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Textbook Affordability Initiatives and Open Educational Resources: Complementary or Competing Approaches to a Persistent Problem?

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Anne Shelley and Rachel E. Scott

Abstract

This presentation investigates library support for textbook affordability initiatives and Open Educational Resources (OER) to consider the relative opportunities and limitations of both approaches. The literature has shown that the cost of textbooks—which has increased far beyond the rate of inflation—can be an obstacle to student success, especially for students from underrepresented groups. By sharing findings from published literature and results from focus groups and interviews conducted with teaching faculty, the speakers highlight both the incentives faculty have to collaborate with librarians to address the increasing costs of assigned materials as well as the challenges they face in adopting an OER or more affordable texts. The findings suggest that no single approach will solve this crisis and that creating viable solutions will require the support and buy-in of a variety of stakeholders.

Keywords: Open Educational Resources, textbook affordability, textbook adoption, academic librarians, qualitative data

Introduction

Textbook affordability and Open Educational Resources (OER) initiatives are proliferating across higher education. The cost of textbooks has increased drastically over the past twenty years, far outpacing inflation and most other expenses associated with degree completion.[1] Initiatives supporting textbook affordability and OERs have benefits and limitations; this presentation outlines these, discusses opportunities for librarians who support textbook affordability and OER initiatives, and contextualizes the overall challenge of how to effectively improve textbook affordability through qualitative data collected from students and faculty. The magnitude of the problem of high textbook costs and the limitations of both methods suggest that librarians would do well to pair textbook affordability with OER initiatives and collaborate broadly with other stakeholders.

Literature Review

The literature documents the increasing cost of textbooks and confirms that it serves as an obstacle to the success of some students.[2] The problem has only worsened in the wake of COVID-19.[3] Librarians, faculty, and other stakeholders have long pursued OER as a potential solution to the textbook affordability crisis, and for over a decade have researched the impact of no- and low-cost course materials on student success.[4] This work reveals some positive benefits for students, both academic (such as higher grades and achieving student learning outcomes) and personal (such as financial savings).[5] Many librarians and institutions have sought to resolve the problem via OER grants or other incentivization programs.[6] OER adoption and textbook affordability initiatives (such as physical and electronic course reserves, facilitating textbook swaps, licensing e-books as textbooks, and adding library-licensed content to learning management course sites) not

only lessen the cost of materials, they can also address some long-standing issues with traditional textbooks such as omission of critical content and author bias. By incorporating alternative materials, faculty have the opportunity to address gaps in the curriculum or canon. They also have more flexibility in what content is presented and how it is organized, they can include more recent content—even current events—and bring geographically distant or super local content into the classroom.[7] Many librarians have proposed affordability initiatives as a solution, acknowledging that teaching faculty are responsible for selecting and assigning course materials and librarians serve in a supporting role.[8] The authors have not identified any published studies that compare the benefits and challenges of OER and affordability initiatives, and this presentation seeks to fill that gap.

Institutional Context

Illinois State University (ISU) is a Carnegie R2 (Doctoral Universities – High research activity) institution with a large undergraduate population and a total student enrollment around 20,000. Milner Library is the only library on campus and employs around seventy full-time personnel. ISU has a campus-wide textbook affordability committee that reports to the academic senate. The committee has surveyed students and faculty in recent years to establish local perspectives on the extent to which textbook costs may be a problem. A Spring 2019 survey of ISU students revealed several themes, namely frustration related to access codes and feeling like faculty "did not use" required textbooks: 61 percent of respondents said they had to purchase an access code at an average estimated cost of $120 per code and 69 percent purchased required material that they said the professor did not use.[9] Students reported using a variety of sources and means of acquiring or accessing textbooks, but only 7 percent look for these materials at the library. The survey also found that the increasing cost of textbooks—along with the increasing cost of higher

education—directly impacts students and their families. The cost of assigned materials is often seen as a hurdle for students in their academic careers, and this can be especially true for historically underserved student populations, such as students of color, students from low-income families, and first-generation college students.[10] The ISU student survey found, for example, that 73 percent of students did not acquire a required textbook or other course material due to cost, 89 percent of students delayed purchasing a textbook or other course material due to cost, and 43 percent of Black students use money earned working a job to purchase required materials compared to 34 percent for white students. The committee surveyed ISU faculty in Spring 2020 and learned that in many contexts faculty responses did not align with those of students, especially related to access codes and "using the book." Nearly two-thirds of faculty reported assigning 75–100 percent of a book and of the fewer than 25 percent of faculty who assign materials requiring an access code, over half of them estimate the cost to students at $50–100.[11]

In response to the data collected from these surveys, Milner Library allocated $10,000 for a project to license course-assigned texts as e-books with unlimited user licenses and to conduct surveys and focus groups with participants.[12] This project—managed by an e-textbook working group of five librarians from different departments—was the first coordinated initiative at ISU to provide e-textbooks to classes across departments, calculate the resulting savings to students, and explore the impact on student success.

