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## Let's Give Them Something to Talk About: Textbook Affordability and OER

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### Abstract

This Lively Discussion brought together librarians from Florida Gulf Coast University in Ft. Myers, Florida and the University of North Alabama in Florence, Alabama. Both libraries were eager to share their experiences with others who have or are considering establishing a textbook affordability project or use open educational resources (OER) to help students succeed despite the high cost of textbooks.

### Florida Gulf Coast University and Library Background

Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) is a relatively young university. We opened our doors in 1997 and graduated our first class in May 1998 with 81 students. We are primarily a teaching university; 78% of our classes are taught by full-time faculty. There are 58 undergraduate, 25 graduate, and 6 doctoral programs with approximately 15,000 students. Most of the students, 44%, come from Southwest Florida and another 44% represent the rest of the state. International students and those from other states make up the remaining 12% of our student body. The Wilson G. Bradshaw Library (Figure 1) has over 1.5 million items including books, e-books, journals, e-journals, newspapers, DVDs, CDs, musical scores, and microforms. There are nearly 400 online research databases providing access to over 70 million full-text articles.

### Background of the FGCU Textbook Affordability Project

Like most libraries on university campuses, the FGCU librarians sought ways we could contribute to student success. It is an established fact that when students are unable to purchase their textbooks, they do not do as well in class. This can lead to failing grades and dropping the class. Our university's tuition has remained the same for the past six years. While this helps our students, 69% still receive financial aid. While the costs of textbooks continue to increase, there is still an enormous burden on the student. Add to this equation that 40% of our students are first-generation students and many courses have high drop, failure, and withdrawal (DFW) rates.

How could the library help? Each year the provost has end-of-year funds to distribute among the



Figure 1. The Wilson G. Bradshaw Library, Florida Gulf Coast University.

various campus units. In spring 2018, we submitted our proposal requesting funds to purchase and loan textbooks for students to use within the library. Much to our surprise and delight, we were awarded \$40,000 to use in the 2018–2019 academic year.

## Implementation

Now it was time to get to work with our campus partners. We worked with the Office of Planning and Institutional Performance to determine what courses were high DFW courses. Once we knew what courses we wanted to focus on, we partnered with the campus bookstore to determine which textbooks were being used for those courses. With this information, spreadsheets were created by our information analyst. There were several key factors we wanted to focus on to determine which textbooks to purchase. First, we looked for courses with high enrollment. Likewise, we needed to know which courses had the highest DFW. We also needed to consider the cost of the textbook. The decision was made to purchase textbooks costing \$150 and over. With the assistance of the bookstore, we found out the purchase history of the textbooks. If students were not purchasing a certain textbook, we wanted to know why. Was it the cost? Was it because the library already owned a copy? If the library owned a copy of the textbook, was it in a print or electronic format?

Once it was decided which textbooks were to be purchased, there were still a few details to resolve. The end-of-year funds needed to cover two semesters. We needed to make sure we did not use the entire budget in the first semester. In addition, with some high enrollment courses, we determined multiple copies would be purchased. Circulation statistics needed to be monitored closely as the project moved forward because additional copies could be purchased for any course.

With our textbook shopping list in hand, we met with the campus bookstore manager to work out the details. Prior to any purchase, the bookstore provided us with some great news. They agreed not to take their usual 25% profit from sales. That meant not only was the purchase price reduced by 25%, but we were able to purchase even more textbooks. In addition to e-books already in the library's collection, several subject librarians used their materials budget to purchase e-books with unlimited users to include in the textbook affordability project. Once the textbooks were purchased, we prepared to launch

the project in fall 2018. Our Course Reserve staff processed over 200 textbooks in one week to ensure the textbooks were ready for the beginning of the fall semester. Processing the textbooks included training staff and student workers to label, catalog, and enter the information into our integrated library system. Before the textbooks could be shelved, space needed to be created for such a large collection of books in our course reserves section. In order for staff and student workers to assist students in searching for their textbooks, they needed to be knowledgeable in searching our catalog as well as the policies for the new project.

