When library innovation meets student success

What the University of Nebraska-Lincoln learned about scaling affordable learning across expanding curricula

The cost of higher education is under growing scrutiny, and course materials are part of the pressure students feel semester after semester. For many, the price of required textbooks and readings can shape when they get access, whether they buy everything assigned and how prepared they are when class begins.

Academic libraries are uniquely positioned to make a measurable difference in affordability and student success. By connecting faculty with library-owned materials, lower-cost alternatives and open educational resources (OER), libraries can reduce costs while improving timely access to learning materials.

At the **University of Nebraska-Lincoln** (UNL), that work has become an award-winning model for affordable learning. Through Project Fox, UNL Libraries has helped students save **$3.5 million** while building a more scalable way to identify, acquire and deliver affordable course materials.

> "Course material costs can change dramatically from semester to semester, which makes them hard for students to budget. This program gives students access to what they need on day one without having to spend hundreds of dollars at the bookstore."
>
> **Melissa Gomis,** chair of Collections Strategy and Open Scholarship, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Clarivate

Reimagining affordable learning at scale at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

UNL was facing a thorny challenge: the library's affordability work was effective but difficult to expand across a growing curriculum. Faculty outreach, syllabus review and course-by-course analysis all delivered value but required significant staff time – a luxury the library didn't have.

Project Fox was launched to overcome that challenge by building on systems UNL already had in place: Alma as its library management platform, Leganto for course materials workflows and Rialto to support acquisition of materials. These systems were connected into a single workflow spanning syllabus review, holdings analysis, acquisition and delivery of affordable resources.

Additionally, UNL Libraries were among the first adopters of the **Leganto Syllabus Assistant**. This AI-powered tool allowed them to ingest course materials information into the workflow much more efficiently, enabling it to operate at scale, without losing staff oversight or control over decision-making.

Project Fox moved the library beyond interventions within individual courses toward a repeatable process that could be applied across many courses. Librarians continued evaluating options and working with faculty, while integrated technology reduced much of the manual work.

The project also expanded faculty engagement by encouraging instructors to share syllabi so the library could identify opportunities through existing holdings, newly acquired resources or alternative options.

Results that extend beyond efficiency

UNL Libraries began with a pilot project, which gave the library a clearer view of where affordability work could have the greatest effect. **Of the 27 courses in the pilot, a startling 89% of courses could move to lower-cost options, while only 11% were already using the lowest-cost option available.**

That insight helped the library focus its outreach, identify where existing holdings could meet course needs and connect instructors with additional options such as OER. In one case, an instructor was able to convert a course to entirely no-cost materials.

The $3 million in savings realized by students to date is only the beginning. By giving librarians course materials data and an immediate impact on students, **Project Fox also strengthened faculty relationships, turning affordability conversations into practical collaborations around course design, access and student success.**

> "Students have immediate access to a large pool of materials — without having to purchase anything."
>
> **Amy Guevara,** instructor, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

From manual effort to measurable impact

As affordability initiatives mature, many libraries move along a technology continuum. Each stage extends the work of staff while preserving the expertise and oversight essential to successful programs.

Stage 1: Librarian expertise

Librarians work with faculty, review syllabi, check holdings and recommend lower-cost alternatives, building trust and demonstrating impact, but every additional course adds manual work.

Stage 2: Workflow automation

UNL extended that expertise through a repeatable workflow.

Streamlined systems connect disparate workflows, simplify handoffs and free staff to focus on evaluation, decisions and faculty engagement, making effective practices easier to repeat.

In affordability programs, that can include:

- Reading list creation and management to get the data to the library
- Collection analysis to understand existing library holdings
- Acquisition workflows to purchase materials for students
- Reporting and program assessment

Stage 3: AI-assisted workflows

At UNL, AI entered after the project goals and workflow were defined. The Leganto AI Syllabus tool converted syllabus content into reading lists for librarian review, reducing the effort required to get the information required to initiate the workflow. UNL isn't alone. Results from the Academic AI Impact Study 2026*, which looked at how academic libraries are applying AI to defined workflows, show how **AI can reduce repetitive work, expand feasible workloads and support reviewable outputs when introduced with clear goals and staff oversight**.

AI-supported workflow finding	Reported impact
Manual, repetitive work	Reduced by 30% to 60%
Feasible workload	Increased by 2 to 4 times without additional staff
AI-generated outputs	70% to 90% accepted with only minor edits

Stage 4: Institutional impact

As workflows scale, affordability work can shift from course-by-course intervention to institution-wide impact.

Libraries can identify curriculum patterns, prioritize high-impact opportunities and connect affordability more directly to student success goals.

The outcome is a program that helps more students start class with the materials they need and fewer cost barriers in the way, demonstrating the impact of the library on student success.

Building from trusted practice

In considering adopting AI, it's worth noting that the best starting point is an established problem with clear value and goals. Few institutions move directly from manual processes to AI-driven services. More often, **expertise leads to better workflows, workflows create room for automation and automation creates a foundation for targeted AI**.

At each step, library values remain central: transparency, accountability and positive student outcomes.

What other libraries can take from UNL's approach

- Start with a service goal, not technology.
- Use workflow automation to reduce repetitive effort and make successful practices repeatable.
- Introduce AI where outputs can be reviewed, refined and measured against clear outcomes.

For library leaders, the opportunity is to identify where technology can extend services that already deliver value, or extend into areas that were otherwise impossible due to staffing limitations. Applied thoughtfully, workflow automation and AI can help libraries move beyond individual interventions and operate at a scale that better matches institutional needs. When technology is aligned with existing library expertise, the result is not simply greater productivity. It is greater impact for students.

See how Alma and Leganto can support scalable affordable learning workflows.

Connect with a library specialist for a personalized walkthrough.

*Academic AI Impact Study 2026