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The Library's Role in the Changing World of Textbooks: Where Do We Go From Here?

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Abstract

This presentation examines the library's role as options proliferate regarding textbooks in higher education—due to the high cost of textbooks. It considers the prioritization of textbooks outside the university and the library, and it covers both the Ottenheimer Library's (at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock—UALR) pilot project to purchase textbooks and the experience of two other libraries with purchasing textbooks, print and electronic. It looks at the growth of open educational resource (OER) textbooks and how they are presented to potential users. The author also discusses the results of three libraries with pilot projects to incentivize faculty to switch to OER textbooks and how these projects impacted the libraries.

The Library's Role in the Changing World of Textbooks: Where Do We Go From Here?

So why is this a topic? Briefly, the cost of textbooks is increasing rapidly. There are many gory statistics, but to quote only one, recently NBC news used Bureau of Labor statistics data to state that from 1977– 2015 textbook costs have increased 1000% (Popken, 2015).

The skyrocketing cost of textbooks is seen as a financial burden on students and negatively impacting students' learning. The increasing cost of textbooks has made it outside universities as a problem. State legislatures, public interest research groups (PIRGs), and main stream media are paying attention to the rise of textbook costs while prices increase for academic journals and the "crisis" for academic presses has not received such attention. Cost of textbooks is a cause célèbre, at least partially, because dealing with the cost of textbooks is easier than addressing the cost of tuition or higher education as a whole.

This topic was the title of a talk at Charleston in 2009, so what has changed since then? Since 2009, there has been the growth of open education resources (OER). In addition to the popularity of OER, more libraries are experimenting with textbooks, and more outside actors are involved. Libraries are increasingly involved formally with teaching and learning and are looking to demonstrate their roles in student retention and student success.

The University of Arkansas at Little Rock's Experience

This is a brief description of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR). It is a state institution, part of the University of Arkansas system, but not the flagship university. There has been a declining enrollment and many nontraditional students attend UALR. Fall 2015 brought an enrollment of 8,902 students, including undergraduates, graduate students, and PhD candidates in engineering and computer science.

In summer 2014, UALR's provost asked the then library director if the library could provide some free access to textbooks for the fall semester, as cost is identified as the leading factor in students dropping out of UALR. The library was given no additional funds for this endeavor. Prior to this the Ottenheimer Library at UALR had a policy of not purchasing textbooks, but faculty copies of textbooks were placed on reserve.

The Collections team in the library took on this project. They conducted a brief literature review, including reading a 2013 report on Wichita State's 2012 pilot project with e-textbooks revealing high levels of student discontent with e-textbooks. In addition, they surveyed UALR's peers—mainly metropolitan, mid-sized public universities. None of the peer libraries were buying textbooks, but some were thinking about it (Grajek, 2013).

UALR decided to purchase print textbooks and place them on reserve as we were expected to provide access at the start of the semester, with the added benefit that this would bring students into the library where they could see our other services as well. We focused on core curriculum courses—a subset of these are mandatory for first-year students—and looked for classes with large number of sections and high enrollment.

We roughly budgeted \$2,000 for this pilot; we spent \$1,600 total. For that fiscal year, our total materials budget was \$1.4 million (this year it's \$1.2 million). Last fiscal year we spent \$16,900 on monographic purchases, including this budgeted \$2,000. So for UALR, while \$2,000 is small, it is not an insignificant amount of money; what we spent purchasing textbooks was almost 10% of our monographic funds for FY15.

For the fall semester we purchased three copies each for two history courses, one theater course, one communications course, one psychology course, one biology course, and one algebra course, totalling \$875 for the fall semester. For spring semester, we spent another \$758 on predominately science courses from the core curriculum, since these courses have expensive textbooks and were covered less by the first half of the pilot. Specifically, we purchased one anatomy and physiology textbook and two chemistry textbooks.

We did heavily promote in the library. We also e-mailed all faculty about the pilot and brought it up at the Dean's council meeting.

For the pilot, what we bought was heavily used. No textbooks disappeared. The core curriculum history textbook, for which we purchased three copies, in one year had 106, 96, and 97 uses for the three copies respectively. For a core curriculum Theater class, the three items had 34, 30, and 26 uses. The biology textbook items had uses in the 30s and 20s. The college algebra book was our one misstep as it was not used much. For the spring semester textbooks, the anatomy and physiology textbook and one of the two chemistry textbooks were heavily used.

