

Librarians Discuss Textbook Affordability as an Equity Issue

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Librarians working in academic settings have taken different stances on providing access to materials assigned in courses. Although libraries have long offered course reserves, adding course-assigned materials to permanent library collections has been discouraged for a variety of reasons. A number of events and considerations—including COVID-19 campus shutdowns, growing online degree programs, increased support for student success, availability of open educational resources (OER), and new e-books licensing models that support multiple users—have made library provisioning of assigned materials, commonly referred to as textbooks, more mainstream. Despite differences in their scope, approach, and workflows, many library-led textbook affordability programs share the common goal of promoting equity.

The following dialogue highlights the perspectives of librarians at diverse institution types doing innovative and thoughtful work that centers student access and equity. Robert L. Butterfield (RB) is the director of instructional resources at University of Wisconsin-Stout, Kendra Lake (KL) works as a librarian at North Central Michigan College, Adriana Poo (AP) and Christa Perez Bailey (CB) serve as co-coordinators of Affordable Learning \$olutions (AL\$) at San José State University, Mitchell Scott (MS) is coordinator of collections strategies at University of Kentucky Libraries, and Allia Service (AS) serves as OER specialist at University of Oregon Libraries. I hand-picked these contributors for their rich experiences and invited them to respond to any of the following questions that speak to them.

How does equity relate to materials assigned in courses?

AS: Equity in college courses is deeply tied to the price of course materials, how students access their materials, when they get access, and the materials themselves. When students are required to purchase expensive materials, those who cannot afford them will either purchase them anyway and forgo other expenses like food and housing or choose not to purchase the materials. Either way, expensive materials create an equity issue. Some students have a stress-free experience with all the materials they need to be successful from day one, and other students wait weeks to purchase materials, work extra hours to

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pay for them, or struggle to do coursework without resources. Accessing electronic resources, including library e-books with DRM, can also be an equity issue for students with inconsistent access to the internet or computers. Finally, the content and examples within course materials can be a source of inequity.

RB: Course materials are related to equity in several ways: (1) Access to required materials is essential to student success. If access is hindered, students with the most need are immediately put at further disadvantage in meeting the course objectives. (2) Day one access is also essential. When students wait to see if a resource is going to be used, or if they may be able to get along without it, because they cannot afford to purchase access, they are not being offered equitable access to that learning. Every student needs to be able to start on the equal footing of having access to the materials they need to succeed in their studies. (3) Accessibility. It is a necessity that ALL students can access the required materials on day one and beyond. It is unconscionable when students need to wait days or weeks into a course to get access to accessible materials. Further, when resources are provided with accessibility in mind at the front it benefits all students (a great example of this is when resources are provided with text-to-speech). (4) Resources need to adapt to relatable formats. Equity and diversity contribute to better outcomes in the classroom and stronger candidates for the job market. One element of promoting equality is to utilize resources that are relatable to a much wider variety of cultures, experiences, and beliefs. This is not purely a task for OER. We must demand of commercial partners that their resources too should support all students. (5) They expand access to a wider range of tools. Much of the conversation around course materials, accessibility, and affordability revolves around the traditional textbook. To promote equity, it is essential that we start to think beyond the book and provide access to materials that support the course objectives and prepare students for engaging with the greater world. This looks to support equity beyond the academy.

AP: Equity in higher education encompasses various aspects, including access to essential course materials. Students are overwhelmed with paying for college and are disheartened when they first learn that the course includes additional costs. We have especially seen this frustration among international students, low-income students, students who have to support their families, and homeless students at SJSU. Maria Ayala, an SJSU undergraduate student, shares that at the beginning of every semester, she is stressed and anxious. Purchasing textbooks affects the way that she selects her class schedule.¹ Students who are not able to purchase their textbooks before the course begins are at a disadvantage and are at risk of falling behind their target graduation rate.

CB: One of the principles of SJSU's Affordable Learning \$olutions program is accessibility. In our program we define accessibility as the following: "Every student is entitled to a high quality education with access to all learning materials."² Therefore, if you cannot afford or do not have the means, appropriate internet access, etc., to access the materials for your course, then you are not able to reach equity in that course. While equity is a component of the work we do at SJSU to make textbooks more accessible and education more affordable, we view this work more broadly as a social justice issue.

