks, databases, e-journals) due to lengthy license reviews by legal counsel. How does an organization pivot to supporting distance learning when the prevailing guidance is “no new contracts” (and *every* new library resource requires a new contract)? While the University moves forward with adding centrally licensed software like Zoom and Camtasia, the Libraries are often unable to add relatively inexpensive electronic resources simply because they require protracted legal review. Such delays negatively impact our academic support services on the micro and macro level.

Electronic resources already far outnumber print materials at CUNY’s campus libraries (see Table 1 for volume comparisons). Our library collections will suffer without concerted attention to the way these resources are funded, procured, licensed, and made available to students—as will our ability to support curricular and academic needs, if this is not made a priority.

## Online learning demands larger budgets for library materials: Electronic does not mean cheaper

Although the ebook version of the latest novel that one might order for themselves on Amazon might be the same price, or cheaper, than the print version of the same title, that is not how it works when publishers and vendors deal with libraries. Publishers know that every e-title they sell to a library has the potential to be used by multiple patrons, so they want to be compensated for that (just as “library binding” editions are often priced much higher than ordinary print editions). Further, ebooks often include digital rights management technology to limit the number of pages one can print or download; limit the number of people who can use the book at the same time; and some of them come with hosting fees, since vendors host the files on their servers. That 24/7 convenience comes with a price.

***Example***: An English professor is using Ibram Kendi’s *How to be an Antiracist* for her freshman composition class. The cost for a library print copy from the New York State contract approved book vendor would be around $24, and patrons can scan or photocopy chapters as needed. The library’s cost for a restricted version of the ebook would be $68, wherein only one person can log in and view the book at one time, but the publisher does not allow downloading or printing of chapters. Current individual pricing for an Amazon Kindle edition is $14.99.

### Ebook Licensing

The complexity of acquiring ebooks and databases compounds these issues for CUNY Libraries. A print book from an established vendor does not require a license to be reviewed and signed by CUNY’s legal counsel. Additionally, providers of electronic books charge annual fees, called hosting fees to maintain perpetual access on their platforms. Often, these hosting fees are waived if a library maintains a subscription to one or more of the vendor’s databases, which puts pressure on campuses to keep these subscriptions even in the face of diminishing need.

***Example:***  OLS funds several subscriptions to electronic databases that are under review for cancelation if the 2020/2021 budget does not provide sufficient funding to maintain access. A specific campus owns ebook titles on three of the platforms under review. Should OLS cut these databases, the campus will be forced into paying for an annual subscription or a hosting fee to keep the ebook titles they purchased in the past.

In some ways, the transition to ebooks and the associated costs mirrors the transition from print journal subscriptions to electronic journals, which have ballooned over the last two decades. To combat the rising costs, universities nationwide are canceling bundled subscriptions, replacing them with a smaller set of core journals. For example, the State University of New York (SUNY) Libraries announced in April of 2020 that they are not renewing a subscription deal with the online vendor and publisher Elsevier. SUNY projects that the cancelation will save the system anywhere from $5 to $7 million per year.[[2]](#footnote-2) One can anticipate a similar run-up in ebook prices as colleges and universities transition their collections from print to online, which may result in paying more to receive less. Open access initiatives are a long-term solution but are often insufficient to fulfill immediate curricular needs.

### Textbooks and e-reserves

With regard to textbooks, academic libraries have been hampered by textbook publishers who do not provide electronic purchasing options for libraries. Approximately 85% of existing course textbooks are simply unavailable to libraries in any other format than print. Textbook publishers have built their profit models around selling e-textbooks directly to students.[[3]](#footnote-3) While CUNY Libraries, with the support of New York State, have been leaders in developing open education resources (OERs) and zero- to low-cost textbook alternatives, the reliance on libraries to solve the textbook affordability problem is overburdening an already underfunded institution.

Dedicated funds from the CUNY Textbook Initiative, which was suspended in 2016, temporarily offset broader cuts to library acquisitions budgets. CUNY faculty and students expect libraries to continue to provide textbook access in the absence of this funding. To meet this demand, each CUNY library expends considerable resources to purchase, catalog, and manage collections of textbooks, which are placed on reserve and available for 2-hour loans to students. New reserve textbooks circulate often because a large percentage of CUNY students cannot afford to purchase textbooks for their courses. However, within just 2-3 years, most of these books will be damaged or obsolete. As collection budgets remain flat and libraries try to meet the short-term needs of students by purchasing textbooks and ebooks, libraries will become unable to purchase monographs to support faculty scholarship and student research. Over time, the quality of library collections will continue to erode.

Libraries are committed to supporting students in need and providing access to curricular materials, but this support should not come at the expense of the permanent collection. CUNY Libraries must be able to anticipate and fulfill academic needs outside of the classroom to foster intellectual exploration and experimentation by our students and faculty.

