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Library Publishing of Open Textbooks: The Open SUNY Textbooks Program
by Kate Pitcher (Interim Director, Milne Library, SUNY Geneseo and Principle Investigator, Open SUNY Textbooks)

Introduction & Background
SUNY Geneseo is one of many four campuses in the State University of New York (SUNY) system, and one of twelve comprehensive, four-year undergraduate colleges. It is a liberal arts-focused, highly competitive, and extremely selective undergraduate institution. System-wide, there are over 460,000 students enrolled in SUNY programs, and in 2012, Geneseo’s own full-time equivalent enrollment was 5,418. Like most publicly funded institutions, Geneseo faces intermittent budget cuts and flat funding, while enrollment remains steady or increases. Leaders on campus and across the system are encouraged to innovate and look for high-impact solutions.

In 2012, SUNY created the Innovative Instructional Technology Grant (IITG) program to incentivize faculty and staff to pursue new initiatives that positively impact teaching and learning. SUNY Geneseo’s Milne Library applied for and was awarded a $20,000 grant to design and build an open textbook publishing program. The Open SUNY Textbooks (OST) program is a collaboration of nine SUNY libraries, made up of community colleges, undergraduate comprehensives, and one research university. The program’s goal is to create an open textbook publishing system spearheaded and managed by libraries, one that capitalizes on our libraries’ existing infrastructure and relationships with faculty. Since 2012, additional SUNY libraries, the SUNY Press, and other individuals have worked with the original project team to develop and build a sustainable academic-friendly publishing model for open textbooks.

Why Textbooks?
Nationally, students bear a high cost to attend college, but how much do textbook costs factor into these budgets? The GAO reported in 2013 that:

More recent data show that textbook prices continued to rise from 2002 to 2012 at an average of 6% per year; while tuition and fees increased at an average of 7% and overall prices increased at an average of 2% per year...new textbook prices increased by a total of 82% over this time period, while tuition and fees increased by 89% and overall consumer prices grew by 28%.¹

In 2012, the Florida Virtual Campus (a network of public colleges in Florida) interviewed hundreds of students from all eleven of Florida’s state universities and administered an anonymous online survey in which students from twenty-two of its twenty-eight colleges, community colleges, and state colleges participated.² Not surprisingly, they found that textbook costs continue to take a toll on students financially and academically. Among their many findings, these stand out:

• Students use a wide variety of methods to reduce costs of textbooks, including purchasing books from a source other than the campus bookstore, renting textbooks, purchasing used books, selling their used books, and using copies on reserve at the campus library.
• Institutions’ libraries that provide textbooks for checkout are extending an important lifeline to students who cannot afford to purchase a textbook.
• 64% of students reported not buying a textbook for a course, 49% took fewer courses, 45% didn’t register for a course, and 27% had dropped a course — all because of textbook costs.²

On our own campus, we’ve conducted polls and informal surveys and found similar information — students are going to great lengths to avoid purchasing expensive textbooks, including dropping and adding courses based on the cost of textbooks. Students are spending more money on textbooks and tuition without the prospect of a greater return on investment. According to the College Board, students and their parents spend approximately $1,200 per year on textbooks.³ In addition, the 2005 GAO report raised concerns that publishers are increasing the frequency with which they revise their textbooks, not because they feel compelled to update the content, but in order to limit the used “discount” market for textbooks, preventing the resale of older editions.⁴ Students want solutions, and they are prepared to make serious decisions about their future based on the problems they see in higher education.

How Open SUNY Textbooks Works
The OST program has two major goals: to engage faculty and students in the creation and publication of open textbooks; and to develop a framework for library publishing services and an infrastructure to support such creation. The original $20,000 grant in 2012 provided funding for author and peer reviewer incentives and for the establishment of an editorial and review system for authors, reviewers, and librarians. A call for authors was released in November of 2012 and sent to SUNY faculty through the SUNY Provosts’ listserv. Interested faculty members were invited to submit proposals for the creation of an open textbook, encouraged to involve their students in the creation of the book, and given the deadline for submission of their manuscript. Incentives were included: authors would receive a $3,000 award upon completion of their manuscript and an additional $1,000 award for the successful integration of students into the creation of the textbook (after completing an assessment of student learning from the experience). Peer reviewers received a $1,000 award.

The OST project team was very encouraged that we received 38 proposals in only three weeks — this demonstrated to us that SUNY faculty were interested in publishing open textbooks. We determined that our grant funding could support the publication of four textbooks. Using a rubric created by the OST project team, librarians carefully reviewed, ranked, and selected the top textbook proposals in each of seven subject categories (Anthropology, Art & Music; Business & Economics; Computer Science; Education; English & Foreign Languages; Math; and Sciences). The four proposals that received the highest evaluation scores were selected for publication. An additional 11 textbooks were identified as strong candidates for publication and four SUNY libraries agreed to contribute $40,000 to fund the publication of these textbooks, bringing the total number of accepted proposals in round one to 15.

In 2013, the OST team applied for and was awarded a second IITG grant, this time for $60,000. Review of manuscript proposals was handled differently during this second round: instead of project team members reviewing and ranking proposals, librarian liaisons from the partner libraries were asked to identify and work with willing faculty on their campuses to review a one-page, blind abstract and use a rubric to rank the feasibility of the textbook proposal in question. This new approach also allowed for the team to identify a pool of future peer reviewers. Reviewers came from all sectors of the SUNY system and all disciplines. The team also modified the incentive structure for the second round — a $1,000 award for authors and $300 for peer reviewers. This has enabled us to fund the publication of 15 textbook proposals in round two with publication expected by the end of 2015.

One outcome from both rounds of the grants is the creation of documentation that can be used to implement initiatives similar to Open SUNY Textbooks at other institutions. Part of the work being done by partners includes developing the roles of editor, copyeditor, proofreader, and instructional designer at the member libraries. In this regard, the project also relies on a partnership with the university press, SUNY Press, to assist with workflow design, role clarification, and professional development.

Why the Library as Publisher?
As more universities and colleges take on publishing initiatives within their organizations, roles will need to be clarified. There are several reasons why the library is a good fit as a publisher on a university or college campus, especially if the focus is on open access textbook publishing. First, libraries are advocates for sharing and reusing information. Open access is a means to the dissemination of research and information across the scholarly landscape and libraries are well-positioned to work with authors and researchers to create, produce, and disseminate their research through open continued on page 24
Access at campuses, and the creation of opportunities for professional development.

The future of Open SUNY Textbooks is about the future of library publishing and the development of new roles for libraries and librarians. Filling those roles often requires guidance and training for librarians to develop new skills. With this in mind, the OST team is working with libraries across the state to create best practices and professional development opportunities for librarians. One of our partnerships in development is with New York State’s NY3Rs Council, a network of local library resource councils, and they are already offering workshops and online learning opportunities for those in the library community who are interested in publishing.

For more information, check out the Open SUNY Textbooks Website: http://opensuny.org/omp/index.php/SUNYOpenTextbooks.

Endnotes