KL: The most straightforward connection, aside from considering the content itself, is simply the ability of students to obtain and access assigned materials. As an institution with over half of our degree-seeking student population receiving Pell grants in 2022–2023, many of our students are not in a position to afford costly course materials. As publishers move to a digital first or digital only access model, these decisions also affect our students' ability to access course materials, as the rural nature of North Central Michigan College places home access to high-speed internet access out of reach for many students.

MS: One key component to student success is all students having equitable access to the materials selected by instructors as necessary or required for their course learning. Therefore, equitable, day-one access to assigned materials is something that we should all be striving for. If we want evidence to support the impact of equitable access, we need to look no further than the research on OER adoption and positive correlation between student use of OER and reduced drop, fail, withdrawal (DFW) rates, improved course grades, and greater equity in outcomes for Pell recipient students, part-time students, and populations historically underserved by higher education.³ To me, this impact is the north star of the work we are all doing with textbook affordability initiatives.

What is the academic library's role in textbook affordability?

RB: Providing access to information (content, knowledge, technology, etc.) is a core tenant of librarianship. In that role, librarians are providers, influencers, advocates, teachers, counselors, collaborators, supporters, and more. That is the same approach that academic libraries should provide in the quest for affordable course materials. Whether your campus aggressively pursues affordability or does little, the library has an opportunity (and perhaps a duty) to support affordability efforts. Libraries provide a nexus between students, faculty, staff, and administration like few other organizations on campus do. This places the library in the perfect position to support affordability. Be a strong voice. Support solutions that provide students with relief but remain flexible. Support good solutions for the near-term while always striving for the more perfect solution. Resources, technology, and teaching change; the library has the ability to support these changes and evolve with these changes.

AS: Academic librarians are in a position to lead textbook affordability initiatives on college campuses. Libraries often house Open Education programs and run textbook affordability initiatives, including purchasing library e-books for courses. Faculty often have positive associations with the library and may already be comfortable going to librarians for course material support. Textbook affordability initiatives fit easily into most libraries' missions of educational access and student success and our existing support around open access publishing, copyright, and licensing. Library e-books for courses programs let us leverage existing collections and purchasing processes to promote and purchase books that we can be sure will be used by students to support their learning. For librarians to lead textbook affordability efforts they need resources; financial and personnel resources are key, but libraries also need administrative support to incentivize faculty to engage with textbook affordability. Without a way to influence administrative and faculty decisions, libraries are limited to supporting textbook

affordability efforts that require little external buy-in. Faculty also need contract time to redesign courses around affordable materials.

AP: Access to textbooks and technologies is another critical equity issue in higher education. Academic libraries often serve as key facilitators by ensuring equal access to required readings through initiatives like course reserves, lending equipment such as laptops or hotspots, and purchasing multiple-user licenses for digital materials. These efforts directly impact students' ability to participate fully in their courses, regardless of financial constraints.

CB: At SJSU, the library is at the heart of textbook affordability. The California State University's Affordable Learning Solutions program has been helmed by two librarians since the program's inception in 2012. Although every one of the twenty-three campuses in the system has an instance of AL\$, not all campus programs are administered by librarians. Some campuses have faculty or instructional designers in charge of the initiative. At some campuses, the bookstore heads up the initiative. SJSU considers itself very lucky to house AL\$ in the library. Having the program positioned this way allows librarians to promote already existing library resources in the effort to bring down course material costs in addition to promoting open educational resources.

KL: The Library is uniquely positioned within the college to lead textbook affordability efforts. As the NCMC Library staff says to students on registration day and in all information literacy instruction sessions, "the goal of the library is to ensure that students have access to the resources that they need to be successful in their academic goals." Embracing textbook affordability efforts on campus is one way that we see that goal being reached. The library has the professional knowledge and skills to support the discovery, acquisition, and access of materials of many formats and across multiple platforms, knowledge of licensing, copyright, and accessibility. In addition, libraries are the central location for knowledge sharing and research support on campus. We see textbook affordability as something that goes far beyond the bookstore, as something that starts by building relationships with faculty and administrators, learning more about what their content needs are, and being a partner in meeting those needs in a way that places the least burden on students.

