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Getting Faculty into the Fight: The Battle Against High Textbook Costs

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“For one semester to save money, I didn’t buy the textbooks necessary for the class... I didn’t have enough money to buy textbooks, so my GPA dropped drastically from a 3.4 to a 2.9.”

This quote from a San Jose State University (SJSU) student in 2012 underlines the situation facing many students across the country as textbook costs continue to rise at three times the rate of overall consumer prices.¹ The quote also epitomizes the motivation behind the Affordable Learning Solutions (ALS) initiative. This California State University (CSU) system initiative promotes the adoption of low-cost and free classroom materials by faculty across the 23 CSU campuses. Its goal: to lower the cost of a college education for students.

For faculty, there are many challenges to replacing traditional, commercially-published textbooks with alternative learning materials. This change requires not just swapping out a book but redesigning syllabi, modifying lesson plans, recreating assessments, and rewriting lecture notes. Faculty can also lose access to the timesaving supplements that frequently come with a textbook, such as test banks, instructor’s manuals, PowerPoint presentations, and prepared lecture notes.

There are additional barriers to making this change, especially when using open educational resources (OER), teaching and learning materials that are freely available online. The absence of an easy, centralized way to find OER and a lack of quality control for these learning objects can make locating an appropriate resource time-consuming and frustrating. Once an OER is found, technical problems can arise if it is not compatible with the devices students are using. Self-authored materials are an alternative to OER but demand even more of a faculty member’s time to create. Library materials, another alternative, still require the time necessary to research and compile them for classroom use.

These were the obstacles we needed to overcome when ALS was rolled out at SJSU in 2012. At SJSU, and many other CSU campuses, the ALS initiative is coordinated by librarians, professionals committed to providing equal access to information. To kick off the campaign on the SJSU campus, an ALS Fair was held with speakers from the Education division of Apple, Flat World Knowledge, and Open.Michigan, the University of Michigan initiative that encourages faculty to use, create, and share OER. A student panel spoke about the effects of textbook prices on their education, and a panel of faculty already using textbook alternatives outlined their approaches. A raffle — with iTunes gift cards and two iPads donated by the campus bookstore as prizes — topped off the event.

After this opener, an ALS Website was created to provide faculty with information on finding open resources (library.sjsu.edu/als), a Webinar was provided for online instructors, and workshops were held where faculty could work one-on-one with librarians to find open resources and library eBooks for their classes. eBooks from the library appeal to faculty as both authoritative and easily accessible to their students, and ALS capitalized on this interest early by creating the Textbooks Available as eBooks in the Library list. http://library.sjsu.edu/affordable-learning-solutions/textbooks-available-ebooks-library

Textbooks Available as eBooks in the Library (TABL) List

The list is created with the help of one of the library’s campus partners, the Spartan Bookstore, a Barnes & Noble outlet. Before each semester begins, the bookstore shares its list of textbooks ordered by faculty with the library’s Technical Services department. The library matches this list of textbooks to the library’s collection of nearly 130,000 multiple-use eBooks. This is a painstaking process because the format of the bookstore’s list and the library’s catalog are not a precise match and the data needs to be reformatted by hand. However, in the Spring 2012 semester, a total of 126 textbook titles were found to be available in the library’s eBook collection.

Once posted to the library’s Website, the TABL list is promoted to students through social media and the campus newspaper. In the Spring 2012 semester, usage of the 126 eBooks increased by 794% compared to the previous term’s usage. Classes that had a combined total enrollment of more than 1,700 students were using these eBooks as either required or supplementary textbooks. Using these enrollment figures and the books’ usage statistics, it was projected that the TABL list saved students more than $50,000 in its first semester. Combined with usage figures from the Fall 2012 list, this estimate grew to over $200,000. The list is now in its fifth semester, and its success is reflected in new library collection practices that give preference to multi-user eBooks.

While this for-profit/library partnership may seem like an unusual relationship, bookstore management indicates that selling textbooks is no longer the main retail goal of a campus bookstore; rentals, digital books, and merchandise provide a much higher profit margin. For the bookstore, creating positive partnerships with other departments on campus balances the loss of a fraction of their book sales.

Textbook Alternatives Project (TAP)

While working with faculty to replace textbooks with library content and OER, we recognized the considerable amount of effort required in these adoptions. Material must be evaluated, courses redesigned, and new assessments created. Clearly, faculty deserve recognition and support for such efforts.

people profile

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EARLY LIFE: Loner, nerd, bookworm.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Grad student, book editor, Web editor, librarian (College of San Mateo, Georgetown, George Mason).

IN MY SPARE TIME: Amateur musician (clarinet, piano), quality TV.

PET PEEVES: Tailgaters (drivers and pedestrians), loud talkers.

PHILOSOPHY: Carpe diem.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Hopefully publishers will be offering print and eBooks as a bundle. 📚

1 Against the Grain / November 2014