VitalSource

From 50% Sell-Through to 85% Participation: How Wilfrid Laurier University Reimagined Course Materials Access

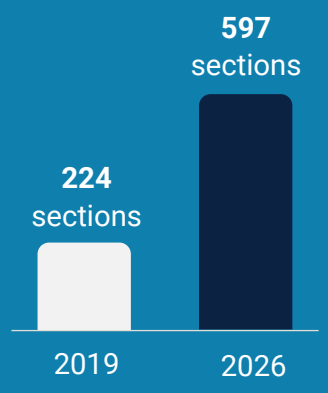
Impact by the Numbers

$2.3M+
in student savings since Winter 2024

80-85%
student participation rate each term

86%
of course materials delivered digitally

166%
increase in participating course sections



The Vision: Wilfrid Laurier University is a Canadian institution serving roughly 20,000 students, with a strong focus on creating a supportive, student-centered experience. Like many schools across Canada, Laurier places a high value on affordability, transparency, and clear student choices when it comes to course materials.

At the Hawk Shop, the campus store team saw more than rising course materials costs. They saw a growing disconnect between students and the materials they needed to succeed. As print sell-through rates declined, the team recognized that many students were simply going without required materials. Rather than making incremental improvements to a legacy model, they set out to build a new approach centered on access, affordability, and student success. Their goal was clear: ensure every student could access required course materials from day one at a lower, more predictable cost. To bring that vision to life, they combined campus collaboration with digital delivery to design the Digital Textbook Access (DTA) program in partnership with VitalSource.

> **"We realized we needed an end-to-end solution, and that's what led us to VitalSource. It offers a simple and easy process for students."**
> **— Mike Zybala, Director of the Hawk Shop, Wilfrid Laurier University**

The Journey: Wilfrid Laurier University launched its Course Access (also known as Inclusive Access) program in 2015 with a small pilot of five courses. Before launch, the team explored what the right model might look like by learning about Inclusive Access at industry conferences and connecting with forward-thinking Canadian institutions, including Conestoga College and Algonquin College.

The team took a deliberate, faculty-driven approach to ensure instructors retained control over content decisions while introducing a transparent opt-out model for students. To lay a strong foundation and ensure alignment, the Hawk Shop engaged stakeholders across campus including faculty, Teaching and Learning, IT, the library, the registrar, student government, and the accessibility team.

Early implementation relied heavily on manual processes, with billing, course setup, and student communications managed through spreadsheets and email. As the program grew, this approach became increasingly complex and difficult

to scale. To support continued growth, the team partnered with VitalSource to streamline operations and bring structure to the program. With tools that simplify billing, automate course setup, and integrate content directly into their learning management system, D2L, they created a more seamless, end-to-end experience. The processes that once required manual coordination became a scalable system that could grow without additional administrative burden.

The team focused on organic growth, rather than pushing for rapid adoption. Faculty participation increased steadily as instructors saw improved student readiness and fewer access-related issues. This measured approach allowed the program to evolve alongside campus needs and positioned the university to respond quickly when disruption occurred.

The Outcome: Today, the DTA program drives **80–85% student participation** across the institution, with digital content now serving as the primary format for course materials in participating courses.

With a more streamlined system supported by the right tools and partnership resources, the Hawk Shop delivers course materials with greater efficiency and visibility while continuing to expand adoption across courses and departments.

> **"Start small and scale intentionally."**
> **— Kimberley Pinkney, Course Materials Coordinator, Wilfrid Laurier University**

The Impact: Since Winter 2024, the program has generated more than $2.3 million in student savings while improving access to course materials and supporting stronger student success outcomes. The consistency, transparency, and ease of access have made digital course materials an expected part of the academic experience and reinforced the program's value across campus.

For the Hawk Shop, the shift from roughly 50% sell-through to 85% participation represents a significant gain in market share, with more students consistently accessing materials through the store. At the same time, the move to digital has simplified operations, reduced reliance on physical inventory, and enabled a more efficient, scalable model.

What's Next: Wilfrid Laurier University continues to advance its digital-first strategy by increasing adoption across courses and exploring additional integrations with publishers and courseware platforms. The team remains focused on refining communication, strengthening faculty engagement, and leveraging data to better understand and support student needs.

As the program evolves, Laurier is building a scalable, future-ready model that reduces reliance on expensive physical materials while ensuring every student has access to affordable course content from day one.

VitalSource + Wilfrid Laurier University
Delivering affordable, digital access from day one

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