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The Textbook Affordability Puzzle: Perspectives From Three of the Pieces

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Abstract

Many institutions focus textbook affordability efforts through open educational resources, but that isn't the only option available to provide students with affordable course materials. This paper outlines how the University of Central Florida Libraries successfully leveraged its e-book collections to support textbook affordability efforts. A description of the initiative is provided from three perspectives: an associate director, the textbook affordability librarian, and an acquisitions librarian. Included will be the genesis of the program, methodology used, and how data collected from the initiative were used to gain a new position at the university, a textbook affordability librarian. As part of this initiative, various avenues were developed for faculty outreach and collaboration. Instead of a solo effort, there was a strong emphasis on collaboration with internal and external library partners. The final part of the paper is a discussion of considerations for purchasing materials for use as a course text.

History of the Program

The University of Central Florida is a large, urban, research-intensive institution located in Orlando, Florida. Characterized as a university of access, UCF has a robust transfer partnership with several state colleges, which allows students who earn an associate degree guaranteed admittance to the institution. Over half of the 68,000 students attending UCF have transferred from a state college. The student body also is incredibly diverse, with over 50% of students holding minority status and over 25% identifying as Hispanic, in turn allowing UCF to be designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution. Almost a quarter of students are first-generation and 72% receive some form of financial aid. In some cases, transfer, first-generation, minority, and lower income students may not have the means or support to navigate higher education. While we can't remove all obstacles to their success, expensive textbooks constitute one barrier that we can address.

Textbook costs have doubled over the past 20 years, even when controlling for a 55% inflation rate. Using Bureau of Labor Statistics data, economist Barry Ritholz (2018) has demonstrated how over time some consumer goods, such as televisions and software, have become more affordable while others, including the cost of college tuition and textbooks, have grown increasingly expensive. An analysis of fall 2019 textbook costs at UCF revealed that the most expensive textbook was \$426. Earlier semester analyses have found textbooks that cost more than

\$700. Some publishers have priced textbooks out of the reach of many students.

To investigate how textbook costs impact student academic behaviors at state universities and colleges, the Florida Virtual Campus administered the 2016 *Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey*. Through survey responses, a clearer picture of how textbook costs impact students emerged. Researchers at the institution were able to obtain UCF-specific responses, and analysis of this information suggests that over half of UCF students had not purchased a textbook due to cost. Research conducted at the institution revealed that 83% of students said they had delayed purchase of a textbook due to cost (Avila, 2019; Beile, deNoyelles, & Raible, 2019). Common sense tells us not having access to course materials from day one may create a barrier to academic success.

The flip side of the problem with expensive textbooks is the promise of affordable textbooks. Giving students access to course materials from day one has been correlated to a number of student success metrics, including higher GPA, increased retention rates, and higher enrollment intensity (Fischer, Hilton, Robinson, & Wiley, 2015). Taking more credit hours relates to reducing the time to graduation, in turn lowering student debt.

A scan of institutional priorities reveals three main drivers at the university: the bid for preeminence status, performance-based funding, and UCF's

Collective Impact Strategic Plan. There are unique performance indicators for each initiative, such as number of national academy members for pre-eminence, the emphasis on developing economic partnerships within the community we serve for the strategic plan, and median wages of graduates for performance funding. And there are overlaps. Student success metrics reside at the intersection of all three of these institutional drivers and they are all supported by a strong textbook affordability program.

Once this scan was conducted, the library mapped its efforts to these drivers, and then related its accomplishments back to those goals. We shared our story at many venues, to a variety of audiences, customizing the narrative to each stakeholder. For example, the institutional effectiveness unit was most interested in how textbook affordability efforts contributed to the cost of college for performance funding reports, while the vice president for student success was curious about the impact of affordable textbooks on student GPA and persistence. Students simply wanted to know how to access affordable textbooks. The results were widely disseminated and quickly gained interest across the institution.

A pivotal opportunity arose through the Student Success Investment Model at UCF, a \$1 million initiative created by the provost. While colleges rely heavily on funding generated by student credit hours, campus academic support units do not have access to those funds. The Investment Model invited campus support units to submit proposals for funding. Initially, the library was not included, but when several vice presidents learned about the library's textbook affordability efforts, we received an invitation to submit a proposal. By tying the textbook affordability metrics to the potential impact on student success, the library received funding for a dedicated textbook affordability position.

Faculty Outreach and Collaboration

The Student Success/textbook affordability librarian started at the University of Central Florida in March 2019. Prior to the creation of this position, textbook affordability efforts were undertaken as a collective effort by several librarians and instructional designers. This role was charged to bring focus to the work and build upon prior achievements.

