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No reservations

Why the time has come to kill print textbook reserves

The cost of textbooks has always been a burden to college students, but the numbers show the average student's burden is growing heavier. According to University of Michigan Economist Mark J. Perry, from 1978 to 2012 the cost of textbooks climbed 812%—a rate of increase roughly 3.25 times greater than the increase in the Consumer Price Index over that same time period.[1] For the 2013-2014 academic year, The College Board's estimates for the average cost of "Books and Supplies" range from $1,207 to $1,253 dollars per student, per year depending on the type of institution.[2] Representing roughly 5% of the average total cost of one year of on-campus, in-state education at a public four-year institution, books and supplies are taking an unhealthy bite out of student budgets.

An obvious solution for costly textbooks has been for academic libraries to provide reserve copies of print-format textbooks for students who cannot afford them. This is a service that academic libraries have provided for decades and is something students and instructors (whether faculty or lecturers) expect and, occasionally, demand.

Just one catch. Putting textbooks on reserve is a terrible solution to the problem of inflated textbook prices. So terrible, in fact, that textbook reserves are not a solution at all; rather, they constitute an anti-solution, one of those well intentioned efforts that not only fails to solve a problem, but also allows the problem to continue flourishing long after it would have been otherwise eradicated.

What is so bad about putting textbooks on reserve?

• For students, a textbook reserve system is an encouragement not to buy textbooks: "If the library has a copy, then I'll save money by using theirs." What unforewarned and inexperienced students often fail to understand is that reserve textbooks are not always going to be there when they are most needed, such as when homework is due, the night before a quiz, and during midterms and finals. Students may also fail to appreciate that their time-strapped schedules (school, work, social activities, and family obligations) will make availing themselves of high-demand reserve textbooks especially challenging and/or stressful, if not impossible.

• Textbook reserve systems impose an unsustainable, never-ending drain on library budgets. The conductors of a pilot program inaugurated at the University of Illinois in 2005 concluded that running a textbook reserve program incorporating "all of the required texts for any given semester would have required at minimum an additional two FTE staff for processing and roughly $70,000 each semester."[3]

• Libraries become the focus of ire when desired textbooks are not available at the exact moment of need or when students face steep fines for not returning a reserve textbook on time.

But what about students who truly cannot afford to buy their textbooks? Isn't a shared reserve textbook better than no textbook at all? Possibly. If it turns out that two or three

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students who play by the rules are sharing one reserve textbook, the system can work. But if you throw into the mix a student who doesn't scruple at gaming the system, or if the number of students is simply too great for one copy (or more) to suffice, things fall apart fast. Mathematically, 25 goes into 1, but it doesn't go very far when a textbook is in demand and a deadline is looming.

Better than rationing access to textbooks is a scenario in which no student is reduced to relying on shared library copies of textbooks while more privileged classmates possess personal copies they can access whenever and wherever they wish (as well as annotate, highlight, bookmark, and dog ear to their hearts' content).

If the textbook playing field is ever going to be leveled, it won't be through doling out shared copies like so many bowls of thin gruel. At the root of the textbook problem is an in unfair economic model in which end consumers (students) must purchase textbooks chosen for them by intermediaries (instructors) who are insulated from textbook costs. Once a textbook has been chosen, students lack the free-market option of substituting some equivalent (or possibly better) textbook; in many cases, students cannot even substitute an earlier edition of the chosen textbook as publishers regularly re-issue new editions in order to suppress the used-textbook market.

In fact, there are only two groups who have the power to do anything about textbook prices, and neither group includes librarians. One group is publishers who, of course, have no incentive to see the price of textbooks go down. The other group is instructors who, unfortunately and perversely, have been disincentivized from taking serious, concerted action about textbook costs thanks, in part, to the existence of textbook reserve systems. No need for an instructor to worry about students' ability to afford textbooks when, "There's a copy in the library." Let them eat cake.

Lacking the convenient escape route provided by textbook reserve systems, what exactly could incentivized instructors do about textbook prices? A lot, it turns out:

• Quit assigning over-priced textbooks, especially those that are frequently and needlessly updated.

• Incorporate as classroom texts e-books and online journals that are already available at no cost to students via the campus library.

• Publish open-access scholarly articles that can be freely used as course texts.

• Fully exercise the right of fair use to make as much course material as possible digitally available to students via course-management or library systems.

