

Against the Grain

Manuscript 8321

Passion for Academic Freedom

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Passion for Academic Freedom

by **Dan E. Krane** (Professor of Biological Sciences and Faculty Vice President, Wright State University; Chair, Ohio Faculty Council) <dan.krane@wright.edu>

Academic freedom means many things to many people but few are as passionate about it as faculty in higher education. To them it is a broad concept that entails a conviction that they should have the freedom to conduct research into areas even if they are unpopular or controversial. It also includes a firm belief that the mission of the academy itself depends upon scholars alone determining how to teach in a way that is most appropriate for their students. The choice of course materials (e.g., textbooks) is something about which faculty have very strong feelings.

Faculty have recognized for many years that the rising cost of textbooks (at more than four times the rate of inflation since 2006) was a problem. They appreciated that those costs, averaging 26% of the cost of tuition at state universities, have a significant impact on the cost of higher education.¹ They know that the price of textbooks has undesirable effects on the behavior (such as delaying or avoiding the purchase of course materials) of as much as 85% of their students.² When policy makers began to explore means of addressing the problem they became very concerned that their ability to choose materials for their courses would be diminished.

In February 2017, Ohio's Governor, **John Kasich**, proposed that public two- and four-year institutions be required to provide each of their students all course materials for an academic year in exchange for an annual fee of \$300 to recover their costs. The budgetary and the selection implications of that proposal prompted the Ohio Faculty Council (which speaks on behalf of all 14 of Ohio's public four-year universities) to support lobbying efforts aimed at delaying the implementation of such a policy. Legislators were persuaded to give faculty a chance over the course of that calendar year to address the problem directly before constraints were imposed on them legislatively.

By May 2017 Faculty Senates like that at **Wright State University** charged committees with the task of identifying strategies to significantly reduce student textbook costs. The Student Success committee of Wright State's Faculty Senate established a "textbook affordability working group" that used a Lean Six Sigma approach over the course of the summer. While many cost saving approaches were identified, four (inclusive access, a textbook auto-adopt policy, expansion of the use of open education resources, and supporting efforts to make textbook sales exempt from state sales tax) were determined to meet three criteria the best: 1) reduce costs, 2) preserve the right of individual faculty to determine the materials that would be most appropriate for their students, and 3) maintain or enhance quality of instruction. Those four initiatives were proposed and later endorsed unanimously by Wright State's full Faculty Senate at its first

meetings in the fall 2017 semester.³ A very similar proposal⁴ was unanimously approved by the Ohio Faculty Council at its October 2017 meeting.

When fully implemented across the entire system of public higher education in Ohio the four initiatives together promise to save students on the order of \$300 million *every year* — savings on a par with the total operating budgets of many of the State's four-year universities. But, of those four initiatives, the one that moves the needle the most in terms of reducing the cost of textbooks is the development and widespread utilization of inclusive access programs.

As the **Wright State** and Ohio Faculty Council initiatives were being debated many faculty expressed concerns about the possibility of policy makers or administrators using the discussions as an opportunity to impose policies that would limit if not outright eliminate the right of instructors to select course materials for their students. Talk of such policies by legislators and the development of system-wide learning objectives for core classes certainly contributed to that fear. It became clear that as a necessary first step faculty needed to forcefully assert the fundamental premise that "No law, policy or administrative action should in any way impinge upon an individual instructor's ability to choose whatever textbooks and other teaching materials (e.g., software, course notes, etc.) they have determined to be most appropriate for the classes that they are assigned to teach." Faculty were happy to explore means of making higher education more affordable to their students but support for the adoption of inclusive access and the other initiatives became noticeably more enthusiastic in the context of that declaration. It is worth noting that the principle seems to have been tacitly accepted without question by legislators and administrators in hearings and discussions where it has been stated.

It is hard to overstate the importance of faculty engagement in the development of inclusive access programs in Ohio. Participation in the development of the program from its very inception helped with the crafting of a clear articulation of an important aspect of academic freedom. It also went a long way toward minimizing significant concerns on the part of administrators who were otherwise reluctant to invest the resources that were needed to address administrative challenges (like

billing and establishing mechanisms by which students could opt-out of inclusive access fees) and negotiating lower prices with publishers. It was also tangible proof to policymakers that faculty could be considered serious partners (contrary to less flattering stereotypes) in the identification of solutions to pressing problems in higher education. That realization, in turn, has led to faculty in Ohio being engaged in discussions on other matters that faculty are passionate about such as the value and role of tenure.

