

Textbook affordability: New roles for the academic library

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Abstract

This Discussion Session at the 2012 CARL Conference focused on textbook affordability and possible roles for the academic library. Textbooks have been long considered to be “part of the cost of higher education” along with tuition fees. With the steadily rising costs of textbooks and a nationwide economic crisis, textbook affordability issues are increasing. Session attendees participated in group discussion about textbook access at their institutions through Instructor Reserves and Library-purchased textbooks. Different textbook lending and reserves models were presented, along with a case-study of an “open” library textbooks model at Pasadena City College. The session ended with a brainstorming session on library and campus-wide strategies for increasing access to textbooks as well as open access textbooks/learning material adoption.

Discussion

Introduction

With rising tuition costs and a persistent economic downturn, being unable to afford textbooks and other class materials is a barrier to higher education for many students. Students spend an average of \$1,168/year on textbooks (College Board, 2011) and the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that college textbooks prices have increased at twice the rate of inflation (GAO, 2005). The rising costs of textbooks have received considerable attention in the national media and in legislature. In 2007, over 85 bills in 27 different states dealt with textbook affordability (Bell & Badolado, 2008). Libraries traditionally provide access to books, periodicals, and other information sources that support student learning. This article will address some of the ways academic libraries can address textbook affordability.

Most libraries have reserve systems for instructor-owned materials or library-purchased textbooks. Although textbook availability in the library can greatly help low-income students, this service heavily impacts library staff work flow and patron interactions. College students often assume the library has all of their textbooks and become frustrated when a textbook is not available. Innovative models for library textbook collections are emerging among academic libraries including the use of restaurant pagers (Chang & Garrison, 2012), green textbook initiatives (Hill, 2010), and high-cost textbook initiatives (University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, 2012).

Although libraries can increase textbook access, they often utilize stop-gap measures that do not address the high and rising prices of textbooks regardless of print or electronic format. Conversations about open access textbooks and other learning materials are occurring nationwide. Academic librarians can participate in campus and system wide initiatives on textbook affordability.

Description

In this Discussion Session, the presenter introduced main issues related to textbook access and affordability. A brief literature review outlining different textbook lending and reserve models at various academic libraries was shared: (1) University of Wisconsin’s high-cost, high use textbook collection, (2) Portland Community College’s green textbook initiative,

and (3) University of Texas San Antonio's textbook lending program with restaurant pagers. A group discussion about the role of academic libraries in textbook affordability was facilitated with the use of "clickers" or personal response systems. A case study of an "open" library textbook collection from Pasadena City College, a community college in Los Angeles County, was presented. This textbook affordability discussion ended with a brainstorming session among participants at each table to generate action items that could be implemented at their own institutions. Participant contributions from the "clickers" group discussion and the brainstorming session are summarized in the "Key Points" section.

Textbook Case-Study: Pasadena City College

After the group discussion, a case-study of "open-reserve" library textbooks at Pasadena City College (PCC) Shatford Library was presented. Since 1991, the Shatford Library has received funding for a textbook collection from the PCC Associated Students Student Services Fund. In addition to this annual funding, the PCC Bookstore provides a 20% discount for textbook purchases, allowing the library to purchase textbooks effectively "at-cost." High-cost textbooks (>\$75) and textbooks required for multiple sections are prioritized for library purchase. The textbook collection is not located in Reserves behind the Circulation Desk; our model is "open" or "self-serve," allowing students to browse, select, and use textbooks without checking them out. The benefits and issues with our model will be further discussed in this section.

Recent assessment of open textbook reserves was conducted by soliciting library staff and student feedback. For two days, we placed large post-it easels with markets up in the textbook area asking for student input regarding whether we should keep the service. Here are sample responses (out of 79 total):

- Please keep the textbooks! I don't know about you guys, but I cannot afford half of them, and it's nice to have access to what I need to further my education without worrying about choosing them over rent.
- Yes please [keep textbooks]! That's how you save our trees.
- The library carrying textbooks allows a lighter bike ride to school, amongst many other benefits.
- Textbooks are vital!!! This library has inspired me to go to libraries and study and helped my grades A LOT! Keep textbooks for students with low funds!

As expected, all respondents encouraged the library to maintain the textbook service and many suggested expanding the collection. Besides affordability issues, students also mentioned how textbooks support sustainability and helps with physical access. The library collection leads to less books purchased, which equates to less trees cut to produce paper. In addition, using a library textbook allows students to carry less weight in their bags and may be more likely to ride a bicycle to school.

