Rethinking campus retail to better serve students

Through eCampus.com Virtual Bookstores, an Illinois university offers more affordable textbooks and sees increased merchandise sales

The campus bookstore traditionally was the one place students could purchase the right edition of texts for their courses—albeit at full cost. With the rise of online retailers came competition for the bookstore, as student access to more affordable textbook options grew exponentially.

"Prices in our store were way more expensive than prices online," says Ruby James, vice president of finance and business affairs for Millikin University in central Illinois. "Plus, our stock was incomplete and we often had a lot of books on backorder."

Sales in the bookstore, for apparel and merchandise as well as books, were low. But circumstances necessitated some students shop there.

"Students who needed to use financial aid to purchase books were required to use their funds at our store and pay our prices," says James.

So in summer 2014, James began conferring with colleagues at peer institutions to see how to go about transforming the campus bookstore into a more purposeful space—and help all of Millikin's 2,200 students—including those using financial aid dollars—stretch their money as far as possible.

Flipping the bookstore

In May 2015, Millikin's campus store footprint was downsized and repurposed to exclusively sell school supplies and university apparel and merchandise. Used, new and rental textbooks are sold online by Millikin's official virtual bookstore partner retailer, eCampus.com. Books can be shipped directly to the student's home or dorm, or to Millikin's campus store. Through the eCampus.com Marketplace, students can sell and buy texts from each other, often at a significant discount.

"Through eCampus.com, books are available 100 percent of the time," says James. "Students enjoy the same ease of ordering as they do with familiar online retailers like Amazon."

A smooth experience for all stakeholders

Another perk of eCampus.com Virtual Bookstores is how its system

"Students are getting the right books they need, on time and at a low price point."

integrates with Millikin's Banner student information system. Millikin programmers work with eCampus.com on a semester basis to load professors' choice books for each course into eCampus.com's system.

"We roll over book lists from semester to semester in eCampus.com to keep things simple," says James. "Instructors have the option to simply accept the list if they have no changes, or modify by easily searching for different texts on eCampus.com, and adding new books."

Students no longer have to know ISBN numbers for each book in each of their classes. Instead, thanks to the Banner integration, when a student logs into the Millikin Virtual Bookstore powered by eCampus.com, their schedule automatically comes up with full, accurate booklists.

"Even through Marketplace, students can use financial aid for textbook purchases through this system," says James. "The Virtual Bookstore has up-to-date information on exactly how many financial aid dollars a student has to spend on books."

Now that campus store staff are no longer bogged down with book ordering, they have time to focus on increasing sales on university merchandise in both the campus store and through the Millikin Virtual Bookstore powered by eCampus.com.

"We now have time to select a wider variety of apparel and merchandise at lower price points, and even promote them at athletic events and other university events," says James. "Sales on these items are significantly higher than before the campus store transformation."

Overall, the cost savings to students has been the biggest benefit to handing over book sales to eCampus.com, says James.

"Students are getting the right books they need, on time and at a low-cost price point," she says.

For more information, visit www.eCampusvb.com
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