

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Vol. 35, No.5

May 2015

Start a Textbook Revolution, Continued: Librarians Lead the Way with Open Educational Resources

By Steven Bell

There's a phenomenon that happens in the Library each semester during the first week of class. One question will be asked repeatedly by students who approach service desks for assistance: "Does the Library have a copy of my textbook?" Library staff hear this question hundreds of times. It speaks to the effort that college students go to in order to acquire their textbooks in the most economical manner possible—free being the most desirable option. All too often, when students fail to obtain their textbooks at no cost, they choose to do without them. Learning without course content is seriously detrimental to any student's educational experience.

This observation mirrors findings from a 2014 national survey about college textbook costs and use conducted by the Student Public Interest Research Group. The survey of 2,039 students from 150 institutions acknowledges that alternatives such as rental programs have helped, but that 65 percent of students had still opted against buying a book because it was too costly – and 94 percent of them believed their grade would suffer because of it. Another 48 percent of students said the cost of textbooks affected their decisions about course selection. At the same time, 82 percent of students said free online access to a textbook would help them do "significantly better" in a course. None of this should surprise us since the average price of a new print textbook is \$128 and college students will spend approximately \$1,500 for them over the course of their college education.

There is a textbook revolution taking place, and at many higher education institutions the academic library is leading the way. Faculty are discovering that they can create their own alternate textbooks or

take advantage of open textbooks that other faculty have created and made available for sharing. Academic librarians are creating awareness about these new opportunities to "ditch the textbook" and then providing the necessary support to enable faculty to join the revolution. This is important because too few faculty are as yet aware of the growing availability of quality OER (Open Educational Resources). When presented with information about OER, faculty are generally hospitable to the idea and willing to adopt it. Academic library directors and their provosts should be talking about OER as part of a strategy for lowering the cost of textbooks for students. This issue provides an overview of OER, reasons why it is becoming more commonplace, how academic librarians are developing programs to support its usage by faculty and why academic librarians are supporting a national movement to advocate for OER.

Busting OER Myths

Nearly five years ago (*Library Issues*, September 2010) I first wrote about the textbook revolution. The recommendation was for library deans and their academic administrators to take a leadership position on campus in shifting faculty perceptions about textbooks. That meant shifting the library role from buying and placing required textbooks on reserve to supporting faculty in using licensed library content, along with strategic fair use provi-

Coming Soon —

**Non-Traditional Activities in
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sion of print content, to replace those traditional textbooks. These efforts are sometimes referred to as “alternate textbook projects” as they encourage the replacement of traditional commercial textbooks with alternate learning content. Since 2010 the most significant development in the textbook revolution is the growing presence of OER, and open textbooks in particular. In the last two years more new open textbooks have become available, making it possible for faculty to adopt an open textbook for many different foundation courses. Additionally, the number of academic librarians launching alternate textbook projects on their campuses has grown substantially.

Multiple factors contribute to the advancement of programs to introduce alternate and open textbooks. With traditional textbooks remaining costly, excepting the growth of rental options students can use to achieve modest savings, there is a heightened national awareness that textbooks make higher education more expensive and add to student debt. That has led more college presidents to call for greater efforts to reduce the overall cost of higher education. Consider the following trends that are driving more faculty to seek options for eliminating textbooks:

- Open textbook publishers such as OpenStax are gaining traction with faculty by offering a wider selection of open textbooks. More selection means more courses across the disciplines can adopt an open textbook;

- The degree of difficulty in locating appropriate OER is gradually improving. Resource sites such as the Open Textbook Library offer comprehensive catalogs of open texts that make finding OER much simpler. Previously, finding relevant OER could require considerable time and hunting through multiple sites. That’s changing.

- Faculty were reluctant in the past to use open textbooks owing to claims that they were of lower quality than commercial textbooks. The Open Textbook Library and MERLOT, another repository of open learning content, now offer faculty peer reviews that help encourage faculty adoption.

- With respect to the quality issue, the last year has seen the release of several new research reports in which students used both commercial textbooks and the comparable open textbook. These studies conclude that students using open textbooks do no worse than students using commercial textbooks and often do as well or better. And as it has been said, a free textbook that is good is superior to a great textbook that costs \$200.

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All types of myths about OER and alternate textbooks are being busted. For example, if the library leads a program to encourage faculty to stop using commercial textbooks, it will create friction with and problems for the college store. If faculty are encouraged to stop using commercial textbooks, faculty who have authored textbooks will protest in anger. The reality, on campuses with alternate textbook projects, is that scant evidence exists to document that these challenges occur. If anything, most college store managers and faculty understand why these programs make sense for students. These and other myths are debunked in the 2014 publication *Open Educational Resources Mythbusting*.