## It's All About Access

We wanted to ensure students had easy access to the textbooks. Although our staff and student workers could assist them in searching for the textbooks, we knew there was much more to be done. Textbooks would be loaned for two hours to be used only in the library. Students were encouraged to place holds on a textbook if it was checked out. Holds could be placed on the textbook before the students even arrived at the library, thus saving the students time. Once checked out, the textbook could be renewed as long as no one else had placed a hold on it. Other time savers included locating scanners near the circulation desk to allow students quick and easy access. And the service was free. Because of our criteria, we knew not all textbooks being used were included in our project. Therefore, we allowed students to request textbooks they needed when it was not already in the collection. When possible, we purchased those textbooks.

## Outreach and Social Media

Once the textbook affordability project was underway, we needed to get the word out to our faculty and most importantly, our students. Subject librarians included information in newsletters and e-mails to their faculty to share with their students. The library's website was revised to link students directly to the catalog to look up their textbooks. Librarians and staff wore buttons advertising the project. Various social media campaigns were created. Textbook Tuesdays (Figure 2) became a weekly event with posts highlighting textbooks that might not have been used very often but were expensive. Around the library, table toppers that included information about the project were placed in strategic locations (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Textbook Tuesday.

### Lessons Learned from the First Year

After our first year, we reviewed the textbook affordability project to determine usage statistics and ways to improve the service. In the project's first semester, fall 2018, there were 1,649 loans. The second semester, spring 2019, showed continued growth in usage with 1,872 loans. With the first-year statistics in hand, it was time to review the service in general. We sought ways to improve the project. One improvement was to increase the involvement of the subject librarians in the selection process. No longer did we use just the DFW statistics, high enrollment, and cost. We now sought input from the subject librarians who were familiar with the courses in their programs. We also continued to fine-tune our access services to ensure students could take full advantage of the project. In addition to Facebook, we expanded our social media marketing to include Instagram and Twitter. With adjustments made, there were 3,541 loans in fall semester 2019. This number is more than for fall 2018 and spring 2019 combined!

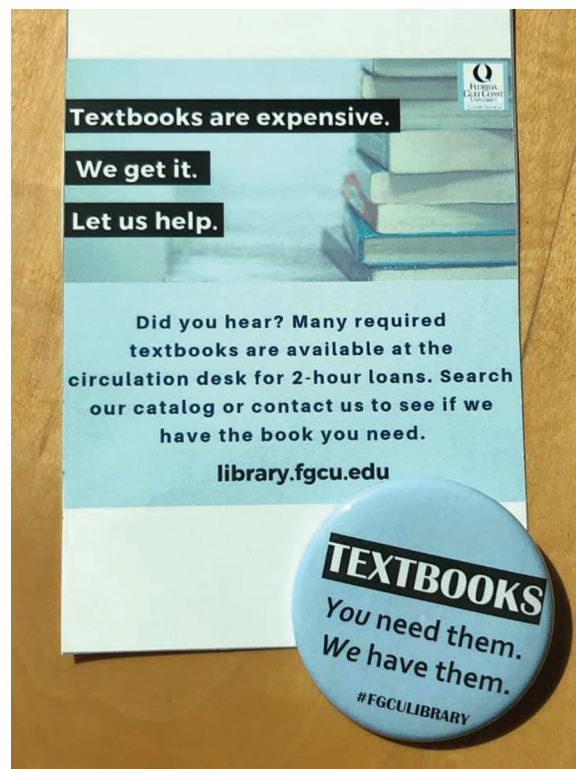


Figure 3. Table topper graphics.

