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Small actions, big impact

Centering student voices and advocacy with a library student advisory board

Library student advisory boards offer a way for academic libraries to understand student needs and concerns, form trusting relationships, and establish formal avenues for students to share input and enact change. Successful advisory boards bring students with different interests and experiences together to foster peer-to-peer learning and advocacy. In this article, we describe how the Rutgers University-Camden Library Student Advisory Board (LSAB) hosted a panel on open educational resources (OER) and textbook affordability, a small event with considerable impact. We share perspectives from the vantages of an LSAB organizer, a dedicated student activist, a librarian working on textbook affordability, and a student new to advocacy.

Paul Robeson Library Student Advisory Board

Samantha Kannegiser, advisor to LSAB

Library student advisory boards can take many forms but all honor student perspectives. LSAB at Rutgers-Camden began in spring 2020 as a group of student volunteers hoping to facilitate communication between library workers and students to improve library services, spaces, and resources. The goal is to meet a few times a semester to discuss library priorities, their ideas for ways the library can support the study body, and more generally elucidate student perceptions of the library and its work. LSAB also educates students on the internal workings of the library to promote informed feedback, questions, and communication with other students.

This group was intentionally structured to let students lead. Students who feel engaged and empowered reap many benefits, and we wanted to provide students with an opportunity to reflect, collaborate, advocate, and contribute. There is a breadth of literature on the positive outcomes of student engagement, advocacy, and activism. Student engagement has a positive effect on grades and persistence; advocacy within an educational setting can affect students' sense of belonging and increase their political self-efficacy; and student-led activism can increase knowledge acquisition and application as well as humanitarianism.¹ Engaging with each other and promoting social or institutional change, even on a small scale, can have a lasting impact on students.

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Student organizing

Oriana Holmes-Price, former LSAB member and NJPIRG member

From the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement to recent social justice and climate change movements, our nation's youth has been on the frontlines of organizing and activism.

In recent years, higher education affordability has become prominent as elected officials discuss free college tuition, loan programs, and student debt forgiveness. Yet less often is their acknowledgement of the cost of textbooks and supplies, which, the College Board estimates, cost the average student \$1,460 at a public two-year institution an estimated \$1,460 and \$1,240 at a public four-year institution.²

One student-led group holistically tackling higher education reform is the Student Public Interest Research Group (PIRG), a nonpartisan, student-funded nonprofit organization working to make concrete changes on numerous social and environmental issues. The Student PIRGs have lobbied for higher education affordability, including the simplification of the FAFSA, funding a federal open and affordable textbooks program, and the removal of bill language that hinders student rights to choose where and how they obtain textbooks or course materials. The New Jersey Public Interest Research Group (NJPIRG), where I previously served as the Rutgers-Camden Chapter chair and State Board chair/vice chair, has collaborated with the Rutgers University Libraries to gain and sustain student, faculty, and administrative support for the Open and Affordable Textbooks (OAT) Program.

I have been politically engaged from an early age and have realized the positive impacts of youth activism due to my experiences with NJPIRG students, so joining LSAB was a natural decision. In our monthly LSAB meetings, we covered lots of different ground, from marketing library events to providing virtual services during a pandemic. Upon joining LSAB, I was interested in exploring the idea of a Z-degree, which is seen primarily in two-year colleges and allows students to graduate with an Associate's degree by paying little or nothing for course materials. As a discussion topic, I mentioned the idea of a Z-degree program to the other members of the Board, which piqued their interest and led to the Camden OAT representative, Zara Wilkinson, coming to speak with us since the two programs align well. From here, LSAB dived a bit deeper into OAT and ways for the library and students to advance the initiative.

You don't have to wait until you graduate from a higher education institution to get involved in organizing and activism. Students have the power to shape the future.

Open and Affordable Textbooks Program

Zara Wilkinson, OAT librarian

The OAT Program, a university-wide textbook affordability initiative, is a point of pride for Rutgers University Libraries. Through OAT, the libraries seek to reduce the cost of textbooks for our students while encouraging faculty to reimagine their course materials and reinvigorate their classrooms.

In March 2015, the Student Affairs Committee of the Rutgers University Senate formally recommended the university create an award program to incentivize the adoption of open textbooks. This action was the direct result of student activism spearheaded by NJPIRG students and focused on mitigating the potential impact of rising textbooks costs. In Febru-

ary 2016, the university president responded by announcing that he was charging Rutgers University Libraries with designing a program to help faculty incorporate open textbooks into their teaching. After the president's announcement, the libraries formed the Affordable Textbooks Task Force, a system-wide group that would oversee the program.

In September 2016, the libraries officially launched the OAT Program. Modeled after successful textbook affordability initiatives at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and Temple University, the OAT Program was designed to award \$1,000 incentive awards to faculty who redesign their courses to use free or low-cost resources, including OER and library resources. The program, which now runs in the spring, has continued to offer awards annually. As of July 2021, the program has issued more than 160 awards and saved students approximately \$6 million. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. In addition to the tremendous financial impact already reported, surveys of enrolled students and faculty teaching OAT courses indicate both groups feel that students learn as well or better with their redesigned course materials.³

OAT was created to benefit students and has undoubtedly achieved that goal. However, the program's core audience has always been faculty. Due in large part to the fact that OAT is a multi-campus endeavor, the libraries have not been able to engage in large-scale communication with students about either the program itself or the redesigned courses. Student involvement has been limited to inviting a student to sit on the OAT evaluation team each year and working with NJPIRG to include OAT in their student-focused textbook affordability campaigns.