Methods

The authors are part of this e-textbook working group studying textbook affordability at ISU. Beginning in Spring 2021, the first phase of the project entailed licensing seventy-five e-textbooks, then surveying and conducting focus groups with student and faculty from participating courses. As part of a separate research project, in Fall 2021

the authors conducted interviews with twenty-one scholars in various subdisciplines of music to explore their Open Access experiences, understandings, and motivations with respect to both their teaching and publishing. The ISU Institutional Research Board reviewed both studies and granted them exempt status. Although participants in both studies held a variety of employment classifications and affiliations, the term faculty will be used to describe those with teaching responsibilities. The following sections synthesize findings from faculty and students across these surveys, focus groups, and interviews to identify some common benefits and challenges of OER and textbook affordability initiatives, as well as opportunities for librarians to support both.

Open Educational Resources

According to the 2018 ITHAKA S+R U.S. Faculty Survey there is "substantial interest in use of open educational resources for instructional practices, particularly from younger faculty members."[13] OER hold great interest for a variety of reasons. Participants indicated that saving students money is most important, with some noting that financial insecurity of students is a profound problem with implications for their own teaching and for student success. Some faculty also positively perceive the openness of OER, or at least the freedom and flexibility of moving away from a commercial textbook. One interviewee shared that the OER they are creating is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to spark conversations. Several faculty noted concerns that textbooks homogenize the learning experience and do not center diverse perspectives. Faculty focus group and interview participants reiterated the importance of teaching a multiplicity of perspectives and highlight this as a strong impetus to move away from traditional commercial textbooks. Another benefit of OER is the ability to shift away from the cycle of frequent edition updates that support a marginal market for obsolete editions: OER keep the control of course

materials within the institution and minimize textbook publishers' profit margin—a margin made from students, frequently funded by loans.[14]

OER also come with significant challenges. Most notably from the perspective of a librarian is that teaching faculty select texts and may not have any inclination to create or adopt an OER. Faculty participants cited the labor entailed in finding, selecting, writing, and creating an OER—not to mention redesigning their course, labs, assignments, or even departmental curriculum—as a substantial obstacle. A faculty member who had recently been awarded an OER grant from their institution's library emphasized that the grant did not begin to cover their time and labor. The instability of existing digital resources was also noted by participants, some of whom have started downloading and storing content they plan to use in class. Despite studies finding OER to be of good quality, participants still posed questions about the rigor of review processes for OER and expressed concerns about their quality.[15] Some faculty participants wonder if students benefit from the traditional framework of textbooks, which package content in familiar ways, and think that OER may lead to a lack of student learning and engagement. One music faculty member indicated that textbooks and anthologies offer comfort through familiar narrative and structure and shared concerns that being too "free form" could be an impediment to student learning of core skills. Similar concerns about OER "not providing students with adequate coverage of the required skills and knowledge" are echoed in the literature.[16]

Another theme of OER concerns had to do with valuing faculty labor and the cost of OER creation. Some faculty noted a resistance to OER because they need or want to be paid for their work—they rely on revenue generated from publication royalties. Music faculty discussed how they pay for permissions or rights to include musical materials in publications and explained how costly it can be to create a music textbook. One noted that OER offer only minimal benefits to the author beyond altruism, quipping that they "don't do a whole lot for your C.V."

Textbook Affordability

A primary benefit of textbook affordability initiatives is that the faculty member's selected text is the starting point, and faculty do not need to rewrite their courses. Librarians can identify which texts have been assigned, determine which are available for institutional licensing and with which terms, and follow up to confirm course enrollment, faculty interest, and other criteria. The major issue is that relatively few assigned titles are available for institutional licensing. In our experience, fewer than one third of assigned titles are typically available with an unlimited user or similar license that supports multiple simultaneous users.[17] Nonetheless, when a commercial text has been assigned and is available with a license that supports the usage, licensing e-books has been found to save students money and to offer libraries great return on investment, whether that is measured in usage, benefit-cost ratio, quality, or student persistence.[18]

A significant benefit to affordability initiatives is that they acknowledge the diversity of materials, as rich as library collections themselves, available to integrate into classroom instruction. Music faculty acknowledged that they assign notated music, music recordings, book chapters, articles and essays, digital primary sources, and a host of other content in their courses. When librarians partner with faculty to highlight what is currently available and what could be licensed with terms that support class usage, a traditional textbook might be avoided entirely.

The assigned materials purchased via textbook affordability initiatives typically undergo traditional review and editorial processes and are not subject to the concerns about quality and rigor that OER are. Although textbook affordability initiatives often involve digital resources, in some cases they could also be made available in print; for example, OER are almost exclusively digital, though they could be printed. Some faculty do not want their students to read assigned materials from a screen, citing research that finds reading from a screen negatively impacts comprehension.

