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 textbooks with library content and OER, we match and the data needs to be reformatted by the library’s Technical Services department.

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