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Spreading the Word, Building a Community: Vision for a National OER Movement

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Academic librarians have a strange relationship with textbooks. Despite all the other books they purchase, librarians rarely choose them. Selection policies may explicitly forbid textbooks owing to the costs, continuous updates or the lack of distinction they bring to disciplinary collections. Textbooks remain largely the domain of the faculty - and the students who are compelled to buy them. This can put librarians in an awkward position since students perceive their library as a convenient place to find a free textbook. Students are quite naturally disappointed to discover the campus library offers no respite from the crushing cost of textbooks.

Some academic libraries attempt to meet this student expectation. They may proactively request faculty to provide a personal or examination copy for the reserve collection. Others selectively acquire textbooks for a few high enrollment courses. Fewer still commit large sums to acquire every required textbook. Designed to help students cope with costly textbooks, these programs are admirable but suffer the limitation of offering only a few copies for a few hours at a time to hundreds of potential borrowers. Despite good intentions, when academic librarians buy textbooks for students they support a dysfunctional textbook publishing industry that has a captive market of students and faculty alike. Academic librarians should be united in shifting more control of learning materials back to educators.

Working collaboratively for several years, the authors have sought to create awareness about the need for and value of creating an alternate path to supplying students with learning content. This new system is designed for and motivated by a singular purpose: to free students from the burden of spending thousands of dollars on commercial textbooks. This new path also frees educators from guilt associated with students spending enormous sums on textbooks and the frequency with which the bulk of a textbook goes unused. Because the research tells us that many students simply opt out of buying textbooks, shifting to open educational resources (OER) provides greater access and improves learning.(1)

Here we each share a unique perspective on why confronting textbooks costs matters to us, and why it is important for academic librarians to lead their campuses in creating new options for digital learning content. Where is it leading? From isolated individual efforts to a coordinated national movement involving many academic librarians working together to create change.

Nicole: Start With Textbooks

My introduction to textbook costs came in 2003 by way of a $400 bookstore bill my first semester of college. Textbook prices have nearly doubled since then yet my anger and frustration, knowing my education required expensive print books, has hardly diminished. I was then unaware of OER as an alternative model, but it was clear that between the Internet, mobile reading devices, and social networks, all of the tools to make textbooks affordable were right in front of us – we just needed to use them. That drove me to a career as an OER advocate.

My first interaction with the academic librarian community was in 2009 as a speaker at the SPARC-ACRL Forum on Emerging Issues in Scholarly Communication at ALA Midwinter. At the time, I worked for the Student PIRGs directing a national student campaign to combat the high cost of textbooks. At the Forum I explained the underlying cause of textbook costs with a comparison to scholarly publishing. Students are a captive market for textbook publishers just as libraries are for overpriced journals. I introduced OER as the ideal solution from the student perspective.

The post-Forum discussion made me realize that libraries were a key partner missing from the OER movement. While the student voice was – and still is – tremendously powerful at driving the conversation on campus, that is only the first step to bringing OER into classrooms. Even the best intentioned faculty encounter barriers to discovering, evaluating, adapting, and disseminating OER, and students simply are not equipped to provide the necessary professional support. That is where librarians come in. Professionals at finding, evaluating and organizing resources, they can directly connect to and collaborate with faculty. The heart of their institutions, librarians are the go-to colleagues for providing access to high quality academic resources - and that can extend to OER.

That is why I eagerly joined SPARC to lead a new OER program. Since my appearance at the 2009 Forum, advances in online education, instructional technologies and open access have sparked a groundswell of interest and enthusiasm for OER. Dozens of libraries have already stepped into this space and are spearheading successful campus-based programs to support the adoption and production of OER, including open textbooks. In my new position at SPARC I support efforts to build the momentum. Much work remains to develop resources and programming around OER in order to expand librarian awareness and expertise. Libraries now play a transformative role in shaping the campus conversation on access to research, and they are poised to do the same for textbook affordability.

