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Library Roles with Textbook Affordability

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Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

Library Roles with Textbook Affordability

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In the Venn diagram linking libraries and textbooks, the overlap has for years been represented by a narrow sliver. Library policies rain down on students seeking shelter from high-priced textbooks like an edict from the authorities: we don't own them, won't purchase them, and can't borrow them for you via inter-library loan. More recently, however, librarians seem to have misplaced their certainty about avoiding textbooks. Indeed, if the articles in this special issue of *Against the Grain* are any indication, librarians are discovering they can play significant and impactful roles in the provision and creation of textbooks and other course materials at their institutions.

Why are librarians reassessing their stance on textbooks? The central issue is affordability: textbooks simply cost too much. Even the most jaded university bookstore manager or **Pearson** representative would not deny that textbook costs have risen to levels that make

them difficult for many students to manage. Making higher education more affordable and accessible to a wider array of students is a theme that resonates as motivation for the authors of the articles in this issue.

What is remarkable is the variety of approaches librarians are using to tackle textbooks. The thrust of many library initiatives revolves around the creation and promotion of open education resources (OER) as alternatives to costly commercially-published textbooks. Some librarians are negotiating with traditional commercial publishers, the oft-maligned villains in the textbook world, for more sustainable pricing and licensing terms for e-textbooks. Others are going head-to-head with the bad boys and publishing their own textbooks to compete with traditional publishers. There is also renewed interest and vigor being put into more traditional library services like course packs and

course reserves. Finally, simply putting more energy and creativity into promoting the use of library-licensed resources as course materials is a strategy gaining steam with librarians looking to play more active roles in textbook affordability.

In "**Spreading the Word, Building a Community: Vision for a National Librarian OER Movement**," **Nicole Allen**, **Steven Bell**, and **Marilyn Billings** call on academic librarians to unite and form a national movement to promote the widespread adoption of OER with the goal of taking control of learning materials away from commercial publishers and putting it back into the hands of educators.

While the number and quality of OER are increasing, making the switch from traditional textbooks to OER-based learning materials is no small matter. Redesigning course materials
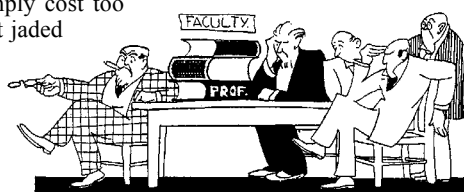
If Rumors Were Horses

Gearing up for the **2014 Charleston Conference**! A lot of you will be here! Welcome!

Was excited to see the Webcast sponsored by *LJ* and **ExLibris** the other day, which previewed a few of the hundreds of upcoming panels during the **2014 Charleston Conference**. **Michael Perry**, Collection Services Manager from Northwestern was the moderator of the panel which included **Roger Brisson** (ExLibris), **Rachel Borchardt** (American University Library), **William Cross** (North Carolina State University), and **Hilary Davis** (North Carolina State University). The Webcast lasted an hour and is archived on the *LJ* **Website**. Many of the participants in this Webcast will be in Charleston presenting at the panels. Check it out!
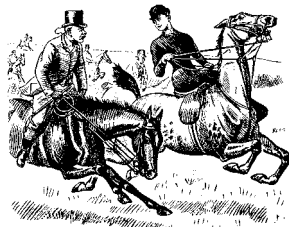
BTW, the **Charleston Conference** program is available in a great app — **2014charlestonconference.sched.org**. Using this app allows you to download your personal schedule and information about sessions that you want to attend onto your iPad or iPhone, tablet, etc. Very convenient and useful!

As the great conference directors, **Beth Bernhardt** and **Leah Hinds** who put together the whole **Charleston Conference** schedule and loaded all the info into the app, etc., etc. with no help from yours truly said, "There is always something going to happen that is beyond our control." This time it was a problem with the **sched.org platform**. Most of our speaker photos were deleted, leaving only the ones that are linked to a Facebook or LinkedIn account

can be a time-intensive and daunting endeavor for instructors. Many librarians are finding themselves well-suited to assisting instructors with the OER curation process: helping them find, aggregate, and assess the quality of relevant materials from a broad array of sources. In "**Getting Faculty into the Fight: The Battle Against High Textbook Costs**," **Ann Agee** and **Christina Mune** describe their "Textbook Alternatives Project" in which the **San Jose State University Library** provides faculty with administrative support and monetary incentives to adopt free and low-cost textbook alternatives like OER. The authors also created a list of "Textbooks Available as eBooks in the Library" and by promoting the list to instructors and students, they were able to achieve significant savings in a short amount of time.

Besides commercial publishers, university bookstores are often viewed as one of the bandits in the textbook ecosystem, charging high prices to the somewhat captive audiences at the campuses they serve. Universities themselves play a role here — many schools give the bookstore the exclusive right to serve as the sole textbook provider on campus in exchange for a small portion of sales. So it is interesting to note that the university bookstore plays prominent roles in many of the initiatives described in this issue. Such is the case for **David Gibbs** and **Jessica Bowdoin**, who describe the success they have had with easing the burden of textbooks costs for students by building a strategically-focused textbook reserves program in their article "**TextSelect: Purchasing Textbooks for Library Reserves**."