PCC library staff and student workers gave feedback on our open textbook model, comparing it with the traditional "closed reserves" model we had before 2009. The majority of survey respondents preferred our "self-serve" model citing that students can directly access the textbooks they need, the lines for Reserves items (behind the Circulation Desk) had decreased significantly, there was less staff needed leading to salary savings, and

Circulation staff can focus on non-textbook issues. Issues with the model include stashing/hiding of textbooks, “hoarding” past the 2-hour marked limit, shelving of textbooks still needed, and students not knowing how to find textbooks on the open shelves (using the catalog, finding call number, and finding it on the shelf). Student workers that worked with the traditional model with all textbooks “behind the desk” brought up unique issues including: not knowing the status of a book (checked out, when it is returning), increased damage/theft of textbooks in the open collection, students will “self-shelve” incorrectly, and students leave library textbooks all over the library.

Despite budget issues and staffing shortages, the PCC library has decided to continue this service for students and we are continually thinking about ways to improve our model. We are discussing a “hybrid model” that places some high-demand/high-theft textbooks in behind the Circulation Desk, requiring check-out and ensuring copies are used for only 2-hours at a time. In addition, we have discussed having library staff “rovers” (from Technical Services) help out in the Textbook area during the busy first weeks of school to assist students in finding textbooks and with shelving. The final part of the discussion was a brainstorming session with all participants on campus-wide strategies for open access textbooks and learning materials.

Key points

Participant Contributions: “Clickers” Group Discussion

The following questions were used to spark discussion about current textbook implementations at local libraries and whether library textbook collections fit the academic library mission:

- Do students ask for required textbooks at the library?
- Does your library purchase textbooks for student use?
- If your library has instructor reserves and/or a textbook collection, do the items circulate [can they be taken out the library]?
- Should academic libraries purchase textbooks?
- Would your administration support a textbook collection?

Participants came from various types of academic libraries including California Community Colleges, California State University, University of California, and private universities/colleges. All participants agreed that many students expect the library to have required textbooks although some thought it was the responsibility of the student to cover costs while others argued that the rising costs of textbooks is prohibitive to students. Local library textbook collection implementations were shared by many librarians, especially among community colleges, and it was argued that providing access to textbooks supports student learning and is part of the library mission. A common theme throughout the “clicker” discussion was the role of disciplinary faculty in reducing the costs of textbooks through e-book adoption, selecting lower cost textbooks for courses, and utilizing alternative types of learning materials such as open courseware.

Brainstorming Session: Ways to Improve Textbook Affordability

Session attendees were asked to brainstorm ways to improve textbook affordability within the library, on-campus, and in the publishing field. The following recommended action items were contributed:

Library

- Catalog free online textbooks
- Buy textbooks as e-books; shift to e-resources
- Better e-reserves system (multi-faceted approach)
- Brief bib/simplified library records
- Get campus/library helpers for textbook collections
- Find internal and/or external funding for textbooks
- Get student input about textbooks
- Get faculty textbook donations (desk copy or 2nd copy) and their input
- Create a textbook affordability guide for students and/or faculty

Campus

- Form or engage in textbook affordability initiatives or task forces (example. California State University Affordable Learning Solutions)
- Work with faculty for choosing reading lists
- Talk to new faculty about publishing open access materials
- Provide faculty guidance on benefits of e-books and availability of quality alternatives
- Faculty incentives to publish and review (for quality) in open access books, flat world knowledge model
- Get bookstore buy-in for e-textbook sales
- Bring bookstore into a partnership role with the library (rather than adversary) to explore rental and e-textbook options

Publishing

- Contact your representatives about textbook cost legislation
- "Ads" in books are okay
- Author pays for crowd-source financing of publishing/destination costs
- Suggest e-textbook vendors to implement an e-textbook decision model

Main “Takeaways”

With the rising cost of textbooks as well as other challenges to higher education, textbook affordability remains a critical issue at college and university campuses nationwide. Academic libraries can take an active role to support student success on their campus and beyond. A case study from Pasadena City College (PCC)’s open textbook reserve with Associated Student funding was presented. In addition, session participants generated a list of action items that can be implemented by academic libraries to address textbook affordability. Academic libraries can be involved in textbook affordability initiatives within libraries, the college, and beyond.

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