Open Educational Resources and Open Access
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Happy Open Access Week.

I suspect that many of us at the reference desk in the first few weeks of this semester were approached by a somewhat worried student asking if you have book X. It’s his class textbook. He ordered it from Amazon but it hasn’t come in and he needs to read 3 chapters by 2:30. You don’t have a copy. He can’t wait for I-Share. He doesn’t want to pay for another copy from the bookstore, of course. His best option at this point is to find a classmate who’s done the reading and borrow the book before class.

This brings up a lot of questions:
Why Amazon? It was probably cheaper than the bookstore.
Could he have rented, rather than bought the book? That would have allowed him to have the book in time. But only if the bookstore offers a rental option.
Could he have purchased an online version? He could, if one exists and if his professor adopts the online version.
Should the library have purchased a copy of his book, and any or all other textbooks? No.
So what’s the best way for the student to get the book? He needs the book. He can’t learn without the book.

These local, daily questions are part of a larger conversation on textbook access and textbook cost, and access and cost of all course materials. It’s a conversation that’s been going on in the journal world for years.

We saw journal subscription prices rise to unsustainable levels, to points at which libraries could no longer afford to buy them, which meant points at which our students and faculty were unable to easily get the research articles they needed from these
journals. It was/is a broken system in which publishers had monopolies over research, and in which huge sums of money were needed to access it.

So, we started and led the Open Access movement and we’re now at a point where more and more research is freely accessible online, where authors exercise their copyrights and share their work more easily for others to read and build upon, where publisher monopolies are changing - breaking up - and information is being unlocked, where the Internet gives us so much potential for new ways of publishing and researching, and where libraries are leaders in open access, copyright, digital publishing and changing traditional publishing practices.

Now, that same movement is starting in the college textbook world. So here we are talking about textbooks, educational resources, open educational resources during Open Access Week. Some of the same problems of the journal publishing world exist in the textbook publishing world.

Five publishers control 90% of the textbook market. The most recent reliable data, according to other presentations on this topic, is from 2008. Cengage, Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Bedford Freeman & Worth, Wiley. Maybe saying one of those names in a bookstore is like saying “Elsevier” in a library?

In the journal publishing world, Reed-Elsevier, Springer, Wiley-Blackwell, Taylor & Francis, and Sage published over 50% of all papers in 2013. They control more than 70% of the journal market in psychology and chemistry, and large percentages in other fields.

We see publisher with monopolies over journals, and publishers with monopolies over textbooks.

We’re probably all familiar with Library Journal’s yearly data on journal prices. We see prices go up every year and know how many thousands of dollars journals can cost. We may have canceled subscriptions because we can’t afford them. Our students and faculty, then, don’t have ready access to these journals.

Since 1978, college textbook costs have increased over 800%. That’s a much greater increase, of course, than the rate of inflation.

Data for 10 years up to 2012 shows that increase, and the increase in the overall cost of higher education.
Textbook publishers can raise prices with very little backlash. Students (consumers) don’t have choices on what they buy. They can’t choose to buy one book instead of the other. Their instructors choose the books, so that’s what they have to buy. Students then must pay publishers’ prices. And publishers - those 5 that monopolize the market - can increase the prices without fear of market competition. Like the journal market, this system isn’t working and isn’t sustainable.

Does anyone know what students spend, on average, for a semester’s textbooks at your institution?

Dominican’s Biology 110 (the intro course) offers many options, the least expensive of which is a digital rental for $115. That may look good compared to buying a new print book for $267, which is more than twice as much. But it’s still $115.

The intro Accounting course (101) book is $205. Not only that, but students are told to put the paper materials in a 3-ring binder. Really?

I’m showing you these not to harp on Dominican, but as examples of textbook prices that are common and that are just too high. I’ve seen prices like these from other schools and booksellers.

According to the College Board (2014), the average undergraduate student should budget between $1200 and $1300 for textbooks and supplies each year. The number is the same for public and private institutions.