Like OER, textbook affordability initiatives face several challenges. As noted, the primary concern is that the vast majority are not available for institutional licensing. Another challenge is that the cost of acquiring unlimited-user licenses of assigned texts can quickly become unsustainable. Additionally, commercial textbooks are increasingly accompanied by access codes that unlock quizzes, homework assignments, and other supplementary materials. Even if the library is able to license a text, content behind an access code is intended for an individual's use and is unlikely to be legally available and accessible to multiple users. The long-term collection implications of content only available with an access code are also unknown.

Steven Bell, University Librarian at Temple University, recently wrote that faculty conflate OER with free content given that both support zero-cost learning for students.[19] He nonetheless urges readers to consider the implications of the terms "open" and "affordable," citing SPARC's Director of Open Education Nicole Allen, who made the point that textbook publishers also use the term "affordable" to describe programs like inclusive access to higher education administrators. Affordability is admittedly somewhat vague and subjective, and Bell suggests "zero-cost learning material as the term that best captures that mix of truly open textbooks, licensed library and miscellaneous free web-based content. It acknowledges that OER isn't always an available solution for courses across the disciplines."

Librarian Involvement

As previously noted, some libraries are actively involved in funding or incentivizing OER creation and adoption. The benefits of this work are most evident in one's immediate institutional context but may also have broader implications if the content can be adopted by faculty elsewhere. Librarians may also be called upon to help faculty identify OER or open content to integrate into their courses, provide input on any limitations on how an existing OER can be deployed in their

course, or support the publishing or dissemination of OER content. Other roles for librarians with respect to OER overlap with those in support of textbook affordability, highlighting that OER and textbook affordability have more in common than some detractors might suggest.

Librarians have many options in creating textbook affordability initiatives that support their campus. One starting point would be to integrate OER and affordable materials into the relevant course within the institution's learning management system and/or to use library course reserves. This helps to make the content more discoverable and accessible so that students can choose whether they wish to supplement the provided text with a personal print copy, for example. Some librarians have developed an affordable and open educational resources A/OER platform that indicates which course-assigned texts are provided by the library to better facilitate discovery and ease of access to these materials.[20]

Librarians can learn more about the needs and concerns faculty have with respect to assigned materials and also advocate for and inform faculty about open and affordable options. At ISU, librarians have partnered with our campus center for teaching, learning, and technology to offer regular workshops on lowering the cost of course materials since 2018. ISU librarians also serve on the campus Textbook Affordability Committee and present about textbook affordability issues when the opportunity arises, seeking meetings with stakeholders in and outside the library, including university administration. Faculty involved in the Spring 2021 pilot project have reached out to ask if a text they would like to assign is available for the library to license and have told their colleagues that the library is willing to work together on textbook affordability. All of this has set the stage for integrating open and affordable initiatives into Milner Library's new strategic plan. Having A/OER represented in the strategic plan was only possible due to years of dialogue and educational opportunities on this topic both inside and outside of the library.

Both/And Thinking

The textbook affordability crisis has no easy or comprehensive solution. By lending their expertise in licensing, publishing, and hosting content, their skills in collaborating with faculty to support curricular needs, and partnering with diverse stakeholders across campus to customize and scale projects appropriately, however, librarians can help address the problem in their institutional context. Like many projects focused on content, initiatives surrounding A/OER will require the collaboration of librarians engaged in developing and assessing collections, licensing and the legal frameworks of content, managing electronic resources, and educating and advising users about scholarly communication—especially OER, Open Access, institutional repositories, and publishing. There have been numerous approaches to A/OER within libraries and librarians attempting to keep up with trends and ongoing developments in those areas will have a huge amount of literature to read. More importantly, perhaps, is the need to have discussions across campus and throughout the profession to determine how you and your library can best address textbook affordability at your institution. Students, faculty, administrators, and librarians all agree that textbook affordability is an equity issue. Although there are different ideas about how best to approach this complex and evolving problem, librarian efforts should focus on identifying and collaborating with campus partners, aligning with institutional values, and taking advantage of available resources.

The question-and-answer segment of the live event yielded questions about and examples of A/OER work within higher education. An audience member noted their institution's course information platform highlights those classes with low or no cost materials. The speakers shared that they have pursued a similar course of action, but have encountered obstacles to adding content, whether links to e-books or a low/no cost designation to their institution's course finder platform. They have been gratified that some faculty partners have added links

to library licensed e-books. Another audience member asked about the potential damage of using the term affordability as raised in the blog post by Steven Bell. The presenters conveyed that although they might prefer OER, affordability resonates much more on their campus. Acknowledging that perfection is the enemy of the good, they are happy to pursue affordability initiatives as the default and support OER as opportunities allow.

Contributor Notes

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Notes

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