MS: Library-led provisioning of textbooks or required materials is increasingly becoming a core function and priority for academic libraries. It is common for most institutions to prioritize student success, increasing equity, and reducing the cost of higher education as part of their strategic missions. I think librarians have often struggled to demonstrate to administration the connection between library services, especially library collections, and these strategic priorities. Although librarians have attempted to link various services and student usage to student success metrics, retention, and graduation rates, these connections have often been ineffective in illustrating how the library plays a role in supporting and advancing these institutional priorities. I don't think that is the case with library-led affordability initiatives. These seem more visible, integrated, and institutionally impactful than any other collection led or collection focused initiative that I have joined or overseen.

Do library and college administration at your campus understand affordability as an equity issue?

AS: Yes, more and more administration has come to see affordability as an equity issue, and a way to advance equity goals. The Office of the Provost has recently asked all departments to set student achievement gap equity goals, and a few departments explicitly set textbook affordability goals. Our colleagues recently included our textbook affordability programs in presentations to all library staff and the university senate about equity and inclusion efforts in the library. Over the last several years we've started collecting and presenting more data about textbook costs and affordability efforts, which has helped administration understand the scope of the challenge and made it possible to easily set measurable affordability goals.

AP: Libraries, along with college administrations, increasingly recognize textbook affordability as an equity issue. Measures such as supporting OER through programs like AL\$ demonstrate a proactive stance in addressing these challenges. Senate resolutions and campus initiatives further underscore the commitment to reducing costs and improving access to educational resources.

RB: Yes and no. Even with the amount of media attention recently focused on affordability of higher education, it can get lost in the noise of all the other issues. Enrollment, declining budgets, and AI have all distracted attention away from affordability. Rising tuition and cost of room and board are larger costs and much more difficult to address. Affordability of course resources require constant advocacy to compete with the other issues on campus.

CB: Maintaining administrative support is always a challenge due to the cyclical nature of popularity and attention that affordability and equity issues have on campuses. Compounding this is the high turnover or churn rate at the campus administrative levels. We spend a lot of time and resources having to educate, and at times reeducate, administrators. Additionally, the constant flow of students due to graduation and admission of new students also creates the need for constant education as to textbook affordability and campus equity issues.

KL: Yes. The library is a coordinator of textbook affordability efforts as well as the point team for technology lending, so access to materials and technology is very much ingrained in the library's structure and duties. Administration has a fair understanding of ways in which the library is supporting these efforts and actively encourages continued growth and development in these areas. The library also recently had an opportunity to provide a brief overview of OER and textbook affordability efforts to the board of trustees, which allowed us to share the impact (financially) that these efforts have provided students in the past four years and introduce the concepts of open and alternative course material use as a means of supporting student access and success.

MS: I think so. Reducing student costs and promoting equity are often institutional priorities, and campus units are increasingly required to demonstrate how their work aligns with and contributes to these goals. However, in the broader context of the overall cost of higher education, the savings generated from textbook affordability programs can be viewed as minimal or seen as relatively

negligible (e.g., \$4,600 worth of savings on textbooks over four years compared to \$104,000 for tuition, housing, and other costs). The equity aspect and its potential impact on critical institutional outcomes, such as student success and retention, seem to carry more weight and create more support. But this support does not always correlate with additional permanent funding to support these initiatives or support for the necessary institutional changes to tenure and promotion that could potentially prioritize this work among instructors.

What support systems exist on your campus to support affordability—whether for textbooks or otherwise?

RB: The library operates the textbook rental program, digital resources program, and the open educational resources program through the Instructional Resources department. The sole mission of this unit is to provide almost all of the required course materials while advocating for affordability.

CB: San Jose State University has the SJSU Cares program. The program is designed to support students' basic needs. The goal of the program is to provide students assistance when support is most needed. "SJSU Cares provides resources and services for SJSU students facing many kinds of financial crises. If you're having trouble paying for food, housing, or other bills due to an unforeseen crisis, come to us to get the help you need."⁴ Students can get housing, food, transportation, legal, or counseling and psychological services through SJSU Cares. Beginning in January 2024 a link to the library's e-books and course materials was added to the list of resources available to students.