• Make use of the growing corpus of open-access, peer-reviewed course materials available through such repositories as Merlot, Cool4ed, College Open Textbooks, Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources, Open Textbook Library, The Orange Grove, and many more.

• Take advantage of the growing number of library-based programs that provide grants to instructors who adopt open-access course texts. Examples include UMass Amherst's Open Education Initiative, UCLA's Affordable Course Materials Initiative, Kansas State University's Open/Alternative Textbook Initiative, and Oregon State University's Open Textbook Initiative.

• Use the power of academic promotion and tenure to reward academic colleagues who invest time, intellect, and effort into writing, editing, and peer reviewing open-access textbooks rather than writing textbooks on behalf of for-profit publishers.

Libraries, and higher education in general, have allowed textbook reserve systems to continue operating much that same way they did since the days when Woodrow Wilson was President (of Princeton) and, in so doing, have allowed the textbook's unfair economic model to survive for far too long.

In the 21st century, the ever-growing cost of textbooks (and of higher education in general) provides the reason to break the model. Digital technology provides the means. All that is lacking is the will to say that we librarians refuse to continue providing life support

This document addressed issues that faculty librarians still hold dear, such as tenure, access to research funds, library governance, salary, academic freedom, and other topics.

During the 1970s, women and minorities capitalized on the momentum created by the fight for equal rights and social justice begun in the 1960s. In direct response to those threatening this progress within the profession, ACRL passed a 1970 resolution that called for a censure of any libraries or librarians lending materials to "racist institutions conceived for the purpose of circumventing the law of land" during desegregation.

This resolution was adopted by the first Black Caucus, which became a strong proponent for black library professionals. In another directive, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded ACRL a $350,000 grant to fund a three-year program to "accelerate the development of the management ability of librarians in black colleges and universities." Women also benefited from ACRL involvement in social issues. In November 1973, ACRL sought membership feedback regarding an ALA-drafted Equal Employment Opportunity Policy.

Finally, the last major concern was one that is all too familiar today—the introduction of new technology within various library services. Stephen K. Bailey noted that even in 1978, the issue of becoming obsolete was not a new topic. "Beginning ten or fifteen years ago, speeches and articles began to appear predicting the imminent demise of libraries as we have known them. Computers would replace card catalogs, microfiche and a variety of electronic print-out systems would replace books and journals. . . . Computer terminals would replace librarians."

Certainly this concept of upgrading humans with technology was prevalent as evidenced in numerous articles and book reviews regarding the place of technology in libraries, automation of services, and computer literacy.

Joe B. Wyatt ended his March 1979 article, "Technology and the Library," urging library science programs to include "computer-based system design, development, management, and use. . . . Every librarian should be com-puter-literate." Furthermore, he encouraged all academic librarians to make an effort to become leaders rather than followers in the coming tech-dominated age.

In addition to these exhortations, the rapid expansion of OCLC's online cataloging system was of concern for many academic libraries. Dartmouth, Cornell, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and the New York Public Library (NYPL) led the charge with each adopting the OCLC system in short order. Other libraries soon followed suit and developed consortia like Yale, Columbia, Harvard, and NYPL did in 1974 with their Research Libraries Group.

Regardless of the challenges ACRL tackled, the organization remained optimistic in the face of an approaching economic crisis that emerged in the late 1970s and would ramp up in the 1980s. ACRL encouraged its members to embrace technology and become more equity-minded and socially conscious while asserting their unique role within ALA. Thus, college and university librarians looked toward an uncertain yet exciting new horizon. ⁊⁊

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to an economic model that serves the interests of neither students nor the academy.

Notes

1. Mark J. Perry, "The College Textbook Bubble and How the 'Open Educational Resources' Movement Is Going up against the Textbook Cartel," AEIdeas blog, https://www.aei.org /publication/the-college-textbook-bubble -and-how-the-open-educational-resources -movement-is-going-up-against-the-textbook-cartel/.

2. The College Board, "Average Estimated Full-Time Undergraduate Budgets, 2013-14 (Enrollment-Weighted)," https://trends. collegeboard.org/college-pricing/figures -tables/average-estimated-undergraduate -budgets-2013-14.

3. Mary S. Laskowski, "The Textbook Problem: Investigating One Possible Solution," *Library Collections, Acquisitions, and Technical Services* 31 (3-4): 161–70, doi:10.1016/j. lcats.2007.09.001. ⁊⁊