Realizing the vast savings that students can accrue, more institutions are putting seed funding into publishing projects to support faculty who agree to publish open textbooks. The Open SUNY Textbooks project received a significant university innovation grant to fund faculty members to participate in the program. Most institutions realize that modest investments can yield many times that in savings to students.

At Temple University, an investment of just under \$40,000 over four years has resulted in savings of over \$300,000.

These trends portray a vastly changed landscape for textbooks. There are more open resources, more tools for finding them and a growing acceptance that the future of academic learning content is about more than traditional commercial textbooks. Despite the change and the growth, there is still much work to be done.

What’s Really Open

Foremost among the tasks needed to promote a textbook revolution is creating awareness among faculty. According to a Babson Survey Research 2014 report on OER in U.S. higher education, two-thirds to three-quarters of all faculty are unaware of OER. The report also found that faculty believe there is value in OER and they are willing to give it a try. These findings point to opportunities for the academic library to take a leadership role in creating awareness among faculty and leveraging their general openness to OER to advance alternate textbook initiatives. One misunderstanding that needs correction relates to the nature of OER. It is about more than educational content that is freely available on the Internet. There is free content that may work as learning material, but true OER are not just free. They should meet the “Five Rs” standard:

- Retain - authors have the right to make, own, and control copies of the content

- Reuse - the right to use the content in a wide range of ways

- Revise - the right to adapt, adjust, modify, or alter the content itself

- Remix - the right to combine the original or revised content with other open content to create something new

- Redistribute - the right to share copies of the original content, your revisions, or your remixes with others

While an article from *The New York Times* or *The Economist* may be free to access on the Internet, such content fails the Five Rs test. Academic librarians are well suited to educate faculty and administrators because they have substantial experience with open con-

tent, and can assist faculty to better understand how to identify it, create it and appropriately apply a Creative Commons license to their learning material so that it adheres to the Five Rs standard.

Academic librarians add value to alternate textbook projects with their ability to help faculty package both OER and existing library content in order to take advantage of both types of resources. Licensed library content, the electronic journals and e-books to which the library subscribes, is not open content. While it is freely accessible to students and faculty the Five Rs do not apply. All too often the vast resources being licensed get less use than desired. To maximize their usage they can be adopted by faculty to serve as alternate textbook material.

Faculty who want to locate good learning content should partner with an academic librarian who can simplify the process to identify appropriate content. Most academic librarians are well versed in the available resources, open or licensed, and can assist faculty to develop their alternate textbook. While some OER advocates will want faculty to adhere as closely as possible to using only open resources that meet the Five Rs, and librarians can certainly support that position, it's a much more effective use of available campus resources when library content can support the provision of alternate textbooks.

Model OER Textbook Projects

A good way for library deans and their administrators to better grasp OER and alternate textbook projects is to explore how other institutions have implemented their projects. These projects typically have the following features in common:

- There is a financial incentive that encourages faculty to participate;
- They are run by the library but may include colleagues from other units, such as the teaching and learning center;
- Faculty are not required to write complete textbooks;
- It is a competitive application process;
- Assessment is integral to the proj-

ect and proposals must describe how evaluation will occur;

- They are proven to deliver both cost savings and enhanced student learning.

To provide a better picture of how these projects work, two are summarized here:

University of Massachusetts Amherst: The Open Education Initiative (OEI) began in 2011 when the provost and dean of libraries contributed \$5,000 each to a fund to support faculty awards of \$1,000 to incentivize faculty to replace their textbook. Several rounds of the project are now completed and a somewhat larger incentive is available to faculty teaching large enrollment courses. On average, approximately 1,600 students are enrolled in OEI courses and there is an average savings of \$128 per student. According to the project coordinator, Marilyn Billings, the Scholarly Communications and Special Initiatives Librarian, the OEI has achieved cumulative savings of over \$1,000,000 for UMass Amherst students.

University of California at Los Angeles: The Affordable Textbooks Initiative encourages instructors to use low-cost or free alternatives to expensive course materials; these can include open-access scholarly resources, library-licensed and owned resources, and learning objects and texts that faculty create themselves. Awards are available of \$1,000 each for instructors teaching courses with enrollments of fewer than 200 students and of \$2,500 each for instructors teaching courses with enrollments of more than 200 students. Applicants complete a one-page form and attend a one-hour workshop at which library staff members introduce search strategies and possible sources for open-access or low-cost instructional resources, and applicants can share ideas and form a community. Unlike most programs which offer annual awards, this one offers them on a quarterly basis.

