

# Chapter 5

## Inclusive Access Impact on Student Outcomes in a Community College Network



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### Background

Alamo Colleges District is the largest provider of higher education in South Texas and enrolls over 60,000 students. The district is comprised of five independently accredited colleges. A diverse institution, nearly 24% of its student body is White, 8.1% are African American, and 62.4% are Hispanic. Over 72% of students receive financial aid, and 80.5% attend part-time. The student body represents the diversity of the region in which it is situated, and the district's mission includes goals that meet critical regional needs, including ending poverty in the San Antonio region through education.

### Challenges and Goals

In the 2014–2015 academic year, the Alamo Colleges District (ACD) Board of Trustees issued a directive to investigate ways to decrease student cost with open access course materials. This spurred two initiatives by the district support office. The first, AlamoOPEN, is the district's zero cost initiative, in which course materials are in the form of free Open Educational Resources (OER), institutionally funded resources such as library databases and other free copyrighted works, including those created by faculty members. The second, branded Instructional Materials

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(IM) Direct, is the Inclusive Access solution, in which quality publisher-created materials are provided at a low cost through negotiated prices with leading publishers.

In addition to cutting the cost of textbooks, faculty welcomed these initiatives and recognized the academic value of having immediate first-day access to course materials. With all students accessing materials on the first day of class, students could not use the excuse of lack of access to shirk their course-related responsibilities. This also creates equity in the classroom and does not disadvantage those students who do not have the financial means to purchase course materials, sometimes for several weeks of the semester.

According to Dr. Said Fariabi, chair of the Mathematics, Engineering, Architecture, and Physics Departments at San Antonio College, students often did not have money to pay up front for course materials at the start of the semester. Faculty in his department recognized that if all students had first-day access to required course materials, they would have a better chance of being successful in the course.

Professor Renita Mitchell, chair of the mathematics department at St. Philip's College, explained that her department's concern driving IM Direct implementation revolved around student non-purchase of course materials after the 2-week free trial expired. Students who did not purchase the required course materials were negatively impacted and less likely to succeed in the course. With IM Direct, students would all be enrolled in the courseware during the first week of class, eliminating this barrier to student success.

## Implementation

A key difference between the AlamoOPEN and IM Direct programs is the way in which individual courses are added to the programs. Individual faculty members can opt in to the AlamoOPEN program as they wish, whereas opting in to the IM Direct program is a department-wide decision. As a result, the impact on students via the IM Direct program is greater in magnitude. In addition, faculty members who opt in to the AlamoOPEN program are typically highly proactive, successful instructors, whereas the IM Direct program's faculty participants are more representative of the range of instructors in the district.

The AlamoOPEN and IM Direct programs are coordinated by the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Success. Phillip Anaya is responsible for coordinating the programs. School administrators, including chairs and deans, receive guidelines each semester with an outline of events and deadlines for the IM Direct program. Each fall and spring semester, Anaya runs a trade show to help raise awareness of the AlamoOPEN and IM Direct programs at each school. Until 2019, these trade shows were hosted at each school in the district. In 2019, the trade show was hosted at one school and ran for a full day. The Follett bookstore that services

the district sent representatives, as did each publisher, and the IM Direct program was presented every hour to attendees.

When making the decision to transition to the IM Direct program for a specific course, discipline leads involve all faculty teaching that course in the decision. In high-enrollment courses with multiple sections, all the instructors that teach the course need to agree to implement IM Direct. In smaller courses taught by only one instructor, the decision is individual and does not require departmental consensus.

The IM Direct implementation process is highly automated at ACD, allowing for a scalable deployment. Once the decision is made for a course to join the IM Direct program, department chairs access the IM Direct Microsoft SharePoint site and begin the process by creating an account and providing term, school, course, publisher, and course material title information via a form. In addition, the chair includes notes to delineate whether all sections of the course are participating in the IM Direct program or if any section exceptions will be made. Exceptions to individual course sections are allowed if that section uses AlamoOPEN course materials or if the section is part of any of the high school programs at ACD. In that case, course materials are chosen and provided via the terms delineated in the Memorandum of Understanding or Course Agreement between the school district and ACD.

After the department chair has completed the form, the publisher reviews the adoption and provides updates as needed, including updating the ISBN for billing, recording the net price, and correcting the title, if necessary. The publisher representative can also enter additional information to note if a bundle will be used or if there are separate ISBNs for billing and deployment.