### The Road Ahead

The textbook affordability project has continued but this academic year we encountered a serious problem. In the spring semester, a request for end-of-year funds to continue the program was submitted to the provost. The request was not approved. How would we be able to continue to purchase new textbooks without those funds and no additional increase to our overall budget? It has not been easy. The head of Collections Management and our E-Resource librarian managed to realign our online resource subscriptions. This saved some money in the short term, which could be applied to the textbook affordability project, but the issue remains. Sustainable funding for the project as it moves forward must be determined.

### University of North Alabama and Collier Library & Information Services Background

Collier Library & Information Services is located at the center of the University of North Alabama. The ground floor of the library houses the Harry L. Smith Student Commons Area that includes a makerspace, computers for student use, a café, and the Library Help desk. The Library Help desk is where students

can check out materials, request reference assistance, and access our growing collection of reserve textbooks.

### Background of the University of North Alabama Textbook Affordability Initiative

The Textbook Affordability Initiative (Figure 4) is a multifaceted initiative comprised of three main strategies: purchasing high-volume course textbooks, strategic purchasing of library databases and content to supplement or replace traditional textbook purchases, and promotion of OER adoption. These ideas merged from separate work on our campus. The University Librarian was looking for ways to

help students with the financial burden of high-cost textbooks by instituting new practices in purchasing textbooks and placing them on reserve. Additionally, it was desired to rethink collection development practices to increase usage and see more guaranteed commitment to usage in databases and library purchases. Thus, more input is sought externally in purchasing content that can be used as a textbook replacement or course supplement. Simultaneously, the Scholarly Communications librarian was part of a three-member working group on campus, formed at the behest of the provost, with the charge to increase adoption of OER. These ideas merged perfectly to form the three critical components of the Textbook Affordability Initiative.

# Textbook Affordability Initiative

By strategically using library resources and librarian expertise, you could significantly alleviate textbook costs for your students.

**Partner with Collier Library to help save your students money on textbooks.**

- Textbook Reserves**  
Let us know if you want your textbook placed on reserve for your students. If the library doesn't own it, we'll get it. We can also put your personal copy on reserve.
- OER**  
Let your librarian help you discover Open Educational Resources (OER) that you can use or adapt for use in your classes. OER are not just free textbooks – they are public domain or open license materials that include teaching, learning, and research materials in any medium – digital or otherwise.
- Library Subscriptions**  
Ask your library liaison how databases can enhance your instruction. The library may have resources that could replace or supplement your textbook. Librarians can also create reading lists and links that you can import into Canvas.

**COLLIER LIBRARY**  
UNA

Figure 4. Textbook Affordability Initiative.

### **Textbook Affordability Initiative—Reserves**

In the first semester of the Textbook Affordability Initiative a list of required textbooks was provided by the bookstore. The library took that list and referenced it with the course enrollment list. Our Access Services department then checked to see what was already purchased or loaned for reserve. Courses that had high enrollments with multiple sections per course were identified and from that, textbooks were purchased. Liaisons were asked to notify their departments of the textbook availability and asked to relay that information to be included on the syllabus.

The process has changed significantly since the initial implementation. Now, departments relay what textbooks are going to be used for fall, spring, and summer semesters. This is done twice annually in October and March. The course lists are still referenced, but liaisons are also asked to contact their departments and ask if there is a textbook they would like to have purchased for reserve, or if there is one that they could loan to the library as a personal copy to place on the reserve shelf.

During the first year of the program the library did not assess usage. However, now that the program is fully developed, library personnel will be fully analyzing usage each semester. This data will be a critical element in library discussions with departments regarding reserve purchases or donations in the future.

### **Textbook Affordability Initiative—Library Content Purchases**

Strategically, Collier Library & Information Services is having significant conversations when it comes to content and subscription purchases in the future. As consistently large budget increases are outside the realm of possibility, the library is looking for ways to maximize content and minimize cost. One of the ways the library can maximize content and simultaneously help the student user is by including external departments in the discussion pertaining to database subscriptions that could replace traditional texts and course materials. The library can do this in a variety of ways. First, library liaisons can make external faculty aware of current content that could be used to replace traditional course materials or could be used to supplement traditional course materials. In addition, the library, when presented with a possible purchase from a department or by a vendor, can initiate conversations about how this purchase will

be used as a teaching component. Collier Library is moving forward in both directions.