One reason, among many, for high-priced textbooks is the disproportionate amount of market control that lies in the hands of a few large commercial publishers — **Pearson**, **Wiley**, and **McGraw Hill** are the biggies in higher education. In "**All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go: The Internet2/EDU-CAUSE E-textbook Pilot Projects**," **Monica Metz-Wiseman** describes her adventures being involved in a national initiative that provided discounted pricing on electronic versions of textbooks from commercial publishers. Why would commercial publishers, notably unkeen on lowering prices, be willing to do this? The initiative employed a business model that required the purchase of an e-textbook for all students in participating courses, providing publishers with what they call "100% sell through." Publishers are willing to go low on price because this model guarantees increased sales volume, effectively eliminating students from skipping, sharing, buying used, pirating, or relying on library copies.

Therein lies the biggest challenge to this approach: student loss of choice. Students today face a broken damn barrage of options for acquiring textbooks: rent or buy; print or electronic; new or used; shop online or in-person. There is some ambiguity and conflicting data about current student preferences among all these options. Generally, more students prefer print textbooks over electronic ones, but many will go with e-textbooks if they are cheap enough. By the time you read this that could be a fading solitary data point in this quickly transforming landscape. But one thing is clear: students want and need the freedom to choose the option that best meets their needs (financial, academic, and technological).

Among all those options, one that is becoming alarmingly popular is skipping the purchase of textbooks altogether, even required ones. Indeed, the concept of a "required" textbook, long crumbling, is now pretty much in rubble. This has as much to do with cost, as it does with faculty reliance on textbooks (or lack thereof). One can understand the frustration of the student who purchases an expensive textbook only to discover that that the instructor rarely refers to it. *RateMyProfessors.com,* a source that many students consult, for better or worse, before enrolling in a course, recently added a category ("Textbook Use") for students to rate the importance of textbooks for particular courses. Course packs, highly-customized learning materials that contain only the content relevant to the course for which they are created, are designed to help solve this problem. In "**The Michigan State University Course Materials Program: Packing Up Your Textbook Troubles with Course Packs**," **Tyler Smeltekop** describes the logistics and successes that can come from libraries investing in course pack creation.

If textbooks were free, of course, students would have no excuse for going without access to them, no matter how infrequently their instructors might refer to them. Open textbooks are just that — freely available online textbooks. In "**Library Publishing of Open Textbooks: the Open SUNY Textbooks Program**," **Kate Pitcher** describes the ambitious grant-funded pilot she is leading in which **SUNY** faculty are incentivized to author textbooks in their area of expertise that are formally peer-reviewed, edited, and published online using **Open Monograph Press**.

It is worth noting that libraries are not the only ones moving in to the textbook space. An indicator that an industry is being threatened by technology-driven disruption is the emergence of many smaller entrepreneurial players developing innovative products. Such is the case with textbooks, where numerous newer firms, many with odd-sounding names, are offering up their own "new and improved" versions of the traditional textbook: **Thuze**, **PackBack**, **Trunity**, **GingkoTree**, **Boundless**, **Flatworld**, **Chegg**, and **panOpen** are a few. Many of the learning materials from these companies can really only be considered "textbooks" by the loosest of definitions as they bear little resemblance to the ten-pound bricks often lugged around today's campuses.

Library initiatives are similarly redefining the concept of what constitutes a "textbook" with the goal of creating course materials that are not only more affordable but also "better." In "**The UCLA Libraries Affordable Course Materials Initiative: Expanding Access, Use and Affordability of Course Materials**," **Sharon Farb** and **Todd Grappone** describe their efforts to create learning materials "focused on the diversity of material used in teaching that extends well beyond any notion of a textbook alone."

Reinvention has long been a dog-eared page in the academic library play book, and "supporting the teaching and learning needs of the campus" is one of the most underlined statements on the page. Involvement with the provision and creation of more affordable learning materials is emerging as a compelling way that librarians can reinvent themselves as partners to teaching faculty and to forge deeper ties into the curricula at their institutions. I hope the initiatives highlighted in this issue will inspire readers to fight for textbook affordability on their campuses — doing so will help us in our neverending quest to increase library relevance and demonstrate our value. 🌳

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against the grain

people profile

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BORN & LIVED: Born right outside of Philadelphia, PA. Have lived in Pennsylvania, Virginia, Illinois, and North Carolina.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: I have worked as a reference librarian, distance education librarian, collection development librarian, interlibrary loan librarian, and most recently as an Access Services librarian, during my career.

IN MY SPARE TIME: I like to garden.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Cookbooks.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I see academic libraries moving increasingly toward utilizing library staff to provide basic, core library services and to keep buildings open longer to provide students with study spaces, while reference librarians realign their work into niche research services. Libraries will continue to purchase more digital resources, which will result in fewer unique collections, while at the same time researchers will continue to demand access to increasingly scarce "unique" or current items. 🌳