Other institutions that offer alternate textbook projects that are similar to these two are Emory University, North Carolina State University and multiple campuses of the California State University.

Other New Trends

A newer trend at institutions that may not yet have a funded project is to add a new OER Librarian position to the library professional staff. Both Virginia Tech and the University of Oklahoma have done so in the past year. OER librarians educate the campus community about the benefits of using and creating the resources, and support faculty to locate and integrate them into their courses. Both types of projects, as well as those profiled above, are able to document their impact on student savings, and it is often the case that the savings to students far exceed the original investment.

Why not just support our faculty to publish open textbooks? That's a question a few academic libraries, sometimes in collaboration with the university press, are exploring. Libraries, individually or in groups are delving into the publishing industry.

Library Publishing Coalition, for example, is a community of dozens of libraries, developing solutions for sustainable scholarly publishing.

A project that may serve as a model for others is found at Oregon State University. There, the libraries and press have joined to create a platform for faculty to publish open textbooks. Those books may be original works by faculty or compilations of existing OER. The press provides editorial support to maintain consistent quality, but the books also go through a peer review process and must be approved by the press editorial board.

Incentivizing faculty to commit to publish an open textbook requires a sum considerably greater than the one or two thousand dollar awards the alternate-textbook projects offer. At Oregon State University faculty are offered a minimum of \$15,000 if their project proposal is accepted. It produces a quality, peer reviewed open textbook, but at these prices building up a catalog of open textbook titles will take some time.

As more academic libraries enter into the world of publishing, with or without a university press, anticipate seeing more original open textbooks published through the campus library.

Join the Movement

What's next for the OER movement as academic librarians continue to take a leadership role at their institutions to initiate these alternate textbook projects? There is no doubt that these programs will continue to grow at all types of higher education institutions. In many states the community college systems are leading the way. The Community College Consortium for OER has over 250 members. Multiple universities, particularly those with academic presses are moving beyond alternate textbooks and are incentivizing faculty to publish open textbooks that may be widely reproduced and redistributed.

OER and academic libraries has become a powerful partnership that is revolutionizing the way students access learning material. Librarians and faculty are working together to shift the fundamental concept of a 21st century textbook. It no longer needs to be a single, all encompassing volume accompanied by a multitude of accessories. Digital learning materials can be accumulated, organized and delivered on learning platforms that make it far simpler and more affordable for students.

With more librarians leading the way for their institutions there is momentum to become better organized. That has led to the formation of LibOER, a loose federation of more than 50 academic librarians and press representatives. Many of the members met for the first time at the Online Ed 2014 conference where they organized a day of information sharing about their projects. With support from SPARC, an international scholarly communications advocacy organization, the LibOER network established an electronic

discussion list where the members can regularly exchange news, obtain advice and find ways to better promote OER and textbook projects. There are plans to further formalize LibOER into a global organization that supports academic library efforts to promote OER, gathers statistical data on textbooks replaced and funds saved, shares best practices, supports librarians starting new projects, and that further collaborates with faculty.

Changing the Textbook Landscape—Gradually

Eliminating commercial textbooks and shifting entirely to OER and licensed library content as the complete campus solution for digital learning material is a nice long-term goal. That, however, may be a somewhat intimidating prospect for many library deans and academic administrators. Creating significant change in higher education is always a long and arduous process.

While there are many benefits to OER, it's reasonable that academic administrators will want to proceed cautiously, in consultation with their library deans, college store managers, technology advocates, faculty governance leaders, and student government to develop a well-thought-out strategy for developing an approach to revolutionizing student learning material.

It's highly unlikely that every textbook can be replaced by an alternative set of digital learning content. A logical first step may be the start of a campus conversation on how course content should be delivered to 21st-century learners.

Academic librarians should be represented with a place at that table, but it may be an even better

strategy for the administration to appoint them to lead the way. As Nicole Allen, SPARC's Director of Open Education, has been known to say, the academic library is the perfect campus entity to lead the conversation to achieving textbook affordability. Academic librarians know the curriculum, they know where and how to find OER and they have relationships with faculty across the disciplines in support of student learning.

If your academic library is not yet exploring OER and working with faculty to create a textbook revolution on campus, a fantastic opportunity to save students money and improve their learning is going unfulfilled. What are you waiting for?

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Resources

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See Steven Bell's Diigo.com resource page on OER and alternate textbooks at: <https://www.diigo.com/user/blendedlibrarian/OER?type=all&sort=updated>



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