Our bookstore has a deferred payment program for students. Each semester registered students may charge up to \$900 on their student account. This amount includes textbooks and school supplies. A program such as this is helpful especially to students who receive veteran benefits and must purchase textbooks from the campus bookstore.

Associated Students have an affordable textbook program that provides \$200 vouchers to students on financial aid on a first come, first serve basis. Typically, there are two batches of vouchers released each semester. This popular program will accept applications until their budget limit is reached. It is not unheard of for the program to close by noon on the first day of classes. "Students who receive financial aid grant(s) and Scholarship Awards: Military, EOP, and Middle Class Scholarship are eligible for a \$200 voucher to buy or rent a textbook, purchase school supplies, and technology that are available at the SJSU Spartan Bookstore in person. This program is NOT offered for Summer and Winter Sessions."⁵

AS: I can only speak to textbook support. We have a few lending libraries run by departments and groups on campus, including the Women's Center. Our basic needs program, which supports students with food and housing, also provides a textbook subsidy. The subsidy receives hundreds of applications every term and they cannot fulfill them all. For faculty, our Teaching Engagement Program and UO Online offices promote textbook affordability and OER to instructors and regularly refer them to the library OER team. The Teaching Engagement Program recently funded an Open Pedagogy project through their teaching grant which allowed a faculty member to work with a team of students to create

an open textbook that will replace paid materials in her course in the future. Within the library our OER team provides small grants and direct support for faculty using and creating OER (see below). Our library e-books for courses program began in fall 2023 and now has ongoing funding. We estimate library e-books have helped students avoid up to \$524,000 in course material costs in the program's first year!

KL: There are many programs on campus that aim to support affordability efforts. Starting with textbooks, the library reviews course material adoptions each semester to determine whether library owned or subscribed materials can serve as a substitute for student purchase of materials. The library also collaborates with faculty and our online learning team to identify, adapt and/or adopt open education resources (OER) as course texts or as supplemental materials for student use. Beyond textbooks, the library operates a widely utilized technology lending program, in which students may borrow a laptop, Wi-Fi hotspot, and/or graphing calculator for the duration of the semester. With a current FTE of 903, our collection of over one hundred laptops, one hundred Wi-Fi hotspots, and eighty-five graphing calculators provides technology and internet access to a significant portion of our student population. The college operates a campus cupboard to address food insecurity, and also maintains a student emergency fund to address life emergencies. In addition to these support resources, the college partners with the Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa on the Waganakising Odawa Career and Technical Education Program (WOCTEP). This program offers students in specific career programs the ability to complete their certificate or degree with benefits that include support for tuition, fees, books, internet, mileage, certification exam, and also provide an hourly stipend to students for attending. NCMC also has a popular Early College program, which provides students the opportunity to receive both a high school diploma and a North Central associate degree after their fifth year of high school. Students complete their coursework at their home high school and on North Central's campus, and the high school may pay all or a portion of a student's tuition bill.

MS: University of Kentucky Libraries has an active OER Grant program and addresses access to technology required to be successful as a student with its iPad Initiative.⁶ University of Kentucky also has a WildCat Wheels program that offers free bikes and bike repairs to UK students and staff and to address food insecurity there is the Big Blue Pantry and One Café.⁷ I have only been at the University of Kentucky for six months so there are likely more support programs, but these are the ones that I am aware of.

How does your library support open educational resources, if at all?

AS: We are lucky to have a small OER team at the University of Oregon Libraries, made up of myself and my supervisor. We support faculty creating, finding, adapting, and adopting OER through consultations, workshops, and ongoing project support. We host UO faculty-authored OER through the open publishing platform Pressbooks, and provide direct editorial, technical and accessibility support for books hosted through our network. We also provide some small grants for faculty who adopt OER for high-cost or high-enrollment courses. We collect and analyze data about all textbook use and costs on campus, including OER and use that data to support our OER program and other affordability

efforts. The data helps us with our OER promotion on campus, and we include it in our materials for outreach events.