### Streaming Media

Of serious concern is our diminished ability to support film and media studies courses due to the added restrictions from streaming media providers, whose licensing models often require continual investment to retain access. Recently, CUNY campuses as well as the New York City public library systems dropped a popular streaming service, Kanopy, after the libraries received much higher than anticipated invoices through its patron-driven acquisitions model. Kanopy was aggressive in its direct marketing tactics, leading faculty and students to embrace the service as a Netflix alternative, not realizing that each view came at library licensing prices (often in the range of $150/year) that far exceed personal viewing rates.[[4]](#footnote-4) Many database vendors are now bypassing the library and marketing their products directly to individual consumers without disclosing the high costs associated with their services. Still, a film and media class taught online must rely on streaming services in order to deliver audiovisual content to students, and library budgets will be placed under added strain.

***Example***: Streaming services have been reaching out directly to faculty members in the theater department of a CUNY campus. During the spring 2020 semester, the theater department requested a streaming service that was offering a free trial under a special Covid-19 relief plan, from the onset of remote teaching until the end of May. The library was faced with the difficult decision of violating CUNY policy, which requires lengthy legal review for the trial, or by-passing CUNY Legal to help faculty members and students fill the gap for that term. Regardless of the decision, the library is unable to commit to subscribing to the streaming service as we go into remote classes for the fall, because of the uncertain budget and time required to review and approve new licenses.

## Centralized purchasing and delays in licensing and renewals

The development of library collections is an academic and curricular concern that is governed by the faculty. The depth and breadth of library collections are important to maintain accreditation (see Middle States Standard III and VI).[[5]](#footnote-5) Library collections support research, teaching, and learning and are evaluated by accreditors in areas like social work, teacher education, the health sciences, and professional licensure programs.[[6]](#footnote-6)

To maximize efficiency, there is a collection of e-resources that are purchased and/or subscribed centrally for all of CUNY and coordinated by the Office of Library Services (OLS). Some are budgeted centrally, while others are procured through OLS but charged back to individual campuses based on their participation in the contract.

Presently, two operational conditions at CUNY threaten library collections:

1. **Delays in licensing and renewals.** If subscription license renewals and payments are delayed, CUNY libraries risk losing electronic resources that students and faculty have come to rely on (e.g. JSTOR, Springer/Nature). Year-end interruptions of library acquisitions because of late-stage legal concerns have threatened the stability of academic resources and represent a troubling intervention in curricular matters.
2. **OLS staffing turnover.** The office tasked with coordinating CUNY-wide library collections has been decimated, with troubling vacancies across all divisions and interim leadership that no longer reports directly to the University Provost. Centralized collections require centralized cataloging, metadata, and technical systems, but without stable staffing and expert leadership that reports to the Chief Academic Officer, the CUNY library system will falter, with devastating effects on academic programs.

## Effects on our permanent collections

The historic underinvestment in CUNY libraries, combined with the present challenges of Covid-19, has eroded libraries’ permanent collections:

* Several campuses are diverting funds from buying print books to online resources to maintain continuity of service. These online resources are often licensed on an annual basis instead of a one-time purchase, and access is likely to be limited to a single campus and cannot be “shared” across campuses, as print items could. Such decisions impact *all* CUNY libraries.
* Month-to-month budgets run counter to purchasing processes, which is complex and requires input from subject experts in and outside of the library.
* Reliance on the Libraries to procure textbooks through dedicated funds like the CUNY Textbook Initiative, while simultaneously cutting general funds, have transformed library purchases from long-term investments in a collection into a budget for, essentially, consumables.
* When libraries don't have reliable book budgets, they never “catch up,” because even when they do have funds, the titles they wanted may have gone out of print. Or, do they spend their limited funds buying the books they should have bought last year, while ignoring this year’s? The quality of the collection suffers, with cascading effects on our ability to support academic programs.

## CUNY Libraries in Crisis

In 2005, CUNY launched the Decade of Science initiative, culminating with the opening of the Advanced Science Research Center in 2016. The years following, however, might be called the Decade of Neglect unless the University takes drastic steps to support CUNY Libraries and modernize its collections and procurement processes in support of distance learning. We identify five areas where urgent action is needed:

1. CUNY Libraries need additional funds and expedited legal review for new licensed resources in order to adequately support teaching and learning in the fall (and beyond).
2. Centralized purchasing and licensing of e-resources should be expanded to the greatest extent possible to facilitate cross-campus access for faculty and students and maximize consortial cost-savings.
3. Collection development decisions for centrally purchased e-resources should be governed by faculty and subject-specialists from the campuses, with a clear and equitable path to acquire materials. A steering committee for library collections should be formed for long-range planning, consisting of library faculty, classroom faculty, and procurement specialists at CUNY Central.
4. Print materials are often the sole format available for scholarly works. Annual allocations should be made centrally to grow and catalog campus library print collections (which are shared across CUNY through programs like CLICS) in order to fulfill academic needs.
5. The Office of Library Services at CUNY Central should be fully staffed and strategically aligned with the needs of the University and its campus libraries, to support and develop a world class library system at CUNY.