Interestingly, when library faculty have conversations concerning the replacement of textbooks with acquisitions, it seems to lead to more departments being suggested as a potential beneficiary. For example, a replacement resource could reach over multiple departments. Something that was initially perceived as Biology content could be used for Biology, Kinesiology, Nursing, and Chemistry. In the future, strategic analysis will allow the library to focus on purchases based on their usage and ability to relieve costs to the user in both singular disciplines and across a broad range of disciplines.

### **Textbook Affordability Initiative—OER**

The University of North Alabama's 2019–2024 strategic plan includes the aspiration for the faculty to "Adopt, implement, and utilize Open Educational Resources (OER) in half of all academic programs." To help the university achieve this goal, the provost formed a three-member working group. Two of the three members were librarians, including the Scholarly Communications librarian and the Cataloging librarian, and the third member was the director of Educational Technology. One of the first initiatives this group undertook was a faculty survey of OER awareness and use. Using the data from this survey, the group then began working on implementing OER awareness programs. Since the ultimate outcome of this aspiration is to help students with the burden of textbook and course material costs, it fit in perfectly with the Textbook Affordability Initiative that Collier Library was working on, so the working group started implementing awareness efforts with the support of the library.

Helping faculty understand what OER is and how it functions was one of the first priorities. Collier Library co-sponsored two days of presentations and a workshop by a leading OER expert. All sessions were held in the library and were at maximum capacity each day. The library also successfully applied for the ACRL Scholarly Communications Road Show, which was a one-day seminar on campus to help librarians understand copyright and how best to help faculty with open access publishing and OER.

Next, the Scholarly Communications librarian met with the Student Government Association to try to raise awareness among students about advocating for OER with their professors. As part of her

presentation she also discussed the library's current efforts for textbook affordability, including the growing collection of reserve books. From this meeting the SGA has passed a resolution in support of OER on campus and is planning outreach events to the student body.

Currently the working group is developing a grant program for faculty to encourage adoption of OER. The work to achieve the aspiration of 50% of all courses having an OER component by 2024 is well underway, and the ultimate goal is to reduce the textbook cost burden for all of UNA's student body.

### **Let the Discussion Begin**

Because our session was a lively discussion, we developed ice-breaker questions to create a robust conversation among our audience members. The questions focused on a variety of issues each library had encountered during our implementation. We were also interested in hearing about the experiences of our audience members. Marketing and access ideas included advertising in usual places such as restroom stalls and residential halls. It is also important to obtain student feedback and hear from their perspective. Statistics are helpful but knowing what students really want and need will increase the project's usage. One suggestion included using whiteboards for student feedback. In addition to

feedback, while students can look in a library's course reserve catalog to find out if their textbook is there, it was suggested to create a Google online sheet or a LibGuide for such a purpose.

Sustaining a text affordability project must be addressed even before implementation. Involving your Faculty Senate and student government is crucial since both groups are key players and users. Faculty need to be aware of the project to inform their students. Likewise, students are the primary users of the project. It may be possible to secure funding from both groups since it benefits all students. In addition, funding through donations, such as Friends of the Library, may be available. Another idea generated from the audience was to place bins out for students and faculty to donate gently used textbooks. What better way to clear out the clutter of a residence hall room or office at the end of the semester!

When additional funding is not available from outside, libraries need to be creative and should consider purchasing e-books when available. However, these e-books should only be purchased with unlimited use. One to three simultaneous users is not helpful for students in large classes. Subject librarians and others who purchase materials should be brought into the process as well. When budgets allow, they may consider purchasing textbooks to be included in a textbook affordability program.