<u>Steven: Taking it to the Faculty</u>

I attended the SPARC Forum where Nicole gave her impassioned talk about the growing textbook crisis. Having thought little about the textbook cost crisis, the Forum inspired me to believe that an academic library, collaborating with faculty, could make a difference for students. The universe of open textbooks and digital learning objects was relatively small but growing. Academic librarians could introduce OER, as well as licensed library content, to faculty as a source of alternate learning materials. Shortly

thereafter I heard Mark Milliron, currently Chief Learning Officer for Civitas Learning, give a talk in which he prophesied the demise of commercial textbooks, encouraging us to think about offering "curricular resource strategies" in which faculty and librarians would work together to identify and provide local and open learning content.

Our institutional Teaching, Learning and Technology Roundtable, composed of faculty, administrators and academic support personnel, seemed like the appropriate body to support a program to encourage faculty to abandon a commercial textbook and replace it with alternate learning materials. While it can be a tough sell to convince faculty to choose open journals for scholarly publishing, they are sympathetic to the plight of students accumulating college debt and can more readily accept alternate textbooks as a way they can help. The TLTR enthusiastically responded to the idea for an alternate textbook project, but recommended creating an incentive for faculty to shift from a commercial textbook to a customized set of digital learning materials. The library administration supported the project with ten awards of $1,000 each.

We are now entering the fourth annual round of our alternate textbook project. Our relatively modest effort has had an institutional impact beyond the thirty-five faculty who have received direct awards and the many thousands of dollars in savings to students. For example, a freshman reading and writing course that enrolls thousands of students, based on faculty successes, is moving away from textbooks entirely. While earlier projects depended more heavily on licensed library content, more recent projects are integrating open textbook content as well as faculty authored learning materials. Collaboration with faculty is the academic librarian's Holy Grail, but inspiring them to do so is easier hoped for than achieved. A library led campus initiative to reform textbook

practices appeals to faculty members' innate desire to support student learning and academic success - and save them money. That's why an increasing number of academic librarians are taking this idea to their faculty, and getting the desired results.

Marilyn: Spreading the Word

I too attended that SPARC Forum, along with my library director. We were intrigued by the possibility of OER becoming a part of the larger scholarly communication portfolio. Fast forward to 2011 when I sat in on a SPARC library directors' phone conversation about OERs and the light dawned about how to proceed. I heard Steven describe Temple's alternate textbook project. It was such an exciting and doable program that I emailed him while on the call to obtain more details of their program.

Just weeks later the Director of Libraries obtained the support of the Provost and funding for the inaugural "Call for Proposals" for the UMass Amherst Open Education Initiative (UMA OEI). We emulated Temple's incentive structure, awarding $1,000 per course incentive grants to faculty to create alternatives to expensive textbooks and $2,500 for courses with enrollments of 200 or more . These alternatives included: 1) adoption of web-based open educational materials; 2) the remixing of licensed library content that is freely available to UMass Amherst students; 3) faculty created content. The UMA OEI is a partnership between librarians, OIT's Academic Computing Group, and the Center for Teaching and Faculty Development.

After three grant rounds, during which time some courses have been taught multiple times, the results of the UMA OEI far exceed expectations. With $39,000 invested by the Provost's Office and University Libraries, student savings are estimated at over $1 million.(2) Students who are more engaged in learning and renewed faculty excitement

in teaching their courses are but a few of the intangible benefits of alternate textbook programs. As many faculty created their own open content, it led to the opportunity to assist them in using Creative Commons licenses on their work and depositing it into our institutional repository ScholarWorks @ UMass Amherst. Along with library-sponsored faculty workshops, both formal and information promotion by our faculty has greatly expanded interest at UMass Amherst. Now, faculty are published their results with UMA OEI in their disciplinary journals. Best of all, some of the faculty ditching their old textbooks for OER required no incentives to make the switch.

The word of our success spread and we became accidental evangelists for OER and open textbooks beyond our own campus. Within the University of Massachusetts system, UMassOnline (UMOL) has hosted a series of open education symposia with keynotes by national OER leaders such as Cable Green and Kim Thalos. Other institutions in the regions, such as Holyoke Community College and Bristol Community College, adopted similar programs after attending a program where I spoke about our project. Interest expanded to the Massachusetts Commonwealth Consortium of Libraries in Public Higher Education Institutions (MCCLPHEI) after Nicole Allen and I spoke about open education and UMA OEI at their annual conference. It could potentially lead to the adoption of OER at all public higher education institutions in Massachusetts. A fall OER NERCOMP workshop will highlight regional initiatives and promote the formation of a northeast regional OER collaboratory.