When LSAB wondered how to better support efforts like OAT, the answer was clear: there was a need for messaging for and by students.

Open and Affordable Textbooks Panel

Erika Pitsker, LSAB member

Compared to my fellow Board members, my academic journey would be aptly described as “nontraditional.” As such, I often felt that my needs were vastly different than those of my peers. Upon discovering LSAB, I found a group where I could bring a valued perspective to the table and effect positive change for *all* students. As a longtime user of OER, I appreciated their many benefits, and my passion for them only increased as we began brainstorming a virtual student-led panel to discuss OER and the OAT program. We viewed this as an effective way to inform students about the program and encourage more faculty participation.

During the planning process, the Board agreed it was imperative to present perspectives from both faculty and students. We successfully recruited professors from the departments of nursing, psychology, and urban studies, allowing us to present diverse viewpoints. This accomplished another goal of ours: proving OER are appropriate across disciplines.

We then developed questions for the panelists. The questions aimed to explore:

- faculty motivation to transition to OER or OAT,
- perception of the overall quality of OER,
- labor required to transition to OER or OAT, and
- advantages to students enrolled in these courses (e.g., positively impacting student engagement and conceptual understanding of course topics).

When generating interest in the panel, LSAB strove to convey our main message: using OER helps reduce the financial and accessibility difficulties experienced by many Rutgers students. We recognized that peers' concerns had the potential to be more interesting than a discussion between faculty members. Thus, we made it apparent that the student-led panel would center student voices and advocate for overlooked student needs. Although the panel would explore more than just financial components, we decided that advertising the financial savings associated with the OAT program and OER would pique interest in the program and encourage attendance.

On the day of the event, two Board members asked questions of the faculty panel while one Board member monitored the Zoom chat for questions or provided links to resources discussed by the panelists. Additionally, two members had taken OAT courses, allowing us to answer questions about the benefits of using OER in the classroom. Across the board, faculty agreed that the transition to OER required increased labor, but the student success was well worth it. Overall, LSAB was able to meet its goals of educating faculty and students about the OAT program, giving insight into the OER landscape, and encouraging students to take courses with faculty participating in the program.

Impact

The event was a success for our Board, the OAT program, and Rutgers-Camden students. It was small scale, but because it came about organically and the students created it intentionally and meaningfully, there was a significant campus response.

The panel had 15 attendees, a mix of faculty, staff, and students. Everyone was engaged and asked a variety of questions—students were of course interested in how they could register for an OAT course, but one student also asked how they could talk to faculty about the program. Faculty had questions about the program itself, and our faculty panel members and OAT librarian were able to answer the more technical questions that LSAB students could not. Staff attendees were from various student services offices and were interested in ways to talk with students about OER and finding OAT courses. We were happy with the level of engagement because the questions showed that everyone was interested in getting more involved in the program and getting others involved, as well.

We are also seeing a broader impact. The Student Governing Association (SGA) is advocating for OER and the OAT program. They invited the library to speak with SGA a few times about the program and ways to involve students. Because LSAB was heading some of this advocacy work, SGA also asked if an SGA representative could join LSAB as a liaison. Additionally, Oriana Holmes-Price was invited to sit on the OAT evaluation committee as the student member, impressing the committee with how informed and involved she was during the evaluation process.

Conclusion

LSAB was always meant to be a place for students to form relationships and feel comfortable sharing their perspectives with the library and its library workers. Through ongoing conversations and a willingness to listen, we discovered a shared interest in textbook affordability and an opportunity for student members to advocate for their peers and for the library. Although LSAB's first initiative was modest, the reverberating effect has lasted

far beyond the one-hour event, demonstrating that even something small can have a big impact.

Notes

1. Germán A Cadenas and Bianca L Bernstein, “Measuring College Students’ Leadership Engagement in Advocacy,” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 13, no. 3 (2020): 288–96; Flora Farago, Beth Blue Swadener, Jennifer Richter, Kimberly Eversman, and Denisse Roca-Servat, “Local to Global Justice: Roles of Student Activism in Higher Education, Leadership Development, and Community Engagement,” *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 64, no. 2 (2018): 154–72; Marisela Rosas, “College Student Activism: An Exploration of Learning Outcomes,” PhD. diss., The University of Iowa, 2010.

2. Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and CJ Libassi, “Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2020,” New York: College Board, 2020, 11, <https://research.collegeboard.org/pdf/trends-college-pricing-student-aid-2020.pdf>.

3. Lily Todorinova and Zara T. Wilkinson, “Closing the Loop: Students, Academic Libraries, and Textbook Affordability,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 45, no. 3 (2019): 268-277; Lily Todorinova and Zara T. Wilkinson, “Incentivizing Faculty for Open Educational Resources (OER) Adoption and Open Textbook Authoring,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 46, no. 6 (2020). *zz*