

Against the Grain

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Answering the Question of Affordability

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A lot of debate has occurred about how best to provide affordable curricular content for students in higher education. The argument has raged over how, or even whether, institutions should involve themselves in providing textbooks at the lowest possible cost. The questions are many. What is a textbook? Whose responsibility is it to provide curricular content? Is it the student, the library and/or the bookstore? Are open educational resources the answer? Who will manage them? The list of questions continues. One question has a solid black and white answer: Whether institutions should have a part in curricular content affordability efforts is an unequivocal yes.

We can look at the “big picture” as proof. Most everywhere, state funding for higher education is in decline while cost continues to rise. Almost every student is leaving higher education with significant debt. And if any argument remains as to the importance of saving students a few hundred or few thousand dollars per year, remind doubters of the food pantries and other aid services provided on most of our campuses to help sustain our students through their academic careers and the importance a few hundred dollars can have.

The other questions can be answered with one word: commitment. It doesn’t matter who “owns” affordability, as long as someone does and has the authority to act on it. Affordability isn’t about providing a bargain, it’s about promoting student recruitment, academic success, and retention. This is in the best interest of the university and why we have dedicated ourselves at the **University of Wisconsin-Stout** to “find affordability wherever it lives.”

UW-Stout has a long tradition of providing affordable curricular content. It began over 120 years ago with the creation of the first iteration of our textbook rental program. The university library has been responsible for providing textbooks for our students for decades. Textbooks were originally purchased with collection development funds. Library records long bemoan the impact textbook purchases had on collection development efforts. In more recent times, a library unit called the Instructional Resources Service (IRS) was created to oversee the procurement and distribution of curricular content. Today, Instructional Resources is a library unit funded by student fees that provides most of the required curricular content and is definitely not the print-only version of its earlier self.

Commitment has certainly been the key to our success. Our program continues to grow and change to meet the needs of both our faculty and students. It is equally important that we stay cost-effective and relevant. The first test to this theory came in 2012 when we began to provide digital resources in addition to print. The digital resources program came in response to increasing requests from faculty to increase the number of tools available to support their courses. eBooks, access codes for homework

platforms, and a variety of other digital content was added to the Stout affordability program. Using many of the hard-learned lessons from a century of providing affordable content has led to increasing access to these resources without significantly increasing the cost to students. One of the ways we limit cost is by promoting a vibrant open educational resource (OER) program. We have no delusions that OER will soon be the only way we provide content. It is, however, one method we have embraced to mitigate the cost of our program.

The Stout Open for Learning and Value in Education (SOLVE) Program was born in 2015 through a grant received from the University of Wisconsin System. The grant allowed us to establish an OER program through joining the Open Textbook Network, incentivizing the review and adoption of open material and providing training through staff training. Our medium-range goal for this program is to convert between five and ten percent of all content we utilize at Stout to open. This will allow us to realize tens of thousands of dollars in savings for our students. Our emphasis is in supporting faculty and students in the adoption and use of open content in a comprehensive, sustainable manner. As with all content in our program, it is about assisting the faculty member in matching the best tools for their courses with their needs. We strongly support the faculty member’s academic freedom to choose what they feel is the best resource. We support those choices along the way by assisting with providing the best quality, accessibility and cost-effectiveness possible.

The way we provide content has continued to evolve over the decades. The pace and scope have accelerated over the last ten years. Advent of digital materials, OERs, homework platforms, all-inclusive programs and many others continually cause us to consider how and what we provide. It is daunting in that we are always forced to reevaluate our offerings and services, but this also allows us the opportunity to grow and stay relevant for our students and faculty. One of our newest attempts to reduce cost while improving service comes in combining new content with an old library tenant: collection development.

While conducting workflow analysis, we determined that there were many areas of overlap between what the curricular content staff and collection development staff were doing. Both were purchasing, circulating, invoicing and supporting content in many ways that mirrored each other. Revenue sources and methods may be different, but, the overall general mission of both groups is similar. It was determined that efficiencies could be found by a closer working relationship between the two groups. A merger was implemented and the new Library Access, Materials Management and Procurement (LAMMP) unit was born.

LAMMP is composed of the Instructional Resources and Collection Development de-

partments of the University Library. Its mission is to acquire and support content throughout the curriculum, whether as library material or direct course material. A student or faculty member can now visit one location to receive assistance for content needs. Reviews have been very positive about our ability to improve service to our stakeholders. It is our attempt to use efficiency and collaboration as one more tool to support affordability.

The bottom line for affordability at the **University of Wisconsin-Stout** is that everything is on the table. We are dedicated to continually searching for new ways to keep the cost of curricular content at the lowest possible point. In that vein, we will close with a few of many lessons we have learned over the years.

First, you may have noticed that I have tried very hard not to use the word “textbook.” It feels that concentrating on that word when discussing affordability tends to cloud the picture. The word “textbook” comes with several preconceived notions about what it may or may not mean. Concentrating on textbook only, in my view, sets us up for the same problem as we continue to move away from the more traditional examples of textbooks. Using curricular content, course resources or some other term allows more latitude and an open mind toward the future.

In more than 100 years of supporting affordability at UW-Stout, we have not found one single way to provide affordable content for our students. We are always interested in what is working elsewhere and applying what makes sense for us. At one institution, all-inclusive access may be “the way,” while at another it is OER *all the way*. Generally, we believe that some combination of methods will be most effective. Our program has always been adapting, evolving and finding affordability wherever it lives.

There is no rush to find the solution. Our success comes as much from our commitment to affordability as it does to any method we have implemented. Content, services and needs all change, but our determination to support our students through affordability has never wavered.

Whether you are a librarian, publisher, faculty member, student, administrator or have some other role in higher education, you have a role to play in curricular content affordability. This is not a trivial issue. Providing quality, cost-effective curricular content is a necessary endeavor to support student success, in and out of the classroom. Affordability is not solely an economic issue. It is a social justice issue. An accessibility issue. An equality issue. We have seen many methods to achieve affordability not pan out. Some methods are certainly more effective than others—but the surest way to fail our students would be to do nothing at all. 🌱