The UCLA Libraries Affordable Course Materials Initiative: Expanding Access, Use, and Affordability of Course Materials

Sharon E. Farb
University of California Los Angeles, farb@library.ucla.edu

Todd Grappone
University of California, Los Angeles, grappone@library.ucla.edu

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The UCLA Libraries Affordable Course Materials Initiative: Expanding Access, Use, and Affordability of Course Materials

by Sharon E. Farb (Associate University Librarian, University of California, Los Angeles) <farb@library.ucla.edu>
and Todd Grappone (Associate University Librarian, University of California, Los Angeles) <grappone@library.ucla.edu>

In 2013, the UCLA Library launched the Affordable Course Materials Initiative (ACMI) with four overarching goals:

- Lowering costs of course materials to students
- Building open educational resources (OER)
- Greater integration of library collections in teaching and learning
- Increased engagement with faculty and students

Broad sponsorship for this initiative was essential to its successful launch, and the pilot was developed and scoped, in part, through many conversations that occurred at various levels across campus. As a result of these conversations, the ACMI is endorsed by the Office of the UCLA Executive Vice Chancellor and the UCLA Academic Senate, partial funding is provided by the California Digital Library, and support comes from the UCLA student government and the campus bookstore.

The ACMI is the latest in a diverse set of services designed and led by the UCLA Library to promote the broadest possible access to and use of library collections in support of UCLA’s mission of teaching and research. The UCLA Library previously partnered with UCLA Bookstore by sharing the terms of our negotiated license agreements. The collaboration enabled the bookstore to avoid paying permission fees for content (typically online journal articles) that the library already licensed on behalf of the campus community. This partnership resulted in substantially lower costs for creating print course packs, especially for classes that rely heavily on journal articles.

The UCLA Library modeled the ACMI on certain elements of programs created by the libraries at UMASS Amherst (http://guides.library.umass.edu/oer), Temple University (http://sites.temple.edu/alttextbook), and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (https://libraries.mit.edu/scholarly) that focus more specifically on open educational resources (OER) and open textbooks. We envisioned our program being broader and focused on the diversity of material used in teaching that extends well beyond any notion of a textbook alone. We designed the ACMI to more effectively utilize existing UCLA Library collections, develop new ones, and help faculty enhance their course materials in ways that support affordability and ease of access. By building on our colleagues’ initiatives, we hoped to provide another model for academic libraries.

In addition to better integration of UCLA Library collections and services into instruction, the ACMI also supports Library efforts to identify OERs that meet the needs of the faculty and that are alternatives to high-priced commercial publishers’ textbooks. We also work with UCLA faculty to more effectively make their scholarly articles, books, and instructional resources available to students and colleagues via open access.

The ACMI incentivizes instructors to use low-cost or free alternatives to expensive course materials. These alternatives include open-access scholarly resources; library-licensed and owned resources; digitized content from UCLA collections; and learning objects and texts that faculty create themselves. We awarded $1,000 to instructors teaching courses with enrollments of fewer than two hundred students and $2,500 to instructors teaching courses with larger enrollments. These modest yet significant sums were meant to offer an incentive for instructors to take the time to identify new resources, adjust syllabi, and modify assignments. The funding could also be used to cover any actual expenses incurred by the instructor. In addition, the faculty committee reviewing the initial round of applications suggested that we designate collection development awards to build or enhance library collections in support of specific courses.

Since announcing the ACMI last March, the UCLA Library has received 27 applications. Applicants have come from many different departments across campus, though English has had the most (5), followed by Nursing, Law, and Chinese (see Figure 1). We’ve made 23 awards: 19 monetary awards, three collection development awards, and one for expertise to help address copyright issues for an open access textbook. A total of $27,500 has been given in cash awards, with an additional $2,916 spent on acquisitions. In addition to the awards, each recipient is assigned a library staff member to serve as the awardee’s point person offering subject expertise, intellectual property and copyright advice, digitization services, and technology assistance.

**Assessing Success**

Although not the sole measure of the pilot’s success, direct savings to students are significant and readily quantifiable: thus far, the more than 1,000 students in ACMI-awarded courses have saved a collective total of $112,000. This figure was calculated by figuring the cost of the materials used the last time each awarded course was taught and the cost during the ACMI-awarded quarter, and then multiplying that difference by the number of students enrolled during the ACMI quarter. Several examples provide additional context. The last time an awarded mechanical engineering course was taught, students had to buy a $200 textbook. During the ACMI quarter, the professor created a “textbook” from his lecture notes, which he provided at no cost to his 56 students, saving them $200 each for a total of $11,200. Students in an awarded theater course were able to access all their assigned readings through the UCLA Library, saving them a total of $11,375.

In addition to the cost savings, qualitative feedback from instructors has been positive. One professor for an English composition class noted that participation in the ACMI has “really been a nice shot in the arm for my teaching,” and an assistant professor in Chi-
nese and Religion noted that she was able “to make the course less expensive for students, to waste less paper, and to use a wider variety of materials so that the course was more engaging.” Another professor noted that the ACMI helped him “get to know the resources available through the library better and who to go to with questions about particular topics. This has actually proven helpful for both my teaching and my research.”

Student feedback in course evaluations was also positive. A student in an awarded course in ecology and evolutionary biology noted, “The lack of a textbook and the fact that we read current and applicable research journal articles was very useful and I would seek out courses offering this sort of material in the future,” and another commented, “As for the reading material, the online library readings were EXPONENTIALLY better than a textbook because I didn’t have to spend money that I do not have and [the instructor] tailored the readings so that each reading complemented course material.”

At the time that the ACMI was launched, the UCLA Library was also exploring options for setting up a journal article subvention program. Early on, we discussed the equity challenges between researchers in highly-funded scientific areas and those researchers in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. We were concerned that journal subvention could in fact perpetuate the inequities currently in the scholarly publishing environment. Also, a recent analysis of article processing charges (APCs) found that APCs from commercial publishers are significantly higher than those charged by open access publishers, like BMC and PLoS.

Finally, a newly-released report from JISC found that “frequently it was unclear whether the APC payment was made for an article to be totally open, embargoed, available for deposit in a repository.” This data suggests that subvention for APCs primarily benefits large commercial publishers and does little, if anything, to transform scholarly publishing. The data also confirms to us that we made the right decision in launching the ACMI and not setting up a journal article subvention fund.

Next Steps

Next steps include reporting results to our current campus partners and securing funding for the ACMI’s next phase. We also plan to identify additional campus partners, including deans, chairs, student government officers, and other campus leaders. We hope to continue to more fully integrate the ACM into the suite of library services we offer to the campus and to broaden the number of faculty and students that benefit from the program. Our initial results in both qualitative and quantitative terms have more than met our expectations. The diversity of campus interest as evidenced in Figure 1 above is exciting and we hope to see this initial trend continue.

The ACMI provides a model built on ongoing engagement of library-led interdisciplinary teams to customize support to best meet the needs of our faculty and students. Do the collections created through the ACMI represent the future of textbooks on our campus? It’s hard to know at this point, but this initiative will help us assess how our collections are used by our community and guide us as we build collections that are integral to teaching and learning.

We look forward to continuing our work with faculty and students and to integrating this work throughout the library and across all disciplines and departments on campus. Doing so will require utilizing the full array of library staff and resources and to integrate this initiative into the routine activities related to teaching and learning support and collection building. As more OERs are created, described, and discovered, the long-term goals of educational access and affordability become more attainable. The ACMI is a step in this direction.