Steven J. Bell

What about the bookstore?

Textbook affordability programs and the academic library-bookstore relationship

If your academic library has yet to implement a Textbook Affordability Project (TAP), odds are it will soon be a topic of discussion on your campus. Sessions on Open Educational Resources (OER) are regular fixtures at library conferences, and participation in formal and informal OER advocacy organizations, such as the Open Textbook Network (OTN) and SPARC Libraries and OER Forum, respectively, is growing rapidly.

Academic librarians are eager to demonstrate their leadership in the textbook affordability movement, and there is great enthusiasm for initiating local projects. Where librarians are contemplating a TAP and engaging in institutional conversations on textbook affordability, one question is sure to be asked. What about the bookstore?

Since my own library began a TAP in 2011,[1] academic colleagues have requested information about the program and how it contributes to textbook affordability. When a regional university administrator contacted me to learn more about our TAP, I was hardly surprised when asked that most important of questions: How did the bookstore react? Despite knowing that textbook affordability is a goal to which we should aspire and readily commit, academic librarians may hesitate owing to concerns about the bookstore and its reaction.

What is it about the library's relationship with the bookstore, or lack of one, that establishes the store as an impediment to TAPs? To answer that our profession needs a more realistic picture of the relationship between the two.

In pursuit of that answer I invited both librarians and bookstore managers to respond to a survey requesting information about the prevalence of TAPs and the state of library-bookstore relationships at participants' campuses. I sought to shed light on the actual dynamics of the interaction between the library and bookstore. This article shares information from the survey and its findings so that academic librarians seeking to implement a TAP may do so with a more realistic perspective of what to expect from bookstore and institutional administrators. I share recommendations for forging a better relationship between the library and bookstore to advance campus TAPs.

Perception versus reality

In 2016 I invited members of OTN, participants on the SPARC LibOER discussion list, and members of the National Association of College Stores (NACS) and Independent College Bookstore Association (ICBA) to complete a survey on their experience with TAPs and relationship with the store or library. I received 77 responses from the library groups and 72 responses from the bookstore groups. The respondents' institutional type was primarily research university, with additional representation from masters' universities and community colleges. Few four-

Steven J. Bell is associate university librarian at Temple University Libraries, email: bells@temple.edu

year liberal arts colleges responded. Despite efforts to include contract or lease-managed stores, those operations did not respond to the survey.

Here are common concerns and perceptions librarians share about their relationship with the bookstore that create barriers to cooperative measures to support textbook affordability:

• Bookstore personnel will think the library is trying to put the store out of business and will block a textbook affordability effort.

• It will look like the library is attempting to circumvent the store as the campus entity that controls the acquisition and distribution of campus learning material.

• Campus administrators will block the library's initiative over fears about lost textbook revenue.

• Contract or lease-managed bookstores are guaranteed revenue on book sales and will resist efforts to support textbook affordability.

These perceptions result from librarian beliefs that the bookstore, whether an independent or contract-managed operation, is profit driven and will defend its textbook revenue streams. To be sure, there are campuses where the bookstore may challenge efforts to promote faculty adoption of OER. Individual institutions and library consortia launching successful TAPs provide evidence that bookstores can coexist with well thought out and managed affordability efforts, especially when the store managers are invited to participate in the process. The bookstore can thrive while the academic library leads faculty to explore ways to find and adopt alternate learning materials.

When survey participants responded to questions about their relationship with each other, the results support the notion that the campus bookstore and academic library share a common goal of supporting student academic success. Here are some of the key takeaways that refute those common misperceptions about the relationship:

• Evidence of distrust or enmity between academic libraries and campus bookstores is unsupported in the survey results.

• Both librarians and bookstore personnel express a desire to work together to advance textbook affordability on campus.

• Bookstores are open to conversations about textbook affordability but would expect the library to initiate.

• Neither librarians nor bookstore personnel see the other as their competition on campus.

These findings suggest that the academic library and college bookstore relationship is more conducive to the development of affordable textbook projects than previously thought. For example, when bookstore managers were asked about the accuracy of the statement "The library and bookstore have a supportive/positive relationship," 80% of respondents indicated it was mostly or somewhat accurate. Among the library respondents, 63% indicated that the bookstore was highly supportive or supportive of a TAP. As is often the case in higher education, collaborative efforts begin with a conversation about aspirations and desires for a shared outcome.

Presence of and participation in textbook affordability projects

Among the OTN and LibOER respondents, a majority were familiar with TAPs: 52% have already implemented one and another 20% were in the planning stages. By comparison, respondents belonging to COLLIB-L, a mostly college librarian discussion list, indicated that only 15% already established a TAP, while 80% had no immediate plans to do so. Bookstore respondents may perceive "textbook affordability project" differently as 90% indicated their institution has one.

From the library perspective, a TAP is designed to assist faculty to eliminate commercial textbooks. The bookstore staff definition of a TAP may include digital textbooks, rentals, and used books—all of which contribute to affordability, but are hardly the same as library-supported TAPs. Future studies should explore if such a discrepancy exists.

Both library and bookstore respondents indicate that their organizations are highly involved in TAPs, with 95% and 88% participation rates

respectively. That said, it's less clear to what extent their participation is of a collaborative nature. Given that only 60% of the libraries indicating the presence of an active TAP agreed that the TAP was supported by the bookstore, those high rates of participation reported by bookstores may be clouded by local interpretation of the TAP. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the TAP is usually initiated and driven by the academic library, rather than it being the product of a joint initiative by the library and bookstore. There is also evidence that bookstores do support library-driven TAPs, even if the bookstore's role was of a secondary nature. Other than the library and bookstore, other common TAP participants or supporters include faculty, students, the provost's office, and the Teaching and Learning Center.