Next, the bookstore uses the net price to calculate the student fee and ensure that the billing ISBN is correctly entered. The bookstore representative can enter additional notes to document exceptions as well. Then, the information is passed to finance, where the data is entered into Banner, ACD's Student Information System (SIS), and tied to corresponding course section(s). The finance department ensures that all the details are correct and verify any special pricing before coding a fee in the SIS.

In general, the process is straightforward and nearly completely automated. Sometimes, when notes are entered, the process requires additional screening and custom actions to enable the course to transition properly to the IM Direct program. Deadlines are provided for each stakeholder that is involved in the process. The final step in the process, in which the student course fee associated with each IM Direct course is entered into Banner, is due several days before registration for the coming semester begins. This is in line with state laws that forbid institutions to make changes to tuition and fees once registration is open. Because of these deadlines, publishers have adequate time to set up course integrations as necessary to ensure a smooth implementation.

Once the bookstore receives information about courses participating in the IM Direct program, they set the final price for the student fee, according to the contract negotiated by Follett and the institution. The bookstore is responsible for delivering the e-texts via third-party integrations, such as VitalSource or RedShelf.

The third-party provider facilitates the integration of the course materials in Canvas, ACD's learning management system (LMS). If courseware is used, the publishers work with the departments and faculty to set up any necessary integrations and create courses. If a faculty member includes print or physical materials (such as a lab kit) in the required course materials, the bookstore stocks these items and tries to provide a discount on these items as well.

Course materials are used from a wide spectrum of publishers, with over 50% of courses participating in the IM Direct program using Pearson digital courseware or eBooks.

In the math department at St. Philip's college, most mathematics courses roll out master courses at the department level using Pearson software. During the summer, full-time faculty members set up master courses for each course. Then, Professor Mitchell pushes out the copied courses to individual instructors. This enables instructors to receive access to the courseware that contains a pre-built course before the start of the semester.

During the first two days of the semester, each course instructor brings his/her students to the computer lab for a 15-minute session. During that session, all the students log in to the digital courseware. Professor Mitchell makes sure to be on hand at the lab during the first week of class to troubleshoot any enrollment issues that arise. In this way, nearly all students access the course materials by the second day of the semester and can begin completing assignments.

## **Chair, Faculty, and Student Experience**

Interestingly, many students believe that IM Direct course materials are free because it is included in the tuition and fees paid upon course registration. Because the course materials are not paid for separately, students are not as concerned about the cost.

Some students prefer a print copy of the textbook over an eBook. On rare occasions, students have expressed their preference for a new, hard-copy text over a loose-leaf addition. However, this complaint has been infrequent, and most students are satisfied with the digital materials and the loose-leaf print option.

Dr. Shane Kendell is the chair of the Department of Natural Sciences at St. Philip's College. His department has implemented IM Direct for nearly all courses in the department since 2015. For some military students who receive financial aid, the IM Direct program is especially helpful because they are eligible for tuition assistance but not textbook assistance. As a result, when the textbook fee is included in the tuition and fees for the course, their financial aid can cover the cost of the course materials. According to Dr. Kendell, other students also find that having the cost included in the course tuition and fees makes it easier to pay for the course materials.

Dr. Kendell explained that when students withdraw from a course that participates in the IM Direct program, they lose access to the course materials and may receive only a partial refund of the course according to the district's policy. In contrast, when a student drops a course that uses a course text purchased independently, the cost of the book is not regained, but the student retains the book and can use it in a subsequent semester if he/she re-enrolls in the course. Dr. Kendell noted that since the IM Direct course materials' fee is nominal, this has rarely been raised by students as an issue that needs to be addressed.

In the math department at San Antonio College, all courses except two participate in IM Direct. The department joined the program at the start in 2015 and services between five and six thousand students each semester. Dr. Fariabi noted that "faculty love it and have had a very good experience. The department has continued to add courses to the model over time because the faculty appreciates its benefits."

Professor Mitchell noted that instructors in the math department at St. Philip's College appreciate the IM Direct program and encouraged its expansion from a smaller pilot to full implementation across the department. As department chair, she works to handle all IM Direct-related tasks so that faculty are free to better support student learning. She appreciates the way IM Direct is run in the department and explained, "It really makes a difference how you set it up from the start. For our department, it is easier to front-load everything for faculty so that there is a smoother experience for faculty and for the department administration." Although the first couple of semesters, there was a heavier administrative burden associated with IM Direct, she has now perfected the workflow, and it only takes about two hours each semester to distribute courses, and time during the first week of the semester to help troubleshoot student enrollment issues.