In Oregon we are connected to our state OER agency, Open Oregon. We liaise with Open Oregon to connect our faculty with a wider range of open education professional development opportunities and grants for working on OER creation projects. We also work with the state to provide input on the implementation of statewide OER and textbook affordability legislation and report our textbook cost data to the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission.

CB: We have added more open content. We have records in our library catalog for OpenStax and LibreTexts textbooks. We also have the Open Textbook Library listed among our library databases.

RB: The campus OER program is an essential element of our textbook affordability unit. We are currently working closely with our Provost's Office to implement a comprehensive and sustainable OER program to increase adoptions and support in depth the adaptation and creation of new OER material.

KL: The library supports the adoption, adaptation, and implementation of OER in the following ways: by supporting faculty in better understanding of open licensing and copyright; by identifying alternative materials that support course outcomes; in curating content to align with course outline; in the inclusion of many OER, public domain, and open access sources into the library discovery search index and A-Z database list; by adapting OER texts to align with course needs and for accessibility; by reporting OER adoptions and savings to the Michigan Community College Association each semester; and through participation and leadership in state and regional OER communities.

MS: At previous institutions where I have worked, the library's licensed side of affordability and equity initiatives was in place before support for OER. OER work and adoption had occurred on campus, but it was driven by grassroots faculty movements rather than library-led efforts. In these instances, there were no dedicated library staff members with OER responsibilities, making the library-licensed collection aspect of affordability easier to scale and manage.

However, after working on the library-licensed affordability initiatives, it became clear how limited these were as standalone programs, as they often did not address the first- and second-year general education courses that incurred the greatest costs and created the greatest student success disparities. Incorporating OER and OER incentive programs into these affordability efforts allowed the library to support affordability with a suite of options and across all disciplines and course levels.

This model has flipped for me at the University of Kentucky, and we are adding the library-licensed piece of affordability to a long-running and established OER Grant Program that incentivizes the adoption and creation of OER. Since 2016, this program has awarded fifty-nine OER grants. In fall 2024, we are adding a more focused and strategic library-licensed e-book affordability initiative as another mechanism for University of Kentucky courses to provide equitable access to materials.

What do instructors of record/faculty think about library provisioning of assigned materials?

AS: The response has been overwhelmingly positive. We have gotten some great feedback from faculty about how much they appreciate the program and how important it is to their students. We have also heard from a few faculty who are confused by the program, or who have concerns about students using digital materials or slightly different e-book editions. Sometimes faculty can be sensitive if they feel like someone else is making decisions that affect their teaching or their students. What we try to emphasize to those faculty is that we are not trying to force them to use library e-books or tell students about them, and we support their academic freedom to choose the materials that work best for their teaching.

The challenge we most often face is explaining to faculty that the books they want are not available because the publisher does not sell e-book licenses to libraries. Faculty are understanding of this limitation but disappointed because they work hard to save their students money and want to participate in the program.

We recently ran a survey of faculty who have benefited from the first year of our e-books for courses program and got some helpful feedback about how to make it easier for faculty to find out about the program and how they would like to be notified about available e-books. Many respondents also told us how helpful the program has been to their students and how much they want us to continue the program, which was great to hear.

AP: Faculty play a crucial role in promoting equity by diversifying classroom content, thereby enriching students' perspectives. This approach not only enhances learning but also ensures that a broader range of voices and experiences are represented in academic discourse. For instance, a discussion by Nidhi Mahendra emphasizes the importance of including current legislation and content to include a thorough discussion on the topic of disability culture when talking about diversity.⁸

RB: Our program receives great support from the majority of our faculty. Since we provide all materials for our students, we can save faculty time and help assure that their students are prepared with their materials before the first day of class (students can access materials thirty days prior to class start). If an issue arises, it is handled as quickly as possible and with the least amount of trouble for the faculty and students. This exceptional service and support tends to assuage the concerns of even the most dubious faculty members.

CB: The majority of faculty I interact with in my departments are pleased to discover the library has assigned course materials available for students. It is not unusual for faculty in the areas I support to ask about library resources or textbook options available through the library before selecting their semester's required course textbook.