*Prepared for the UFS Committee on Libraries and Information Technology by the Ad Hoc Collections Advisory Group: Prof. Roxanne Shirazi (GSUC, Chair), Prof. Nora Almeida (NYCCT), Prof. John Drobnicki (York College), Prof. Alycia Sellie (GSUC), Prof. Elizabeth Tompkins (Kingsborough CC)*

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Table

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|  |  |  |  | |
| *Physical and electronic library collections by CUNY campus* | | | | | | |  |  | |
|  | | | |  | |  |  |  | |
|  | | | | **Physical\*** | | **Electronic†** | **Total** | **E-resources (%)** | |
|  | | | |  | |  |  |  | |
| Bernard M Baruch College | | | | 304,661 | | 903,435 | 1,208,096 | 74.8 |
| Borough of Manhattan Community College | | | | 95,691 | | 880,756 | 976,447 | 90.2 |
| Bronx Community College | | | | 78,415 | | 671,726 | 750,141 | 89.5 |
| Brooklyn College | | | | 751,706 | | 947,431 | 1,699,137 | 55.8 |
| City College | | | | 788,484 | | 1,298,381 | 2,086,865 | 62.2 |
| College of Staten Island | | | | 190,993 | | 691,354 | 882,347 | 78.4 |
| Graduate School and University Center | | | | 230,569 | | 1,132,659 | 1,363,228 | 83.1 |
| Hostos Community College | | | | 56,084 | | 690,306 | 746,390 | 92.5 |
| Hunter College | | | | 472,531 | | 2,065,906 | 2,538,437 | 81.4 |
| John Jay College of Criminal Justice | | | | 225,679 | | 1,027,521 | 1,253,200 | 82.0 |
| Kingsborough Community College | | | | 190,955 | | 686,543 | 877,498 | 78.2 |
| LaGuardia Community College | | | | 94,762 | | 814,718 | 909,480 | 89.6 |
| Lehman College | | | | 317,417 | | 815,226 | 1,132,643 | 72.0 |
| Medgar Evers College | | | | 111,065 | | 719,683 | 830,748 | 86.6 |
| New York City College of Technology | | | | 120,813 | | 822,891 | 943,704 | 87.2 |
| Queens College | | | | 719,497 | | 465687‡ | 1,185,184 | 39.3 |
| Queensborough Community College | | | | 129,392 | | 860,226 | 989,618 | 86.9 |
| School of Law | | | | 31,510 | | 769,266 | 800,776 | 96.1 |
| Stella and Charles Guttman Community College | | | | 2,252 | | 710,825 | 713,077 | 99.7 |
| York College | | | | 150,205 | | 715,779 | 865,984 | 82.7 |
|  | | | |  | |  |  |  | |
| *Note.* Data obtained from IPEDS (Academic Libraries) for last complete year, 2017-18. | | | | | | | | | |
| \*Includes books, media, and serials. †Includes books, databases, media, and serials. ‡Queens College appears to have a reporting error. Each campus reports centrally licensed databases in their individual electronic collections. | | | | | | | | | |

1. Council of Chief Librarians, “Budget Challenges for CUNY Libraries.” [Memo]. December 11, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. McKenzie, Lindsay. “SUNY Cancels Big Deal with Elsevier.” Inside Higher Ed, April 13, 2020. <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/04/13/suny-cancels-big-deal-elsevier>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. University of Guelph Library. “Commercial Textbooks Present Challenges in a Virtual Environment.” Accessed August 13, 2020. <https://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/news/commercial-textbooks-present-challenges-virtual-environment>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cagle, Chris. “Kanopy: Not Just Like Netflix, and Not Free.” *Film Quarterly* (Quorum), May 3, 2019. <https://filmquarterly.org/2019/05/03/kanopy-not-just-like-netflix-and-not-free/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Middle States, Standard III: “sufficient learning opportunities and resources to support both the institution’s programs of study and students’ academic progress;” Standard VI: “a financial planning and budgeting process that is aligned with the institution’s mission and goals, evidence-based, and clearly linked to the institution’s and units’ strategic plans/objectives.” <https://www.msche.org/standards/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example: Council on Social Work Education Accreditation, “Librarian’s Report Form (2015 EPAS)” <https://www.cswe.org/getattachment/Accreditation/Accreditation-Process/LibrariansReportUpdated02-27-18.docx.aspx>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)