## Overcoming Obstacles

Although the deadlines are sometimes viewed as difficult by the various stakeholders, it is a necessary component of the process that enables it to run smoothly and efficiently. The first semester that the IM Direct program was rolled out, Anaya was more flexible, but realized that this caused many issues. Last-minute changes made by departments can cause much confusion and make the process more difficult for administration.

Sometimes, department chairs entered the wrong course number in the form. When that happened, the information supplied to Banner was incorrect, and the wrong students were billed for the IM Direct course fee. In these cases, the students were refunded, and the course that was supposed to join the IM Direct program could not do so for that semester because the course fee was not provided at the time of registration. In most of these cases, the publishers and bookstore were able to negotiate a better price for the course materials and mitigate the cost implications for students.

Anaya is the point of contact for the issues that crop up during the IM Direct implementation process. Sometimes, the Follett bookstore works with the publishers to iron out smaller issues, but Anaya is involved when the issue becomes bigger and helps coordinate and bring in the correct stakeholders to resolve difficulties as they arise.

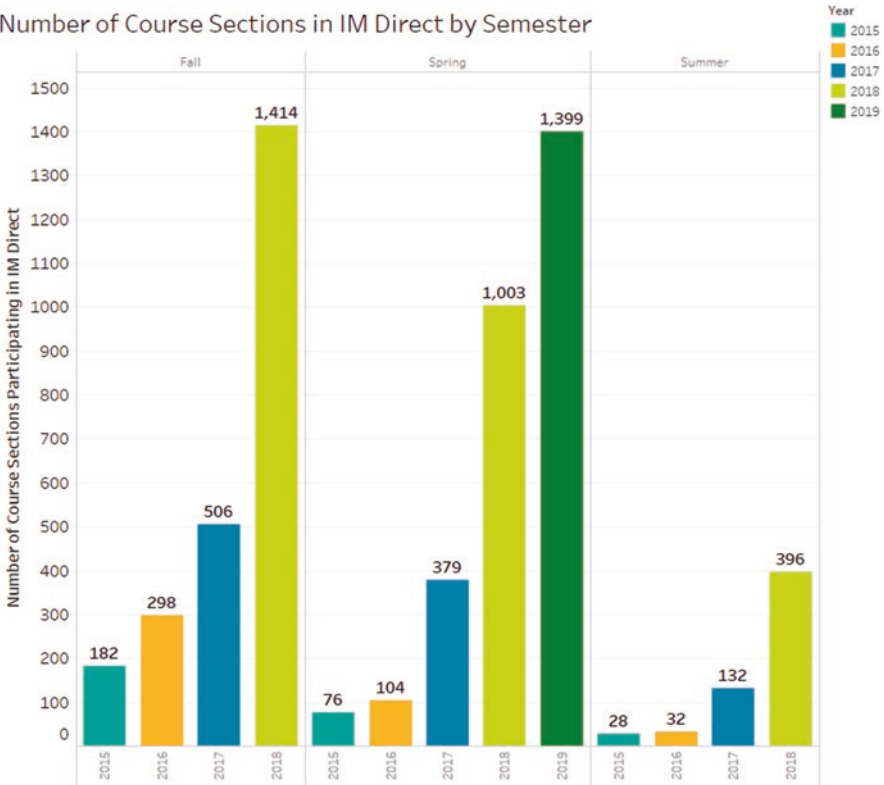
Anaya explained that since the district needs to comply with legal policy and regulations, issues crop up with the inevitable errors that creep into a large implementation. After registration opens, the district cannot change student fees. If the wrong cost information is provided at any point during the process, the course cannot participate in the IM Direct program, and the institution needs to absorb the additional cost of the student texts for that course. Thankfully, most publishers have been able to meet the district in the middle to reduce the cost of the books outside the IM Direct program, which is helpful because the IM Direct program is intended to be a zero-cost initiative to the district. In addition to human error issues, Anaya pointed out that there needs to be more clarity regarding interpretation of federal guidelines and its alignment with state regulations that may be more stringent.

At the department level, the process is typically smooth. Dr. Fariabi noted that he finds courseware integration into Canvas a complication of the course creation process in MyLab Math. This is because he needs to copy and create new courses for instructors when the courseware is integrated in the LMS, and instructors have less freedom to create their own courses. In addition, not all instructors are familiar with Canvas, requiring additional training to help instructors use the LMS. As a result, starting in the Summer 2019 semester, the department is transitioning to using course access codes. Instructors will be provided access codes for MyLab Math at the start of the semester to distribute to their classes. In that way, each instructor will have more freedom to create courses in MyLab Math, and students will continue to receive first-day access to the courseware, now using the access codes.