KL: Most faculty are glad that the library has made the effort and investment in the materials that they've selected for use in their classes and that we seek out creative ways to support their students. We've had an opportunity to grow the library e-book as textbook adoption across multiple disciplines as a result of their positive experiences. As the purchase or use of library owned e-books as course materials has grown, faculty have begun seeking us out in advance of selecting a textbook in hopes of addressing the affordability and access issue for their students. This has presented budgeting challenges

for the library, but having more requests than we can fulfill is a good problem to have in my opinion. I am currently in the process of seeking out additional funding and formalizing this purchasing program to ensure equitable request fulfillment as well as a way of further documenting the impact that these purchases have on student access to course materials.

MS: I have found most instructors to be either receptive to or excited by the idea of the library providing no-cost alternatives to students for assigned materials. Because instructors are the key link to getting these materials into the hands of the students, their buy-in is important to these programs, and we've seen varying degrees of how instructors choose to integrate these materials in their courses and how they approach new courses and new materials for courses. In terms of integrating these materials, some faculty simply forward along the library email to notify students that a library-supplied no-cost option is available. Other faculty members integrate the book permalinks into their learning management system course, page, or syllabus. Other faculty fully integrate these by building them into weekly assigned readings or weekly course modules. From an impact perspective, the more access points students have to these materials and the more integrated they are into the course, the more likely students are to take advantage of the library materials as no-cost solutions. In terms of future course design or redesign, some faculty embrace the library as a supplier and work with librarians in advance to determine what materials can be made available to students at no cost. Others are content with being notified if and when things they have assigned are available from the library. Still others are unaware of the option of adopting library materials for course texts, as we continue to work on raising awareness of textbook affordability initiatives.

What are the equity implications of the United States Department of Education's stance on automatic textbook billing programs?

AS: Revising the rule to require automatic textbook billing programs to be "opt-in" instead of "opt-out" would be a win for student equity. As it stands, many students don't know they have a choice to opt out of automatic textbook billing. Students often do not know how much money (if any) they will save if they choose to stay in the automatic billing program, and sometimes do not even know they have purchased access to a book. They often do not have the option to choose alternative formats (like print books) even if that would support their learning more, buy used books, borrow books from peers, or choose to purchase books that they want to maintain access to after the course is over. This poses a financial burden, raises accessibility concerns, and generally obfuscates information that should be available to students. The new rule would mean students have a fairer chance to make an informed choice.

Even with the switch to "opt-out" there are negative equity implications of automatic billing programs, and colleges should consider investing in open education and textbook affordability initiatives instead of continuing to fund textbook publishers that over and over have been caught using their monopoly power to exploit students.

AP & CB: Although automatic billing programs offer many benefits, do they really benefit students? When the program first started, it was called "inclusive access." Universities and/or campus bookstores had to ensure student participation in the program to secure discounts for the students, leading to a

switch from an “opt-in” to an “opt-out” model. We agree with the US Department of Education that “automatic textbook billing” is a more accurate term to describe it.

Automatic textbook billing does not offer a sliding pay scale; it assumes that all students can afford the flat rate. When students opt out because they cannot afford the rate, they are automatically at a disadvantage and cannot participate fully in the academic experience, which can affect their grades and completion rates.

Another issue on our campus is the opt-out process. We’ve seen a handful of cases where professors adopt online textbook packages, causing students to panic because they are not properly informed on how to opt out. These students have contacted the library for assistance via chat, but unfortunately, our library cannot support this process. Programs should have assistance in place to help students navigate this process before adopting the automatic textbook billing model.

RB: Let me qualify my response by saying that this is from the perspective of an historic program (having provided textbooks to our students for over one-hundred years). We are a 100 percent student funded, university operated program that provides over 95 percent of the required content to our polytechnic students that is not allowed to make a profit. Our office provides print and digital textbooks, OER, courseware, lab kits, access to digital tools and other materials to our students. Students pay a flat fee that must be approved by the student senate, campus, and the university system. We pursue any method possible that allows us to reduce cost (inclusive access, OER, collaboration with library collection development department, etc.). We are also tasked with providing textbook accommodations for students with disabilities.

