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High Textbook Costs: The Battle Continues

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High Textbook Costs: The Battle Continues

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In a 2014 *ATG* article, the authors quoted a **San Jose State University (SJSU)** student who wrote, “I didn’t have enough money to buy textbooks, so my GPA dropped drastically from a 3.4 to a 2.9.”¹ In 2016, the **California State University (CSU)** system released a report on the prevalence of homelessness, displacement, and food insecurity among **CSU** students. It found that an estimated 8.7% of students lack stable housing and 21% have limited or uncertain access to adequate food.² These figures underscore the continued need for Affordable Learning Solutions (ALS), an initiative that reduces the cost of a college education by promoting the adoption by **CSU** faculty of free and low-cost classroom materials as alternatives to expensive textbooks. Following is a quick update of how ALS has evolved at **SJSU**.

Textbooks Available as eBooks in the Library (TABL) List

At **SJSU**, the ALS initiative is administered by the University Library. One of its most popular ALS programs is the Textbooks Available as eBooks in the Library (TABL) list. TABL is created by matching the list of textbooks ordered by faculty (provided by campus partner, the **Spartan Bookstore**, a **Barnes & Noble** outlet) with the library’s collection of multiple-use eBooks, which are freely available to students. Each semester, 120-210 textbook titles are matched and posted to the library Website. Google Analytics shows that this list — now in its ninth semester — is the sixth most visited Web page on the site with over 8,500 pageviews in the past academic year. The most popular title on the Spring 2016 list received over 6,556 uses by 88 students. At a retail cost of \$60, this single title demonstrates the significant savings this list provides.

eBook Accessibility Project

When considering library eBooks for use in the classroom, faculty express anxiety about the books’ accessibility. To address these concerns, ALS librarians analyzed sixteen major academic ebook platforms to provide a detailed list of each platform’s accessibility features and Section 508 compliance. This analysis is available online and can be used by faculty and librarians when making decisions on which eBooks to use or acquire.³

Textbook Alternatives Project (TAP) Grants

Between 2013 and 2015, 32 faculty members at **SJSU** received \$1,000 TAP grants to redesign their courses to include free or lower-cost classroom materials. Together, the estimated savings for students from these redesigned classes was \$1,460,315.⁴ The TAP grant program shows how even a small number of faculty can have a big impact on student costs. With over 2,000 faculty teaching at **SJSU**, there is a lot of room for growth; and another faculty grants project was planned. This project, however, was overtaken by an initiative created by the California State Senate: **Assembly Bill 798**.

AB-798 College Textbook Affordability Act of 2015

AB-798 earmarks \$2 million for the **CSU** and **California Community College** systems to help ease textbook costs for students: “The **College Textbook Affordability Act of 2015** is hereby established to reduce costs for college students by encouraging faculty to accelerate the adoption of lower cost, high-quality, open educational resources.”⁵

Applicants were invited to apply for 100 awards of up to \$50,000 per institution. **SJSU** submitted an application requesting \$49,000. There are specific stipulations that come with **AB-798** funds. To obtain the entire \$50,000, an institution must restructure 50 class sections to include open educational resources (OER); each section qualifies for \$1,000 in funds. Also, students must see an average savings of 30% on their course textbooks.

All applicants were required to submit a very detailed plan as to how these funds would be distributed. **SJSU**’s plan allocates funds across a variety of efforts to support adoption of OER by faculty. In partnership with the Center for Faculty Development, five faculty professional development workshops and support sessions are planned. Each faculty member will receive \$250 in professional development funds for attending the workshop with an additional \$1,250 for redesigning their course and implementing an OER to replace the textbook that students would typically purchase. Faculty mentors will be present at some of the workshops. Mentors are individuals who have already adopted OER materials in their classes and can share their expertise and support with others who are in the process of revising their teaching materials.

An initiative like this demands quite a bit of campus coordination. **AB-798** required the University’s Academic Senate to pass a resolution supporting the effort to reduce student textbook costs. Additionally, the Academic Senate had to approve the final version of the grant proposal before it was submitted.

It is exciting that the state is interested in supporting legislation to tackle the high cost of textbooks, and 19 of the 23 **CSU** campuses applied for **AB-798** funds. Award winners will be notified no later than September 30, 2016. Funds from **AB-798** will represent a victory for **SJSU** students in the ongoing battle to reduce textbook costs. 🍌

Endnotes

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