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Donor Funded Open Educational Resources: Making the Case

Introduction

Libraries have endeavored to offset the high cost of textbooks by making certain books available through course reserves, but such efforts are often hampered by a lack of funds to make more than a few copies available or by the fact that textbooks are typically only placed on reserve when an instructor specifically requests that the library do so. Open Educational Resources (OER) provide a powerful new tool for libraries to use in combating high textbook cost, but such efforts still require funding to succeed. However, due to the considerable impact these programs have on helping to ensure student academic success and on the ability of OER textbook programs to return multiple times their cost in value, such programs are ideal candidates to secure donor funding. This article will discuss the need for such programs, provide an overview of OER and how it can meet the need for reducing the burden of high textbook cost, and demonstrate why such programs are ideal candidates for donor funding.

Text Book Cost as a Barrier to Education

Textbook costs have become a serious burden on students and have become an unfortunate barrier to education for students from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. Nationally, textbook costs have risen at four times the rate of inflation since 1981. For example, according to the Oregon State University financial aid office, the average cost of textbooks for an OSU student is \$1,965 per year. This amounts to 29% of the cost of tuition (OSU Tuition and Fees 2015). In fact, students in the United States spend an average of \$1,168 per year on textbooks (College Board, 2011), and this cost barrier helped prevent 2.4 million low and moderate income college-qualified high school graduates from completing college in the previous decade (Advisory Committee 2006).

High textbook costs are also a barrier to student success in individual courses and to student retention. A recent poll of higher education students in Florida found that 45.1% of students chose not to register for a specific course, 33.9% had earned a poor grade, 26.6% had dropped a course, and 17% had failed a course because they couldn't afford the textbook (Donaldson et al 2012).

The Course Reserves Solution

Traditionally libraries have attempted to offset the cost of textbooks by purchasing textbooks and making them available for student access through course reserves. However, this approach has inherent limitations. A physical book can only be accessed by one student at a time so each copy of the textbook the library provides can only be used to help a relatively small number of students. In addition, students must visit the library to use the textbook which may present difficulties for off campus and other students. Of course, such resources do not offer a solution for the increasing number of students who participate in distance learning programs. In addition, purchasing even a single copy of all textbooks used at an institution would be cost prohibitive, therefore most libraries are only able to provide a limited number of copies of textbooks for courses with the highest registration numbers (Pollitz, Christie & Middleton 2009).

The OER Solution

OER offer a new approach to finding a solution to the problem of excessive textbook cost. The term was coined at UNESCO's 2002 Forum on Open Courseware and is commonly defined as:

“teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise, that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions (Lane 2012, 137-138).”

For the purposes of this discussion, OERs are very low or no cost resources intended to supplement or replace more expensive traditional resources such as textbooks produced and sold under the for profit model. The number and usefulness of such resources is on the rise. For example, over the past several years authors have increasingly written textbooks and provided access through a Creative Commons license that allows anyone who wants to use a copy of the book to do so free of charge, particularly for electronic copies of such resources. In the case where printed copies of a book are provided there may be a small cost associated with obtaining a printed copy. In addition certain library resources that fall outside the strict definition of OER may often be successfully incorporated into OER textbook programs. Resources such scholarly articles from journals to which the library already subscribes or e-books which the library has already purchased fall into this category.

Involving Faculty in the OER Solution

A key component in implementing OER solutions is persuading faculty to switch to OER textbook resources. Libraries may help encourage faculty to do so by implementing OER consulting programs which present information on how to eliminate expensive textbook requirements and instead use textbooks with open access licenses in combination with other OER resources, such as articles from open access journals or from traditional journals to which the library already subscribes. However, the time and effort involved in converting a course from traditional to OER resources has presented a barrier to the success of such programs. In fact, faculty cite the time and effort to find and evaluation OER resources as the most significant barrier to adoption of such resources (Babson Survey Research 2015). Faculty must re-work reading assignments, homework problems, discussion points, and grading rubrics. So, while many faculty members see the need to reduce textbook costs and desire to do so for the benefit of their students they are often already facing a heavy workload and many demands on their time which prevent them from doing so. One solution to this dilemma is providing a financial or other incentive to encourage more faculty members to participate in such programs. For example, Lane Community College in Lane County, Oregon provided an iPad to instructors who participated in an OER program and Oregon State University is in the process of providing \$10,000 worth of funding to faculty as an incentive to changing over existing courses from traditional textbooks to OER resources (Lane CC's Award-Winning 2015). Of course, the resources to fund such programs can be difficult to find given the many demands on current library budgets. However, due to the nature of OER programs a strong case can be made to donors to secure such funding.

Involving Donors in the OER Solution

OER programs make ideal candidates for donor funding programs for a number of reasons which will be discussed in this section.

Donors like to support programs with a proven track record of success.

OER textbook programs have been successfully implemented by a variety of institutions. For example, Salt Lake Community College in Utah began using an OER solution for some math sections and found improved student grades and greater student retention in the OER sections compared to sections that used a commercial textbook and an online homework system with a login and password requirement. In addition, cost savings to students were significant. 257 students participated in OER classes and saved \$48,000 (Lumen Success Story: Salt lake 2015). Students are now demanding more OER sections.

In another successful example, Tidewater Community College in Virginia has created a z-degree in business. The z represents zero textbooks. This saves students nearly 25% of the cost of the curriculum or \$252,000, and 98% of the students in the z-degree program rate the courses better or the same as courses that use traditional textbooks. In addition, there was a significantly higher retention rate in the z-courses (TCC Office of Academic 2015). Such success stories can be a powerful incentive when soliciting donor funding for OER textbook initiatives.