Expanding nationally, I visited several institutions with library publishing programs and gave presentations on the UMA OEI and digital initiatives. Purdue and North Carolin State have since broadened their OER programs. Additional presentations were

made in 2012 at University of Arizona's "Living the Future Conference" and Rice University's "Future of Academic Libraries Symposium". Almost simultaneously, the UMass Amherst cohort published an article about our early OEI experience for ARL's *Research Library Issues*, no 280 (Sept 2012) entitled "Open Educational Resources as Learning Materials: Prospects and Strategies for University Libraries".(3) By far, the broadest national impact was made by a presentation, "Ditch Your Textbook: Academic Librarians Inspiring Faculty to go Open", that Steven and I gave at ACRL 2013. (4) Afterwards, many librarians requested permission to make a local copy of the UMass Amherst OER research guide (5) and sought guidance to adopt similar programs.

The UMA OEI has clearly served as a catalyst for other institutions, regionally and nationally, to explore the benefits of OER and in multiple cases to develop their own variation of an alternate textbook project. This unprecedented level of interest and rapid growth has inspired the three of us to contemplate bigger and better things - or at least being more organized in advancing the role of libraries in the OER movement.

Vision: A National Library OER Movement

While we have individually made great strides to promote the use of OER at our own institutions and those of other academic librarians, we realized that 2014 is a time of building momentum to take this message to an even larger audience. Nicole's appointment as SPARC Director of Open Education was a catalyst that signaled that a growing trend was evolving into an acknowledgement by academic librarianship that the time was right for a national OER movement. To initiate this we joined forces to launch

several new opportunities for academic librarians to become part of a community of OER advocates.

This multi-pronged effort began with the identification of a core group of approximately forty academic institutions that had previously expressed their interest in the UMass and Temple programs. Librarians or academic administrators received a survey designed to gather information about their interest in participating in a number of activities to create a national community - with international aspirations. In particular, we asked if they would be likely to attend a one-day symposium on libraries and OER. Over thirty respondents signaled overwhelming interest in more networking and engagement. With this enthusiastic support we decided to quickly leverage SPARC's resources to create the first discussion list for OER, referred to as LibOER-L.

To extend the momentum we began planning a face-to-face gathering of this emerging community. Rather than establishing our own event, we decided to connect with an existing like-minded program. That led us to Dr. David Wiley, co-founder and Chief Academic Officer at Lumen Learning, who organizes the annual OpenEd Conference, now in its eleventh year. We believed Wiley, an experienced OER advocate, could support our aspirations for a national librarian OER movement. We were encouraged by one of his more recent projects, the June 2014 Open Ed Leadership Summit that brought together faculty, librarians and academic administrators from across the country to discuss open education strategies.

With Wiley's support we were invited to introduce a "Libraries and OER" track to the conference. We were encouraged to receive over two dozen proposals for an inaugural day of programming in which librarians will share multiple open education resource

projects and share new research into the use and development of OER among libraries. When we meet at OpenEd on November 19, 2014 a cadre of dozens of academic librarians will be present to join the conversation.

Where this heads next we are uncertain, but we believe our initial efforts have captured the attention and enthusiasm of a core of academic library OER pioneers. Whether they are leading alternate book projects, the authoring of open textbooks, the building of OER repositories, building regional consortia for sharing textbook content or conducting research, they are all committed to creating change at their institutions and beyond. If we are able to successfully harness this energy and convert it into a national or even global movement, a good next step is to enlist more academic librarians to join in the effort to be their institutional advocates for OER. We will work to together with faculty, advocates like David Wiley and all those who wish to join this community effort to redefine the learning materials students use and how they access them – so they spend less and learn more.

Endnotes

1. http://creativecommons.org/weblog/entry/41906

2. http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2014/04/umass_students_library_others.html

3. http://publications.arl.org/rli280/2

4. http://www.learningtimes.net/acrl/2013/ditch-your-textbook-academic-librarians-inspiring-faculty-to-go-open/

5. http://guides.library.umass.edu/oer

See additional resources at: http://www.diigo.com/user/blendedlibrarian/oer?type=all