Textbooks Can be Affordable: Getting Faculty in the Game

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Abstract
The first step toward faculty adoption of OERs is successful when it meets two, interconnected goals: faculty awareness that textbook costs are a huge obstacle for students and recognition that high-quality, customizable alternatives are available. Almost simultaneously at the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (system-wide) and at one of the system’s community colleges, strategic approaches to raising awareness and incenting faculty participation were initiated. These are straightforward strategies that can be adopted or modified by nearly any college, university, or system. They are particularly compelling in unionized environments or in systems or institutions where faculty collaboration and consultation is at the center of meaningful initiatives.

Keywords
Open Educational Resources, OER, open textbooks, institutional and system strategy, professional development, sustainability, faculty, teaching and learning, innovation

Introduction
Established college textbook practices are out-pricing our students. Citing US Bureau of Labor Statistic’s consumer price index data, economist and scholar Mark Perry (2012) has widely reported that the cost of college textbooks has risen 812% since 1978, outpacing the rapidly rising costs of medical services and new homes. More recently, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2013) found that between 2002 and 2013, textbook costs grew by 82%, more than three times the consumer price index (p. 6). The price of textbooks has risen so dramatically, in fact, that the College Board (2015) estimates that they now make up 40% of the tuition in the U.S. community colleges and 13% of the tuition at the nation’s public four-year universities.

Of course all of this is happening at a time when wages have stagnated and student loan debt has ballooned to all-time highs. The cumulative effect is that textbook costs have become a significant barrier for today’s college students and many are seeking to forgo texts, classes, or both. According to a recent report published by The Student Public Interest Research Groups (2014), 65% of the more than 2000 students surveyed reported that they had “skipped buying or renting a textbook because it was too expensive” despite “94% feeling that doing so would hurt their grade in a course” (Senack, p. 6). In a separate survey conducted by the Florida Distance Learning Consortium (2012), textbooks costs prompted 35% of students to take fewer courses, 25% to drop or withdraw, and 31% to not register at all (p. 2).

To combat these costs, an increasing number of book stores have turned to rental and leasing options. While these options can help lower students’ upfront costs, those looking to keep their books will ultimately end up paying the full cost. Moreover, a study prepared by Natsuko Hayashi Nicholls for the University of Michigan Library (2011) shows that new editions are being introduced every three to four years, elevating costs of both new and used editions and
making used copies increasingly obsolete (p. 7). In addition, publishers are increasingly bundling additional materials with their textbooks, requiring students to buy new text bundles or pay for highly inflated stand-alone versions (Nicholls, p. 8). E-textbooks and supplemental online resources similarly offer students some short-term relief, but these resources are often tightly controlled through printing limits, expiration dates, and device limits; they also offer no resale value and, because of the built-in expiration dates, little long-term value (Senack, 2015, p. 7).

While faculty are becoming increasingly aware of the barriers these costs and practices pose for students, there’s still much work to be done. A 2006 study found that fewer than half of faculty surveyed even knew the cost of their selected textbooks (Nicholls, p. 8). And despite the increasing use of bundled textbooks, 65% of faculty reported “rarely” or “never” using the included materials. This disconnect is ultimately perpetuated by a system whereby the faculty choosing the texts are rarely if ever provided information about the costs and limitations associated with those texts.

Yet just as media outlets, student advocacy groups, and legislatures begin to grapple with the current landscape of outsized student costs and indebtedness, the Open Educational Resource (OER) community is offering a viable solution: open textbooks. Leveraging the global infrastructure of today’s social networking technology and the socio-economic egalitarianism of the open-source software movement, open textbooks promise to make course material accessible and affordable. Given that textbook selection largely resides with faculty, the success and reach of the OER movement hinges on how successful that movement is in helping faculty overcome what are commonly cited as the key challenges to open textbook use:

1. Lack of knowledge on the impact of OER on teaching and learning.
3. Effort required for alignment to accessibility standards.
4. Lack of professional development and technology in school to support OER use.

The cultural embeddedness of traditional textbook practices is by no means easily overcome, as evidenced by a report prepared for the Babson Survey Research Group (2014), which found that despite an overall receptiveness to the OER movement, two-thirds to three-quarters of all faculty “classify themselves as unaware of OER” (Allen & Seaman, p. 2). The Babson report goes on to note that of those faculty who have attempted to adopt open textbooks, 38% described the process of finding and evaluating OERs as “difficult” or “very difficult” (p. 2).

By examining two complementary approaches currently in use within and across Minnesota’s State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU), this report aims to add to the growing body of models that other institutions and consortia can use in locally developing and implementing OER initiatives.

**Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU)**

Minnesota’s recent legislative session included a performance goal to lower costs associated with textbooks. While this is an important goal, it is one that has not gained much attention from faculty. In order to raise awareness of textbook costs and also raise awareness of lower-cost alternatives, the Open Textbook Initiative was launched by MnSCU. This initiative brings together faculty
across 24 colleges and 7 universities in a broad scale effort to raise awareness system-wide about opportunities and barriers involved in adopting open materials for use in their classes. This effort focuses on large enrollment sections of accounting, biology, psychology, and math. Within a discipline-based learning community, faculty review relevant open textbooks and materials. The ultimate goal, of course, is that faculty will adopt open educational resources and lower costs to students. The first step, however, is engaging faculty fully in understanding the problem and realizing that high-quality alternatives are available for use and remix.

Within a week of the call for participation in this Open Education Initiative, 50 faculty committed to this project. For their participation, faculty receive a minimum of $500 USD in compensation, in accordance with the terms of the relevant bargaining agreement.

To help faculty organize their work and to function as a community, this project brings faculty and resources together via the Minnesota OER Commons. In addition, working within the OER Commons connects faculty with other network groups to help validate this work: University of Minnesota, Minnesota Learning Commons, and the Minnesota Partnership for Collaborative Curriculum. Partners in this initiative agreed to use the review criteria developed for the University of Minnesota Open Textbook Library and have engaged David Ernst, Chief Information Officer in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota, in faculty development and training. All reviews completed by these faculty become part of the Open Textbook Library, offering a primary site for all Minnesota public colleges and universities.

Next steps of the Open Education Initiative is to bring system-level work back to the 31 colleges and universities. Funding provides for campus facilitators and campus-based peer reviews. Facilitators are OER champions who will support new reviewers in efforts to develop the Open Textbook Library and increase faculty awareness at the local campus level.

**Anoka-Ramsey Community College**

While efforts across the system are selectively aimed at faculty involvement across specific disciplines, efforts at Anoka-Ramsey have focused on faculty engagement across as many disciplines as possible. To generate interest and help faculty understand the problem of textbook affordability, a break out session titled “Funding Opportunities for Great Faculty Work” was offered during a locally sponsored faculty development event. During that session, faculty were helped to understand the very real hurdles that high textbook costs present and were invited to apply for a small grant to explore possibilities. The main goal was not OER adoption but instead raising awareness of both the problem and the viable solutions. A specific textbook mindset has been in place for over 100 years, so this first step is not insignificant.

**Structure**

The initial grant process was set up in two phases (see Table 1). Interested faculty could work independently but were encouraged to work in discipline teams. They were provided a starter kit of OERs and were asked to identify and evaluate available OERs in their field or for a specific course. The deliverables for this phase included a list of possible OERs with a brief review of strengths and weaknesses and a viability scan focusing on the top resources in their field. If they identified viable resources in their field, they could request additional funding for a deep evaluation,
resulting in recommended resources that they would present to their department and faculty peers.

Participating teams worked in chemistry, philosophy, biology, math, music, communication studies, and history. In addition, librarians provide additional support and resource research. Faculty were paid $500 USD for involvement in phase one, which was encouraging enough that additional funding was supported. To be eligible for funding, all participants are also required to complete a signed intellectual property form specifying a creative licensing option. The second call for participation brought faculty from even more disciplines into the process of exploration and review. The results of all reviews will be made available on department intranet sites, and it’s expected that all faculty who were engaged will at least use OERs as supplemental resources. About half are considering adopting an OER to replace a current textbook.

Table 1. Local Open Education Initiative, ARCC

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase I</th>
<th>Phase II</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Identify available open educational resources (OER) in the faculty members’ subject area.</td>
<td>1. Conduct a deep evaluation of resources that show the most potential.</td>
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<td>2. Evaluate, generally, the viability of resources/textbooks for quality and usefulness for particular courses.</td>
<td>2. Recommend or create resources that could be adopted for specific courses (or identify that current OERs are not yet developed enough in the area to be adopted).</td>
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<td>3. Request continuation of review (Phase Two) if initial scan shows viability of OER resources have merit for intended course.</td>
<td>3. Present findings to department and faculty peers; if review is positive, encourage use or adoption in relevant courses.</td>
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($500 per individual or team member for each phase—preferably 2-3 per team)

Analysis
In the past two years, 9 different projects have been funded through both Phase I and Phase II completion. This reflects an investment of $9,000 and, given an average textbook price of $125, an approximated generated savings of approximately $275,000 for the 2,300 students impacted by this initiative so far. By Fall 2015, 9 different courses will have transitioned into open textbooks across multiple sections. In addition, two of the funded projects spanned multiple courses and sections. For example, the mathematics project examined OERs across 12 different courses while the campus library project lays the foundation for additional OERs in multiple disciplines, providing research support for future OER projects.

Conclusion
Based on the work of both these approaches, several things can be learned and shared with others who are looking for institutional or system-level strategies for moving forward with Open Educational Resources:

1. It is essential to foster a deep understanding of textbook costs as a real and significant obstacle.
2. Faculty, most particularly in a unionized environment, need to drive the work or OER review, and incentives to do so are an important kick start.
3. A tangential but important benefit of these approaches is faculty collaboration and communication around a topic vitally important to the students they teach.

References


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