Donors like to support programs that have a significant impact on important issues.

The need to find a more affordable solution to the traditional textbook model is an important issue for educational institutions today. In 2013, a group of student Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) surveyed 2,039 students from more than 150 universities on textbook costs. 65% of these students had foregone purchasing a textbook and 94% of that group were concerned that not purchasing the book would negatively affect their grade. Nearly half of the students said the cost of textbooks influenced whether or not they enrolled in a specific course as well as the total number of courses in which they enrolled. Nicole Allen from the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) summarizes, "Whether it is doing worse in a course without access to the required textbook or taking longer to reach graduation, it is clear that the issue of textbook costs has evolved from a simple financial concern to a threat to student success (U.S. & World Report 2015)."

Personal stories highlighting the effects of high textbook cost also abound and likely can be found on your own campus. Donors may be influenced by these stories and by the stories of students struggling through classes without the required textbook. Students who endeavor to complete a course without the needed funds seek creative but unsatisfactory alternatives. For example, some students share textbooks and therefore share the associated costs. While this is helpful, logistically such a solution may not create the ideal educational environment. Others use a free OER textbook even though that is not the book assigned. This requires translating each assignment that uses the costly book to the free book which is not always possible. Yet others use an older edition of the required textbook that may not have access to accompanying materials or may have different problems and exercises. Having an older edition may also be a source of embarrassment for a student.

The savings that OER alternatives provide to students are significant. For example, if faculty at Oregon State University replaced the textbooks from just the ten courses with the highest

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3 enrollment, students would save a total of \$1,493,474 every year (see Appendix A). Assuming
4 an incentive program which provided a \$1,000 for each professor these savings could be realized
5 with a donation of only \$10,000. Another example of the financial benefit of OER textbook
6 programs can be found in a program implemented at Lane Community College. Instructors at
7 Lane replaced textbooks for 61 courses with OER resources and in the process saved students
8 approximately \$155,500 per term in textbook costs while investing \$30,500 to provide iPads as
9 an incentive for instructors to do so (Lane CC's Award-Winning 2015). These numbers are
10 impressive and likely to sway donors making hard decisions about the most effective ways to
11 donate their resources.
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14 *Donors like to support programs donors at other institutions have supported.*

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16 Donors have already offered their support for OER textbook programs across the country. For
17 example, the Oregon State University library recently received a \$10,000 grant designed to
18 provide a \$1000 incentive for faculty willing to convert a course from a costly textbook to an
19 OER based solution from the OSU Women's Giving Circle, a group which provides funding for
20 university programs relevant to women but not necessarily exclusive to women (OSU Women's
21 2015). The OER textbook program was an ideal candidate for this funding as textbook costs are
22 relevant to all students and nearly half the students enrolled at OSU are women (Institutional
23 Research, 2015).
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27 In another example, The University of Minnesota was awarded \$600,000 from the William and
28 Flora Hewlett Foundation to advance the adoption of OER at colleges and universities across the
29 country. One way they have been educating faculty is by offering small grants of \$200 to review
30 an open textbook on the Open Textbook site. This has a two-pronged effect. One is that the
31 faculty member who reviews the book is now aware of OER textbooks, and secondly faculty
32 interested in replacing their textbooks can see peer reviews of the textbooks they are considering
33 making it easier and more likely that faculty can find appropriate and effective OER resources
34 for the courses they deliver.
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37 *Donors like to fund programs that have a cascading effect.*

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39 While it has been demonstrated that replacing the required textbooks for even one course with
40 OER alternatives can result in a significant savings to students over time, OER textbook
41 programs offer the possibility of creating a cascading effect that has the potential to greatly
42 increase their reach and impact. Faculty who change over one course to OER resources and
43 witness the positive impact such a change has on their student's educational experience may be
44 inspired to do so in other classes they teach. In addition, faculty also often encourage other
45 professors teaching the same course to use the free resources they have discovered.
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48 *Donors like to help people who are helping themselves.*

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50 At Lane Community College, the funding for incentives for the more than 50 courses that have
51 been moved to OER resources came from the students themselves. Students at Lane decided to
52 invest some of the funds available from a tuition rebate into an OER program. With the cost of
53 textbooks reaching 39% of tuition for students at community colleges (Trends in Higher, 2015),
54 it is not surprising that the students at Lane chose using OER resources to replace costly
55 textbooks as a high priority when looking for ways to improve their educational experience and
56 that of their peers.
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3 *Donors like to fund programs to which they can relate personally.*
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5 Everyone likes to be involved in programs to which they can personally relate or that reflect a
6 need they themselves have experienced. This is also true when examining the problem of high
7 textbook cost. For example, at Wichita State University a textbook fund was started by donors
8 who themselves had trouble paying for textbooks throughout college (WSU Libraries Textbook
9 Collection 2015).
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12 13 **Conclusion**

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15 Replacing expensive textbooks with free resources can help to ensure that no student earns a
16 poor grade, chooses not to take a class, or leaves school due to high textbook costs. These are
17 important objectives. Fortunately, there is a strong case to be made to donors that just a small
18 investment in an OER textbook program can have a multiplying effect that will provide
19 considerable cost relief to struggling students leading to improved institution wide learning
20 outcomes. Libraries are in an ideal position to lead this important effort.
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