Wright State and other institutions in Ohio have been quick to act on the implementation of inclusive access programs. Pilot programs have born impressive fruit in a very short time. In just nine courses with a total of 1,029 students at **Wright State** in the spring 2018 semester more than \$102,400 in savings were realized — an average reduction in cost of 48% because of inclusive access alone. A fall 2018 expansion of **Wright State's** pilot to 39 courses touched almost 6,000 students and resulted in savings of approximately \$600,000. Students in more than 100 courses in the spring 2019 semester are anticipated to save a total of more than \$1 million and annual savings

going forward are likely to be on the order of \$2 million because of inclusive access alone. Faculty engagement in the roll out of these pilots in terms of identifying high enrollment classes with particularly expensive course materials has continued to be instrumental to their success.

Advantages beyond cost savings are also being realized in **Wright State's** inclusive access pilots. Students know (and

studies have shown) that they do better if they have the materials that instructors had chosen for them. They also enjoy the convenience of being able to pay for their tuition and course materials at the same time. Freedom from dealing with access codes and trial periods are other features of inclusive access that students appreciate.

From a faculty perspective, including one of their classes in an inclusive access program has required relatively little additional effort. At **Wright State** the bookstore invites interested faculty to consider a set of materials that publishers are willing to provide for their classes at prices that are lower than what students could obtain in any other way. If the instructor feels that one of the options would be suitable for their students they select it and can expect all

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students in the class to have course materials in hand at the first meeting of the class. If they do not think any of the inclusive access options are suitable they are under no obligation to use any of them and can continue requiring their students to purchase materials as they had been doing in the past.

There have been pleasant surprises along the way. It was easier than expected to modify **Wright State's** learning management system (Banner) to allow students to opt-out of paying inclusive access fees (as is required by federal regulation⁵). Less than 1% of students taking classes that are participating in the inclusive access program have chosen to opt-out so far. Many instructors report that they had not realized how much time they would be saving at the start of the classes that they teach when all students have course materials in hand the very first time that they meet.

Perhaps the best surprise of all though is that, despite assertions that it could not be done, it has been possible to dramatically reduce textbook costs in a relatively short time frame without sacrificing quality of instruction. In addition to being passionate about academic freedom, faculty also proudly consider themselves to be “guardians of the curriculum.” Entailed in that guardianship is a

fiercely protective attitude about the quality of courses and of certificate/degree programs. All four of the initiatives endorsed by the **Wright State University** Faculty Senate and, subsequently by the Ohio Faculty Council, make a college education more affordable without compromising quality — not by intangible “improved efficiencies” but by actual savings to students. 🐘

Endnotes

1. <https://uspirg.org/news/usp/student-group-releases-new-report-text-book-prices>
2. <https://www.insidehighered.com/quick-takes/2017/09/20/study-high-textbook-prices-lead-poor-grades>
3. <https://www.wright.edu/sites/www.wright.edu/files/uploads/2017/Dec/meeting/TextbookAffordabilityResolution-Approved.pdf>
4. <https://www.ohiofacultycouncil.org/sites/ohiofacultycouncil.wright.edu/files/page/attachments/TextbookAffordabilityResolutionOFC.pdf>
5. https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=f26563f69f7e76d894166903c-246601c&mc=true&node=se34.3.668_1164&rgn=div8

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to study the current state of digital scholarship infrastructure in the U.S. and to help envision a more modernized and sustainable system that would enhance scholarly communication at colleges, universities, and research libraries across the country. With a recent grant from **The Andrew Mellon Foundation** over the next 18 months, this project will focus its efforts on mapping out the range of infrastructure that comprises the system of scholarly communication, and surveying colleges and universities to understand their current investment practices in this infrastructure. Principal Investigators: **Mike Roy (Middlebury)**, **David Lewis (x-IUPUI)** with help from **Educopia**, and **The Andrew Mellon Foundation**.
<https://educopia.org/category/blog/>
<https://educopia.org/mapping-scholarly-communications-infrastructure/>

John Wiley & Sons, Inc. has announced a countrywide partnership agreement with **Projekt DEAL**, a representative of nearly 700 academic institutions in Germany. Under an annual fee, this three-year agreement provides all **Projekt DEAL** institutions with access to read **Wiley's** academic journals back to the year 1997, and researchers at **Projekt DEAL** institutions can publish articles open access in

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