On the flip side, as of fall 2015 UALR has new online-only programs for some degrees, and these textbooks are only available to students on campus. Only a year after our pilot three titles are on new editions; for these the library made the decision to keep the older editions on reserve. UALR expanded the core curriculum in fall 2015. All of the classes for which textbooks were purchased are still part of the core curriculum, but there are an additional ten classes.

Other Libraries Purchasing Textbooks

Interested in the experiences of those doing this on a large scale and with a larger budget than us, I spoke with Eric Elmore Electronic Resources Coordinator at University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). UTSA has a student population of 29,000. The library had been receiving requests for textbooks and purchasing them, but not systematically. Beginning in fall 2014, they began identifying requests for textbooks, purchasing and routing them to the reserves desk. They are e-preferred, only purchasing print when requested or when an e-textbook is unavailable. UTSA acquires unlimited multi-user textbooks when possible, or e-books with two or three users. If they see many turnaways, they purchase additional copies or access. Regarding print, fewer of the large introductory class textbooks are available as e-textbooks, and they have been purchasing new print editions for these textbooks, which has proven to be expensive.

There has been very little faculty pushback regarding spending on a textbooks, as the cost of a degree is an issue, and this project is seen as working to support retention. The UTSA library did put this program in their annual report (E. Elmore personal communications, August 25 and 27, 2015).

The Collections team in the UALR library also spoke with the collection development librarian at the University of Central Arkansas, when we were considering options at the start of our pilot. I followed up with Renee LeBeau-Ford, the collection development librarian.

University of Central Arkansas is a state school, not part of the UA system. UCA has predominantly traditional college age students, who live on campus. Their library is open 24 hours a day.

They budget \$10,000 a year for purchasing textbooks and have been purchasing textbooks for 5 years. They run a list of textbooks for the upcoming semester against their holdings, and EBSCO e-book availability, to identify what they already have access to. They are e-book preferred, but do take into consideration when a preference for print is expressed. Many of the traditional textbook publishers are not producing e-books for their classes, so they are buying print in those instances.

The library sends a list of the textbooks the library has before the start of each semester to department chairs, or if the chair is known not to send stuff on, they e-mail the faculty directly. Frequently, faculty members ask the library to purchase their textbooks, or one will offer to bring a copy over as a personal copy. They are purchasing new editions, and sending older editions to the main stacks, where they do circulate.

At the start of a semester, students arrive on campus on Sunday and classes start on Thursday. On the first Monday students are in the library to check on their textbooks, and the library posts spreadsheets by department so students can see if their textbooks are available.

LeBeau-Ford stated the project was “hugely popular.” After 5 years, there’s word of mouth and students know about the textbook program and look for it. Financial aid also has the spreadsheet and if a student’s financial aid is late coming in, they can know if their textbooks are available.

LeBeau-Ford described this project as gratifying to work with the faculty (R. LeBeau Ford, personal communications, October 15, 2015).

So far in 2015 I’ve been talking about buying print books, which is not very innovative and this is an innovation session, but there are other options, most prominently open education resources, or

OER. OER have similar goals to open access, but OER are usually licensed, frequently using Creative Commons licensing (n.d.).

Using Creative Commons CC BY licensing, you do not pay to access the content, but you can’t make profits off it for yourself, either. You can edit and adapt original content created using this type of licensing as long as you attribute it to the original creator and identify what you’ve changed.

This would seem to work well for textbooks, which would need to be updated as knowledge continually changes or grows, or at least changes.

Many libraries and other organizations are creating or compiling lists of portals for OER textbooks and resources. I will provide a couple of examples; first: MERLOT (Multimedia educational resource for learning and online teaching, n.d.), created due to the California SB-1053 California Digital Open Source Library legislation (2012) (<https://www.merlot.org/merlot/index.htm>).

Some of the content listed are collections of academic material or archival material, such as “Documents of the American South” and “Sage American History.”

This is Fresno State’s portal (n.d.): <http://coolfored.org/facultyshowcase.html>.

It looks more like traditional textbooks, with descriptions by faculty of how they used these texts in classes. Southern Connecticut State University has a lib guide about OER teaching materials (2015): <http://libguides.southernct.edu/c.php?g=7150&p=34680>.