Just as a scan was conducted on institutional priorities, the first step by the textbook affordability

librarian was to conduct a landscape survey. By spending a lot of time meeting with key players and learning about past efforts, a snapshot came into focus on how work was done both formally and informally at the institution. Gaining this insight was one step toward successfully navigating the culture at the university.

Particularly valuable was taking time to meet individually with each of the subject librarians. Through these meetings, the textbook affordability librarian and subject librarians were able to outline a process for faculty outreach efforts. As the subject librarians are the main liaison to the departments, the role of the textbook affordability librarian was customized to complement the working style and preference of each subject librarian. These initial meetings were the first step in developing a positive and collaborative relationship.

This same process was applied to external partners, first learning what was done in the past, then jointly creating a common understanding for the roles of each department. This was an important step, as through these conversations, the role of UCF Libraries in this work emerged to focus on the following areas: assisting faculty using library resources for course materials, locating existing open educational resources for faculty to consider, and managing a print textbook reserve. Although the library would assist with the adaptation or creating of open educational resources, the primary support for these areas would be through instructional designers.

Once a consensus was established on how to collaborate with faculty, the next step was documentation of tracking and outreach efforts. Tracking potential student savings through textbook adoption is directly tied to performance-based funding. It was critical to create documentation with complete transparency on what resources are being used for course materials, and how savings were calculated.

In addition to providing a roadmap for others to recreate our metrics, clear documentation provided an opportunity to review the process and refine the workflow each term. This resulted in a checklist of considerations based on important lessons learned along the way.

One such lesson came through an opportunity to purchase select e-books from a vendor on a tight deadline. The list of available titles was reviewed and any e-books in use as a course textbook were

purchased. Instructors were then notified the books were available for students to use at no cost through the library. In some cases, we learned this was the last semester the purchased title would be used as a text. After this experience, the workflow was adapted to reach out to faculty prior to purchasing any materials for this reason.

Just like learning to ride a bike, outreach efforts get a bit smoother each term. A collection of e-mail templates has been created to reach out to faculty for different scenarios. The templates are then customized to reflect the individual course. In most cases, the outreach is either to confirm a faculty adoption or inquire about an e-book available to replace the course textbook. Overall, the response by faculty has been overwhelmingly positive. To date, there has only been one exception.

As part of the acquisition opportunity mentioned above, we reached out to an instructor to let them know the book had been purchased and was freely available to students through the library. The instructor was the author of this book, and his response to this news was not favorable. Fortunately, there was a strong partnership with the subject librarian, who was able to successfully navigate the situation. This was another lesson noted on the documentation for future outreach.

This example also highlights the importance of collaboration between the subject librarian and textbook affordability librarian. In another example, the textbook affordability librarian received a lengthy reply to an outreach e-mail questioning their role at the institution, or if this was a sales pitch from a textbook vendor. The faculty member stated the only reason he replied at all was that the subject librarian was copied on the e-mail. Once the subject librarian confirmed this was a new position with UCF Libraries, the faculty member was more than happy to answer any questions. This example speaks to both the importance of relationships and the growing frustration of faculty with textbook publishers.

Strong communication, collaboration, and coordination go a long way with a complex initiative like Textbook Affordability, especially at a university the size of UCF. Most important are the relationships developed both inside and outside the library.

Through a partnership with the Office of Student Success, the library received an \$8,000 grant from the UCF Parent and Family Fund. This grant provided

funding to purchase textbooks for general education courses, which were added to our Print Textbook Reserve prior to the start of the fall 2019 term. This grant also serves as a supplemental source of funding for e-books if they are used as a course textbook. Finally, there is funding set aside to provide textbooks or online access codes to individual at-risk students.

External partnerships like this not only leverage institutional resources, but also raise the profile of the library and align the library to the priorities of the university.

Internal partnerships are just as critical. Through the partnership with the acquisitions librarian, the textbook affordability librarian can focus on locating potential resources and ensuring faculty will use those resources. The acquisitions librarian can be relied upon for their expertise before reaching out to faculty that the usage rights of the book will fit the needs of the class. Furthermore, they act as a second set of eyes on locating potential e-books. A single title identified by the acquisitions librarian impacted 143 students in a single term, saving them a combined total of \$6,435.

Considerations When Purchasing Materials

The example above that saved students \$6,435 was discovered by the acquisitions librarian through the course of normal work duties. This particular title was a nonlinear user model. It had only had 200 total uses for the entire year, yet usage had already reached 99. It was available to be upgraded to the unlimited user model at the cost of \$15. After confirming with the textbook affordability librarian that this was indeed a textbook, it was upgraded. The final step in the process was notifying the faculty. It was a very easy decision to spend \$15 to upgrade this e-book, but not every decision is this straightforward!