While there are concerns, from both librarians and bookstore managers, that TAPs may have some impact on store revenue, 96% of store respondents say they support an institutional TAP. If there is any area when some tension exists it concerns store data. While 86% of the store respondents indicate they support library requests for book data, only 72% of library respondents indicate they get adequate support from the bookstore for data requests. Comments from librarians pointed to some frustration with their data requests going unfulfilled.

The weak link in the survey is the distinct absence of contract-managed or outsourced bookstore operators. While 37% of the library respondents have a contract-managed store, versus 54% reporting an independent store, only independent stores were cooperative in responding to the survey. The prevailing view is that independents are more supportive of TAPs than contract-managed stores. Perhaps it is the local environment, dictated by the views and biases of the players, and not the type of store that predicts institutional adoption or rejection of the TAP. Additional research is needed to capture the contract-managed store perspective on the library-bookstore relationship.

Improving the relationship

Library and bookstore respondents were asked to share their recommendations for how to build better partnerships, whether to strengthen an existing relationship or improve a weak or nonexistent one. Three prominent themes emerged from the responses: communication, engagement, and initiation. Keys to better relationships focused on establishing stronger channels of communication, exploring other ways in which libraries and bookstores can work together, and taking the initiative to talk, engage, and find common ground. Among the top recommendations were:

- librarians should involve the bookstore at the earliest stages of the TAP;
- find ways to collaborate beyond textbooks, for example, student orientations can be about more than books;
- learn about each other's operations, major services, functions, and systems;
- partner to establish an institution-wide textbook affordability group;
- initiate a regular quarterly meeting to exchange information and ideas; and
- collaborate to educate faculty about textbook affordability.

Good relationships need solid foundations. Both librarians and store managers believed that their common ground was students. Whatever differences they might have, each put students at the core of their affordability efforts. By focusing on student success, respondents believed the relationship would be shaped by commonalities rather than differences.

Of course, every relationship has its rough spots and misunderstandings, and this one is no exception. Both parties believe the other fails to completely grasp the complexities of its situation. Book store managers want librarians to understand their survival is revenue-driven, lacking the secure funding of libraries. Librarians want book store managers to understand that students expect the library to offer free access to textbooks. For the stores, a major concern is that the library seeks to usurp its position as the primary institutional provider of course material. Librarians expressed dissatisfaction with the bookstore's slow response to requests for book data, such as titles requested by faculty and pricing, and questioning the store's commitment

6. We are building an online clearinghouse for locally developed materials and approaches.

7. We are planning for a series of faculty fairs to showcase demonstrations (showing peer products is far more effective than explaining theoretical possibilities).

We will soon start to post to our campus website a running total of savings generated from our adoption of alternatives to commercial textbooks. We also hope to include testimonials from students about the improved teaching environment we have created.

Highlighting cost savings to students and enhanced pedagogy benefits for students and faculty is a great way to more deeply integrate the library into the evolving campus teaching enterprise. Using textbook alternatives is a great way to start these conversations.

Notes

1. www.uspirg.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/NATIONAL%20Fixing%20Broken%20Textbooks%20Report1.pdf.

2. http://sxu.beta.libguides.com/scholarlyresearch.

3. See business example at http://lib.sxu.edu/businessdatabases.

4. The Quick Tutorials can be found at http://lib.sxu.edu/undergraduates. 𝒏

---

to cooperation. Acknowledging our points of contention or mistrust could serve as the basis of an initial discussion between the library and store to discover the path to establishing a better relationship.

Take the next steps

Academic librarians contemplating how to begin promoting textbook affordability solutions on their campus may be expecting questions about its impact on the bookstore —or possibly pushback from the bookstore. Anticipating that possibility is wise, as it will better position librarians to respond. First consider organizing an institutional working group to explore the issue of textbook affordability, if no such committee already exists.[2] Make that first step and reach out to the store manager. Explain what you intend to do and why. Offer examples from other institutions that are achieving textbook affordability, and reinforce that these efforts contribute to student success. Whether your campus store is an independent or contract-managed operation may be less consequential than the attitude and spirit of your store manager. What does matter is the librarian's ability to establish where the common ground exists and to appeal to that individual's commitment to students' academic success.

When it comes to having conversations with the bookstore about textbook afford-ability, I am reminded of the bookstore manager who explained, colorfully, why he supported these programs. He reminded his colleagues that every student who dropped out owing to their inability to afford higher education, who failed courses and quit because they couldn't afford their textbooks, was one more student who would never make a purchase at the bookstore. He argued that if textbook affordability programs helped to retain at-risk and other students, that meant more customers for the store. When you look at it that way, academic libraries and bookstores, working together for student success, is a relationship that makes a lot of sense.

Notes

1. Steven J. Bell, "Coming in the Back Door: Leveraging Open Textbooks to Promote Scholarly Communications on Campus," *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* 1, no. 1 (2012), DOI: http://doi.org/10.7710/2162-3309.1040.

2. Steven J. Bell, "Five Institutional Strategies for Textbook Affordability," *Library Journal* (February 4, 2016), http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2016/02/opinion/steven-bell/five-institutional-strategies-for-textbook-affordability-from-the-bell-tower/ (retrieved February 9, 2017). 𝒏