Professor Mitchell noted that, from time to time, there is human error in transmission of enrollment data needed to batch-enroll students. To address this issue before the semester starts, a member of the department administration quickly checks the enrollments for each course after registration has taken place in the district to verify that the bookstore has correctly submitted student enrollment information to the publisher and that batch enrollment has completed successfully.

Laura Romero, executive director of Strategic Partnerships at Pearson, highlighted the importance of top-notch communication between the institution, the bookstore, and the publishers. Issues are bound to arise during implementation of an Inclusive Access program, and if all parties involved communicate quickly and effectively, they can usually be resolved. The process is different for faculty and students, and communicating these differences helps eliminate unnecessary confusion. According to Romero, Alamo has been a great communicative partner, which has facilitated the transition to IM Direct throughout the district.

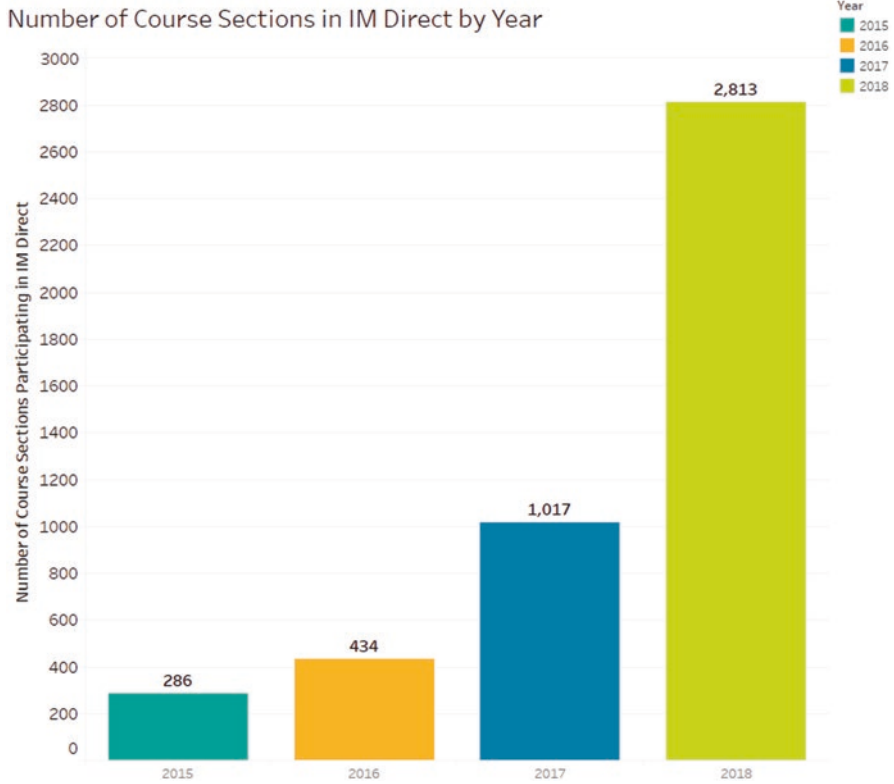
Number of Course Sections in IM Direct by Semester



**Fig. 5.1** Number of course sections participating in the IM Direct program at Alamo Colleges District by semester and year

### Cost Savings

The IM Direct program saves students an average of \$55 per textbook purchase compared with the original price of the textbook in the Follet bookstore that services the district. Over the lifetime of the AlamoOPEN and IM Direct program, students have saved an estimated \$10 million, with nearly \$7 million in savings attributed to the IM Direct program alone across nearly 6000 course sections (Figs. 5.1 and 5.2).



**Fig. 5.2** Number of course sections participating in the IM Direct program at Alamo Colleges District by year

## Conclusion

The IM Direct program at Alamo Colleges District is part of a larger initiative to provide less expensive course materials to students and enable them to succeed in their educational experience by enabling first-day access to course materials. The program is automated and scalable and has mushroomed since its inception in 2015.

Romero summarized:

Alamo has been exceptionally successful at growing the IM Direct program. This is because the district has done a great job branding and promoting it as an affordability initiative. Because Phillip Anaya directs both the AlamoOPEN and IM Direct program, there is a central office that addresses affordability issues. Faculty have one address that they can direct all affordability questions and concerns, and Phillip can provide the options that are available via OER and Inclusive Access. If there are no OER options available for a given course, IM Direct can be offered as an alternative. With this more holistic approach to affordable course materials, Alamo has been highly successful in implementing and growing IM Direct across the district.(44)