When considering what materials to use or purchase for textbook affordability, librarians should consider three major points: availability and ownership; DRM and user models; and price and funding.

Availability and Ownership

Availability and ownership are the most important considerations. If a textbook is unavailable for library purchase in an appropriate user model, the library cannot buy it. When looking at a title for textbook

affordability, the librarian must first determine “does the library own this?” and then “can the library purchase this?”

In some cases, assigned textbooks are e-books the library already owns, and the textbook affordability librarian and acquisitions librarian must confirm that the e-book has an appropriate user model and DRM and will be accessible through the end of the semester, with perpetual access strongly preferred. Most titles are straightforward and require only a simple upgrade. However, many titles may be available through evidence-based programs and won’t necessarily be perpetual. Others may be in an e-book subscription package that swaps titles out once a year. The textbook affordability librarian and acquisitions librarian must have strong communication in order to ensure titles used as textbooks will be selected from evidence-based programs for perpetual ownership or purchased outright if dropped from a package. Often those e-books will have strong usage and would be selected anyway, but sometimes the usage will be low because the book is assigned for an upcoming semester. Communication between the acquisitions librarian and textbook affordability librarian is vital to ensure these titles will not be missed.

It’s also important for librarians to know who pays for the package the e-book is in. If the library doesn’t pay for it, it likely does not have control over what happens to it. For example, the UCF Medical School library pays for a database that provides access to several textbooks that non-medical school courses have assigned. Since the Medical School library is a separate accounting unit and is located on a separate campus, it takes additional effort to verify with the medical school librarians that the medical school will continue the database subscription. For packages owned or subscribed to by a consortium, the library may not be able to upgrade the title to the desired user model and must be prepared to purchase a new copy for textbook affordability. If the package is dropped unexpectedly, the library must be ready to purchase the titles used as textbooks.

Once the e-book has been purchased, or ownership and suitability has been verified, acquisitions needs to make sure the textbook affordability librarian is in the loop for any access issues that might arise.

DRM and User Models

Though DRM-free e-books are always the preferred model for use as textbooks, many titles are not

available without DRM attached. In those cases, user models should be considered on a case by case basis. First, consider how many students will be using the textbook across sections. Next, consider how heavily the class will be using the textbook. The faculty will be essential in answering how the textbook will be used but note that they may overestimate how frequently a student will use the textbook. It is perfectly fine for a library to purchase a nonlinear or concurrent user model in many cases, with the caveat that the acquisitions librarian will need to monitor usage and be prepared to upgrade to an unlimited user model if necessary. If an unlimited user model is not available for the e-book, librarians should look for creative solutions, such as purchasing a single-user copy as well as a nonlinear or concurrent user copy. In that instance, the nonlinear or concurrent copy would not be used unless the single-user copy was already in use.

Librarians will find that e-books assigned as textbooks are available on many different e-book platforms. Though acquisitions will always purchase the e-book with the most favorable DRM and user model, sometimes titles will be available DRM-free on multiple platforms. When deciding to purchase an e-book for textbook use, librarians should consider the usability of the e-book platform. Though the librarians may understand the DRM limitations of an e-book, such as printing and download restrictions, it’s likely that faculty and students will not. It may be helpful for librarians to have an e-book guide that explains these points, as well as basic how-to information, for each e-book platform the library uses.

Price and Funding

The acquisitions librarian and textbook affordability librarian must consider price and funding before any titles are purchased. At a school as large as UCF, the library cannot purchase every textbook that is available as an e-book. There is simply not enough funding, and currently UCF Libraries have no dedicated funding for textbook affordability in the materials budget. If the subject librarian wants to purchase an e-book for textbook affordability, they will do so with their subject allocation. This means that textbooks that are very expensive or out of scope for normal library acquisitions should not be purchased with library funds. In these cases, it is helpful for the textbook affordability librarian to have connections around campus for outside funding. UCF has had success in asking departments to cover the cost of an

e-book, and in getting connected with grants around campus that can provide funding.

Conclusion

These three different perspectives on the process provide some insight on how using library-sourced materials used for textbooks can be like a puzzle. It is really complicated on all ends and requires a conscious and intentional undertaking. The call to

action on this is clear, and by providing open or library-sourced resources, students have access to course materials on the very first day of class. This work is well worth the effort. At the University of Central Florida, it has already had an impact. Since 2016, UCF faculty have taught over 400 classes using open- or library-sourced materials, in turn reaching over 27,000 students and potentially saving them well over \$2,500,000.

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