I found the Southern Connecticut State portal among the most helpful. It has a list of OER portals, description of OER, and OER policy guidelines from Educause (n.d.). It lists steps for turning classroom materials into OER content and contains a great video testimonial from a physics professor. He describes the following: how he saw an OER textbook in a National Science Foundation (NSF) workshop and tested it by using one module in his course, and then the whole textbook; the adaptations he made under the Creative Commons licensing; students reactions as wholly positive;

and that students could purchase a \$13 print textbook instead of a previously \$175 textbook.

I only show a couple of portals because there are a lot of these portals, and they seem to have many of the same links to Open Stax, Merlot, Educause's seven steps to OER, etc. But also because it appears that there are 3,000 textbooks, but once you start looking for a specific topic, the process becomes complicated.

SUNY open textbooks (n.d., <http://textbooks.opensuny.org/>) is an open access textbook publishing initiative established by the State University of New York libraries and is supported by SUNY Innovative Instruction Technology Grants. It looks like there are about 10 textbook titles currently available, and more in progress.

So OER content exists in these resources, but does one use it, or get to faculty to use it?

Encouraging Faculty to Use OER Textbooks

I talked to three libraries involved in pilot processes of incentivizing faculty to work with OER textbooks: those at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), North Carolina State University (NCSU), and University of Minnesota (UMN).

To learn about UCLA's experience, I spoke to Dawn Setzer, director of library communication. Starting in the 2013–2014 school year, UCLA used a fund originally created to cover open access journal publishing fees for faculty and grad students to now offer grants to faculty to switch from proprietary textbooks to alternatives. Grants for an enrollment under 100 students of \$1,500 or \$2,500 for enrollment above 200 students (n.d.).

Early in their pilot project a mechanical engineering professor wrote up his course notes toward making a textbook, wanted to supplement it with some material from an open textbook, and wanted charts and graphs in a proprietary textbook. The professor contacted the publisher (strategic decision to have the faculty member, not a librarian, contact them) with his request for access to the charts and graphs. The publisher

agreed, if the textbook was listed as an optional text for the class at the bookstore.

For a theater class with an expensive collection of plays, the library subscribed to a database that contained the plays. So the cost of the textbook was removed from the student, but really taken on by the library, while the plays were also made available to more students on campus.

To support a Child development class that didn't use a traditional textbook, but course readings and videos of observing children, this content was acquired by the library.

Finally, there was the example of an English professor with a course on Victorian novels. For the professor's course the library digitized some Victorian novels from UCLA's special collections, and then sent them on to HathiTrust (n.d.). However, when a different professor teaches the course on Victorian novels, he or she might not use these novels, as they might want to cover other topics or authors in the field (D. Setzer, personal communication, October 2, 2015).

At North Carolina State University (NCSU), there is the Alt Textbook Project, about which I spoke to Will Cross, director of copyright and digital scholarship (n.d.). They have a similar grant program to that of UCLA. They have a workshop for interested faculty where they go through the process, the goals, and OER issues faculty might encounter. Faculty from undergraduate and some graduate courses participated. The courses that participated were STEM heavy, which makes sense considering NCSU's academic focus. From the first year of the grant program 9 of 11 recipients were creating their own content.

According to Mr. Cross, NCSU is comfortable having the faculty rely on resources that are open for their students, but not to the world. They are working to encourage faculty receiving grants to create truly open content.

However, for their program, they are willing to use fewer open resources, where costs savings will be high for the institution. NCSU describes their program as so far saving \$200,000 for students. In NCSU's program, the library has not

purchased any additional content, aside from what the grant covered. They are using the grants to purchase, not as a carrot for the faculty to take on extra work of reconsidering their textbooks or creating OER content (W. Cross, personal communication, October 2, and 15, 2015).

For the University of Minnesota Partnership for Affordable Content, I spoke to Shane Nackerud, Technology lead, Library Initiatives.

Similarly, UMN offered grants of \$1,000 to \$1,500 offered to faculty to consider switching from proprietary textbooks to OER or licensed content (2015). Like UCLA, a mixture of faculty from humanities, sciences, more undergrad than graduate classes participated.

He provided an example of a statistics professor who wanted the grant to create an open web page of content, but not require that content be used in his course. Once informed that wasn't sufficient for the grant, the professor did explore the OER resources available and found some good content, though still not exactly what he wanted. However, the library could license his textbook as a multi-user e-book so 58 students in his class will now no longer have to spend \$254. That is a savings of \$14,732 for one class in one semester.