That one book the student asked for at the reference desk, that hasn’t come in the mail, is just one piece in that $1200. This is too much.

Many of our students, and students everywhere, come from working families who may be struggling with college expenses. Because textbooks are often paid for out of pocket and because they’re often the last big expense right before classes start, the perceived financial impact of buying books is even higher.

Students take on more loan debt or they take on more hours at work to be able to buy books. They may buy cheaper, older editions of the book. Or sometimes they simply don’t buy some or all of their textbooks because they simply can’t afford them.
A 2014 Student PIRGs study found that 65% of students [about 2 in 3] had skipped buying or renting a textbook because it was too expensive, and 94% of those students felt that doing so would hurt their grade in a course. But they did it anyway. They knowingly put themselves at a disadvantage because of the high cost of textbooks.

The same report states that almost half of students surveyed said high textbook prices determined which and how many courses they signed up for.

Students can’t learn and succeed without their books, just like researchers couldn’t succeed without ready access to journal articles. We can’t advance our institutional missions if students are not learning and not succeeding in their classes. Knowing that our great students that we interact with every day at our small schools may not be doing as well as they should because they can’t pay $205 for a binder? It’s tough.

This is a “textbook crisis,” much like the “journal crisis.”

There are some solutions to ease some of the cost burden. Students can rent books and return them at the end of the semester. Students are very good about comparing bookstore prices with Amazon and other online sellers. Sharing books with classmates may work. I-Share could be used to get a book for at least half the semester. E-books are generally less expensive, but often come with printing restrictions, or other license and access restrictions. None of these options is ideal. And, before you know it, publishers come out with new editions and raise prices, professors adopt said editions, and students are forced to pay higher prices.

Is there a better way? We’re working on a better, more balanced way to publish research in academic journals - open access. Can we do that with textbooks? Can we use the internet and use copyright to enable the creation and use of less expensive or even free textbooks? Can we invest in open education like we invest in open access? A lot of universities, a lot of libraries, some of us in this room, are saying, “Yes.”

Textbooks are just one part of OER, of course. OER includes all types of teaching and learning materials such as lesson plans, exams, activities, labs, or even full courses.

You’ll hear about different types of OER throughout the morning. But, here are some OER projects. It’s important to remember that not all of these sites offer all materials for free or in easily transferable formats.  

MERLOT: https://www.merlot.org/merlot/index.htm  
MIT Open Courseware: http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm
OER Commons: https://www.oercommons.org/
Carnegie Mellon’s Open Learning Initiative: http://oli.cmu.edu/

And, of course, the programs and repositories of free, online textbooks:
Open Stax College: https://openstaxcollege.org/
University of Minnesota’s Open Textbook Library: http://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/
Community College Consortium for Open Access Resources: http://oerconsortium.org/

As for use of these, and other OER resources, Student PIRGs, as of Feb 2015, had over 3000 professors report that they have adopted open textbooks, and has identified over 100 intro/general open textbooks available.

The OER/open textbook movement is led by public or research institutions, and by community colleges. But we private institutions should be involved in the conversation and, as you’ll hear later, some of us are already working on our own campus plans to address the high cost of course materials and to make our faculty, students and administration aware of this crisis and of resources and solutions.

My institution, Dominican, to my knowledge has not had any campus-wide conversations about this issue. I tried to start just an email conversation with our bookstore to prepare for today and never heard back. I do know that we offer rentals and digital options that can save students money, as you saw with Biology 110. And each student, as part of her or his loans, receives a $500 credit at the bookstore, which at least lessens that perceived financial impact at the start of college.

I feel comparison of the open access movement and the OER movement is a good introduction to the rest of the morning. We can’t necessarily talk about making textbooks ree without an understanding of the textbook market and of student book-buying behavior. I’m looking forward to hearing from our other speakers who are saying “yes” to finding a balance in the textbook publishing world and to making textbooks affordable.

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