



Finding New Angles: OER Student Survey Data and the Academic Library Narrative

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This project collected over 400 responses to a student questionnaire used to assess a program that incentivizes the adoption of open educational resources (OER) and other free or affordable course materials. Students enrolled in Open and Affordable Textbooks (OAT) program courses at Rutgers University (RU) indicated that they were concerned about textbook affordability, liked their open and affordable course content, and unanimously supported continuing the program. However, responses also suggested the relative invisibility of library resources and the need for continuing education about copyright and potential piracy. In addition to having direct implications for the use of open and affordable materials, these results reveal students' attitudes towards the libraries' digital environment and the role of the library in their academic experience. The survey can also provide a glimpse at how textbook affordability interfaces with key foundational library services and philosophies, including academic integrity, copyright, and the visibility, use and discoverability of library resources.

Introduction

In the last several years, initiatives that promote textbook affordability at institutions of higher education have become more common, creating opportunities for academic libraries to expand their role as stakeholders in the discussion.^{1,2} Combined with a steady increase in the availability and disciplinary reach of open educational resources (OER) through highly-visible repositories such as the Open Textbook Library and OpenStax, rising textbook prices have led many colleges and universities to develop local, library-lead, incentive programs for OER creation and adoption.³ Typically, these programs are charged with removing students' financial barriers to course content while facilitating pedagogical innovation and experimentation. Some are focused more tightly on the creation and adoption of OER to replace often-expensive commercial textbooks, while others include encouraging faculty to use library resources, course reserves, and freely-available (but not open) resources. In 2016, in response to student activism and a resolution passed by the university senate, the president of Rutgers University (RU) charged the RU Libraries with the creation of a textbook affordability initiative. The Libraries responded by creating the Open and Affordable Textbooks (OAT) program, which has since given financial incentive awards to faculty members across RU who have committed to redesigning their courses to be free or affordable.

Regular assessment is vital to ensuring that library programs meet their goals, as well as to documenting the broader impact of the university library on the student experience. The librarians on the OAT program team included regular assessment in the design of the program in the form of a web survey sent to students enrolled in OAT courses. This survey was created by the team, approved by the RU Institutional Review Board,

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and administered separately from the university-required course evaluation process. It asked students a series of questions about their textbook usage in general as well as about their experiences using open and affordable resources in their redesigned OAT course. The survey included questions about the amount students currently spend on textbooks in an average semester; where they currently obtain their textbooks; their knowledge of and experiences library resources such as e-books; and their perceptions of how open and affordable materials impacted their course activities.

This paper describes the results of the survey sent to students in OAT courses between spring 2017 and spring 2018. During this period, the survey received 423 responses. Overall, students were concerned about textbook affordability, responded positively to their open and affordable course content, and unanimously supported continuing the program. While this data can be used to demonstrate the impact of the program on textbook affordability, it also reveals information about students' digital environments and the role of the library in their academic experience. In addition to having direct implications for the future of the OAT program at RU, these results provide an opportunity to consider how textbook affordability interfaces with key foundational library services and philosophies, including academic integrity, copyright, and the visibility, use and discoverability of library resources.

Literature Review

The rising cost of textbooks is among the most pressing issues affecting higher education today. According to reports by the U.S. Public Research Interest Group (PIRG), high costs can deter students from purchasing required course materials and negatively impact their academic experience.⁴ A core component of the mission of academic libraries is to provide access to information on college and university campuses. In many cases however, libraries do not acquire textbooks, limiting their ability to mitigate high textbook costs with services such as print reserves.⁵ Open educational resources (OER), an alternative to commercial textbooks, are often credited as being the ultimate long-term solution to the textbook affordability crisis. According to the Hewlett Foundation, OER are “high-quality teaching, learning, and research materials that are free for people everywhere to use and repurpose.”⁶ These free materials are available to students on the first day of class, removing financial barriers to course texts, and studies have found that students enrolled in courses that have replaced textbooks with OER perform just as well, if not better, than their peers in other courses.⁷ A recent study conducted at the University of Georgia found that the use of OER improved students' end-of-course grades and reduced DFW (D, F, withdrawal) rates when compared to the same course taught with traditional materials.⁸

Due to these and other benefits of OER, academic libraries across the United States have been making strides towards encouraging the use of OER through inventive grant programs, as well as highlighting the use of their own digital resources as course materials.⁹ These programs are clearly up-and-coming and there is continuing support for them on many college campuses. However, such programs are often embraced as an initiative separate from other, more traditional library services, and as a result, it is sometimes difficult to understand these efforts are or should be integrated within general library work. One exception is an article that discusses the formation of a Content Services department at the University of Minnesota Libraries, which is aimed at positioning the libraries as a leader in promoting textbook affordability on campus.¹⁰ The creation of this new service model included re-thinking the Interlibrary Loan process at the institution, collaborating with the university bookstore in order to enhance and use and visibility of library e-books, and designing a grant program to incentivize affordable/open textbook publishing. Such multi-faceted approaches can ensure that affordability is a core component of many library services, not relegated to a separate program that may be isolated from other, related functions of the academic library.

Results

The OAT student survey received 423 responses, and preliminary results from the survey are reported here. The survey collected demographic information from student respondents, including on which RU campus they take classes and how many semesters they had been students at RU. Students selected how long they had been at RU from predetermined options that ranged from “one to two” to “more than ten” semesters. Although responses to this question were well-distributed, indicating that OAT classes reach students at all levels, the highest number of results fell into the “one to two” or “three to four” categories.

