The Michigan State University Course Materials Program: Packing Up Your Textbook Troubles with Course Packs

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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%.3

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.4 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 on textbooks, Renting textbooks, purchasing textbooks at the bookstore, selling used textbooks, borrowing from friends, and using copies on reserve at the campus library.

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 access publishing.
access methods. Second, an important consideration in planning a publishing program is infrastructure development. Libraries, in most cases, have already developed a robust infrastructure for collecting, organizing, and maintaining digital collections. The necessary platforms already exist for producing scholarships. Third, the library as publisher assists our higher education institutions in curating and shaping the new learning environment needed to make transformations for the future. Instead of reacting to change, libraries can be proactive on their campuses and lead transformation.

Conclusion & Future

By the end of our second round of funding, the OST project will have published thirty textbooks and will have created a scalable model for library editorial and production services for open access textbook publishing. A sustainability plan, including sources for future funding, is in development to identify ways libraries can support these sorts of resource-intensive and high-impact publishing services. OST’s future is dependent on developing such a sustainability plan. To that end, project team members are working on next steps for the project:

- **Print-on-demand:** currently, OST contracts allow authors the right to sell print-on-demand versions of their books through CreateSpace or other vendors. While OST team members can provide assistance, all royalties are assigned to the author. A cost recovery model is under development in which print-on-demand options are written into the contract and royalties are shared between OST and the author, 50/50. Currently, SUNY Counsel is reviewing contract options for including royalty sharing clauses.

- **Distribution:** currently, Open SUNY Textbooks are distributed freely online through our Open Monograph Press (OMP) publishing platform (http://opensuny.org). Our scalability and sustainability plan will include an enhanced distribution model. We are negotiating with several vendors to test EPUB distribution of our open textbooks. This would allow for sales of enhanced versions of the textbooks while keeping the free open access versions of the textbooks available at the Open SUNY Textbook Website.

- **Hybrid funding:** other funding models are also in development. One idea is to propose a student fee to the SUNY student fee. Another idea is to make available as an open-access option with start-up money to support libraries publishing open textbooks. The development of such an outside entity could offer libraries the infrastructure for publishing textbooks, including the platform, incentives for Open 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/SUNYOTextbooks.