How do we feel this will affect equity:

- It will hamper our ability to monitor and address textbook accommodations for our students. We have nearly 100 percent opt-in and this provides leverage to assure that our commercial partners provide the most accessible material possible. The vast majority of students at our institution requiring accommodations opt to use our commercial digital textbook provider to alternate access platforms (i.e., Kurzweil, Dragon, etc.).
- Inclusive access is currently the most effective measure to reduce cost. Our volume is what gives us the ability to negotiate cost and give that value back to the student. We are very blunt with our commercial partners that aggressive pricing is paramount, and if it is not available other means will be implemented. An opt-in model will certainly degrade our purchasing ability.
- Our students receive about \$1,000 worth of content per year for about \$300. It is a very real concern that students, not understanding the value of the content they receive, will opt-out to “save” \$300. This will result in costing them \$700 to save \$300 or placing them in a position that they will not acquire content needed for their studies.
- One of the key points to this stance on textbooks is student choice. History has shown that when there is “choice” but no campus, state, or federal oversight, a situation developed where academic publishers became the sole arbiter of course materials. This resulted in ever increasing textbooks costs and an outcry for something to be done resulting in the Higher Education Opportunity Act

(HEOA). It is not hard to imagine a scenario where this issue is reimaged. Publishers may move to limiting choices in format and content that create the same textbook pricing issues we have already seen.

- This will in effect cause us to RAISE prices. Fewer students opting in will decrease bargaining ability and raise cost. There is also some indication that it will become necessary to tax these fees that in our case were not taxed in the past.
- How will this affect academic freedom? Faculty are primarily the sole creators of this content and our students the sole consumers. Why are we not engaging to take back more of the control on materials required for our courses?

That being said, there are some reasonable solutions that could be considered:

- Clarify terms. What does lower than market value mean? What are reasonable savings?
- Provide clear guidance and methods of providing transparency.
- Provide funding to do in-depth research on course material usage, pricing, etc.
- Provide funding and support to research programs providing course materials. Determine best practices and encourage and reward campuses that adopt these measures.
- Provide incentives to campuses that embrace opportunities to support affordability.
- Continue to support OER and other initiatives that reduce costs.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

RB: We should always strive to reduce the burden on our students. We should not, however, ignore the good while trying to achieve the perfect. Equity through course materials is an evolving process. As technology, current events, and humanity change, so must our methods to address inequity as it arises. Libraries are uniquely qualified to lead this change.

AP: In the face of budget constraints, librarians must strategize to sustain their support for affordability initiatives. This includes developing transparent purchasing criteria, such as evaluating the potential impact of acquisitions on student learning across multiple semesters and courses. Such strategic planning helps mitigate the effects of funding fluctuations and ensures that equitable access to educational materials remains a priority.

KL: One thing that stands out to me about the ways in which libraries are leading and supporting course material and other college affordability efforts on their individual campuses is the level of creativity and collaboration that is involved in enabling these programs and activities. It is exciting to have an opportunity to connect around a common goal of student success and to open up lines of communication about what can be possible when we think in terms of what is best for the students. I also very much appreciate the sense of community that working in this area brings—there have been many ideas that my library has enacted that another librarian has shared, and I have had an opportunity to encourage others and talk through some of their challenges and successes as well.

Conclusion

These authors demonstrate the role of librarians in improving equity in college classrooms. As Butterfield notes, “The library has the unique role of being the nexus between students, faculty, staff, and administration. This allows advocacy and support of equity in all directions.” It is encouraging to read about the strong support these programs have from campus constituents.

Librarians are providing students with textbooks and equipment, funding and supporting the creation of OER, and advocating for equity for their students. These responses reiterate the diversity of approaches to supporting textbook affordability in community colleges, regional public universities, and research intensive university settings.

Different positions of librarians on automatic textbook billing programs demonstrate the importance of having libraries, and not commercial bookstores, lead these programs.

We hope that this dialogue informs your understanding of equity issues surrounding textbook affordability and empowers you to work toward improvement in your setting.

Notes

1. San Jose State University, “Maria’s Textbook Story,” YouTube video, January 7, 2021, <https://youtu.be/CnVR8svhik4?si=ohpvmnSjmZ6RfimT>.
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