The first part of the survey asked students to provide information about their textbook-purchasing habits, including how much money they spend on all of their textbooks in a typical semester. The College Board estimates that the yearly books-and-supplies in-state estimate for the average full-time undergraduate student at a four-year public college is about \$1,298.¹¹ Thus, the OAT committee expected that responses to this question would be rather high (i.e. \$500-1000). However, actual students’ responses were much more moderate, with highest percentages of students reporting spending between \$201 and \$300 or between \$101 and \$200. When asked if they had ever been unable to purchase a textbook due to its cost, slightly less than 60% of respondents selected “Yes,” although there was some variation in the percentages at individual campuses. When asked where they acquire their textbooks, the majority of students indicated that they buy online at Amazon or similar retailer. The university bookstore was another common choice, followed by borrowing the text from friends. Using the library seemed to be the least popular response, with almost 65% of students reporting that they never use the library to acquire or access their textbooks. In an optional open text box that accompanied this question, students also indicated that they rented their textbooks or found pirated copies online.

The second part of the survey asked students several questions specifically related to their OAT course. First students were asked if they had been aware that their course was designated as an affordable course before they enrolled. Almost 80% of respondents were not aware that their course was part of the OAT program, suggesting that additional student-focused marketing and branding are needed. They were then asked about the ways they accessed the redesigned course materials and their experience using those materials compared to traditional course materials such as commercial textbooks. In terms of technologies students use to access their redesigned course content, the majority used a laptop/tablet. Much smaller but still significant numbers of students reported using their mobile phone, printing their course materials, or using a desktop computer. These results suggest the need to consider format constraints of open and affordable digital materials, such as the ability to be printed and mobile compatibility, as well as of other kinds of library-provided electronic content. When asked to compare their redesigned course materials with traditional course materials, students responded quite positively to all course-related activities, including accessing, reading, note taking, and collaboration. At the end of the survey, students were asked if it was important to them that RU continue to try to make their course materials more affordable, and 100% of students responded affirmatively.

Discussion

It is clear that the RU students surveyed find textbook affordability to be a significant problem, that students support OAT, and their experiences with their redesigned course materials are overwhelming the same or better than with commercial textbooks. This is consistent with the existing literature on textbook affordability, OER, and the student experience, and well as with conversations with student activists and student government at RU, who have all been supportive of OAT and the Libraries-led efforts to lower costs and increase the use of OER. In fact, there is an emerging student campaign in support of price transparency of coursework at the university, which includes requests to list the cost of required materials in the registration system.

One surprising finding was that OAT students report spending less than the nationwide average on textbooks in a given academic year. This question may need further examination, however. OAT students are only a subset of all RU students, making it impossible to determine from these results whether RU students spend more or less than what the College Board and other estimates have predicted. In addition, the term “textbook” may have inadvertently excluded digital course materials, access codes, homework programs, and other associated fees.

It is alarming that the majority of survey respondents did not know (prior to taking the survey) that their course was redesigned to include open and/or affordable content. This is problematic, especially since some also expressed that knowing about OAT would have affected their course selection. These results emphasize the need to better advertise OAT and to increase the visibility of specific courses, especially those that fulfill general education or major requirements, to students and academic advisors. The Libraries have worked with the university registrar create an OAT identifier in the course registration system, but it has received limited use, so a future course of action might include revisiting that and making recommendations to increase its usage. Increasing the visibility of OAT courses has many benefits for a variety of stakeholders, including the faculty member and their department (higher enrollment), the students (lower course fees), the Libraries (a prominent initiative), and the entire university (a public relations opportunity). Such benefits become increasingly important in an academic environment that asks libraries to provide their value.

A careful look at the data collected from this survey shows how this textbook affordability initiative interfaces with other library services—or, in some cases, how it does not. The “affordable” (rather than open) element of the Open and Affordable Textbook program is intended to encourage faculty to lower the cost of their courses by adopting existing library resources and using them as course materials or by employing course reserves, which is of course a mainstay of the academic library. Despite this, students who responded to this survey overwhelmingly indicated that they do not use the library to acquire course materials. This is, of course, due to the long-standing practice of libraries not including textbooks in their collection development policies. However, it could be time to re-examine this, in view of the fact that the libraries do purchase many materials that can be used as course materials, such as e-books. This is obviously a sensitive issue with many wide-reaching implications for library budgets and services, and any changes would require ample future discussion. Overall, however, it is very concerning that students do not recognize the library as a provider of course materials, even course reserves, and it is possible that they are responding to a broader confusion about what course materials are and can be—that is, not simply print textbooks. This results in a question that will challenge library professionals going forward—while it is clear that libraries cannot purchase expensive commercial textbooks for all students, is there, nonetheless, a role for libraries as providers of some course content?

Conclusion

The student questionnaire used to assess the incentive OER and affordable course material adoption program at RU found that it is both appreciated and well-received by students, as the cost of course materials continues to pose a significant burden. Responses also suggest the need for more intentional marketing and branding of OAT courses and the real or perceived invisibility of library resources in OAT courses. Furthermore, student responses offer a glimpse at other, related issues such as students’ reliance on mobile devices for viewing course materials and the need for education about copyright and potential piracy concerning online course material acquisition. The data gathered through the OAT student survey, as well as through an accompanying survey of faculty members teaching OAT courses, will help the OAT committee make decisions about future rounds of the program, which has already generated an estimated \$2 in savings for RU students. In recognition of the fact

that making textbook affordability a priority at RU Libraries clearly requires more than a single initiative, future directions may involve building more structure around the program and bolstering it with associated services such as course reserves, collection development, technical infrastructure, and user education.

Endnotes

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