So far the library spent \$20,000 licensing content for this initiative. Again, students in these instances aren't paying for the expensive textbook, but someone else is. It is worth nothing that the three institutions I spoke to are all state universities, but they are all large ones with substantial budgets.

Mr. Nackerud did share a few examples of resistance. Two faculty members participated in the grant process but did not seem to want to give up their proprietary textbook, and he had to encourage them to look and consider OER materials, but described this as part of the process.

He also relayed the example of a Dean who expressed concern about the project, referencing academic freedom, and the idea that authors make money off of copyright, which are arguments not commonly mentioned in literature

regarding OER (S. Nackerud, personal communication, October 5 and 7, 2015).

More Examples on OER and Textbooks

I have another experience to share from my home institution regarding OER textbooks.

UALR is part of the UA system led by the UA Board of Governors, which has created a brand new UA system-wide online-only education program, e-Versity, with lower cost per credit hour than any of the UA branches (n.d.). This is different from UALR's online-only programs and UA Fayetteville's online-only programs.

In one of the four slides advertising e-Versity states "no charge for textbooks" as part of the advertisement. Here, free OER textbooks are for the students' benefit. But not just for the students' benefit, it is also for lower overhead for the institution.

State Legislatures' Interest in OER

I mentioned in the beginning that even state legislatures were interested in the cost of textbooks. And this is just a selection, not all state laws or initiatives regarding textbooks.

The Ohio state legislature is considering a law to eliminate sales tax on textbooks (Siegel & Berliner, 2015) South Carolina is considering a minimum adoption of textbooks for upper level divisions of 2 years and lower level divisions of 3 years to create good buy-back value for students (2015).

This process can be described as nibbling at the edges.

In 2015 Connecticut passed an act concerning the use of digital open source textbooks in higher education. This act creates a consortium that shall "assess the use of high quality and affordable digital open-source textbooks . . . promote the use and access to open-source textbooks . . . and collaborate for the purposes of developing and acquiring open-source textbooks. "

So no real specifics, but this legislature is promoting open source textbooks.

I left the first and most important legislation for last, which was in California, the state that first looked at the issue of textbooks. In 2012 California passed two state laws on this issue (Senate Bill 1052 and Senate Bill 1053), with the aim to “provide for the creation of free, openly licensed digital textbooks for the 50 most popular lower-division college courses offered by California colleges.”

However, I had a hard time finding those OER textbooks for the 50 most popular courses in 2015.

The California Open Education Resources Council lists 18 courses with recommended OER textbooks. As the website describes it, “the COOL4Ed Course Showcase will be continually updated during the duration of the project (2014–2016), and it will eventually reflect approximately 50 courses and a number of peer reviewed open textbooks for each course.”

I think this illustrates that with a lot of interest and support from different stakeholders, including faculty and university administration, and where state government put in \$5 million of state funds, as well as other private grants, it remains difficult to create OER textbooks and be in a position to use them on the scale matching the interest.

In a situation ripped from the headlines, at Cal State Fullerton, in the week of October 20, 2015, one week before this conference, a faculty member was reprimanded for selecting a nondepartmental textbook, instead of the textbook chosen by the department. The reprimanded professor chose a cheaper proprietary textbook combined with OER content.

Seventy faculty members have signed a letter supporting him in challenging the reprimand (Reprimanded for Assigning Affordable Textbooks?, 2015).

As the *Inside Higher Ed* column put it, academic freedom of the department to pick a standardized textbook versus the academic freedom of the professor to pick a less expensive textbook? (Jaschik, 2015).

In review, UALR and two other libraries with larger budgets have been purchasing textbooks in print and e-book format, with varying degrees of coverage for courses. The cost is saved from the students, but switched directly to the libraries. The textbooks are still proprietary, but available immediately.

More conceptually, with more innovation, other schools are incentivizing and guiding faculty to switch to OER texts. It has been an involved but beneficial process with a range of products. The cost is saved from the student, and in some of this the cost has been switched to the library, in some instances covered by grants, and in some others OER content has been created and is available to others.

So to respond to the question “where do we go from here?” finding content, guiding others to find content, making that content discoverable, understanding the licensing, determining when it is worthwhile to purchase content, and providing access are all work that is part of librarians’ expertise. Librarians can provide valuable and realistic guidance in this endeavor, but it’s best to be aware of the immediate financial implications for these projects.

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