

Open Textbooks: Addressing Student Financial Needs and Faculty Course Development

Lloyd Ackert, PhD
Department of History
Drexel University

Final Report

November 8, 2018

As a Library Fellow between January-April 2018, I worked with the Library to investigate the feasibility of implementing an Open Educational Resources program (OER), especially regarding the use Open Textbooks. Based on my connections across the Drexel campus, I was able to connect with a diverse variety of faculty and students to discuss this topic. The focus of my research was to conduct a series of interviews with faculty in small groups or individually. These faculty had expressed an interest in library issues generally and adopting open textbooks specifically. Thus, they proved to be an excellent first step in surveying faculty interest in or reluctance to considering open textbooks in their courses.

Bi-Weekly meetings:

The first step in this fellowship was to become informed about the Library's ongoing and future plans for the Open Textbook program. This was accomplished through bi-weekly meetings with Dean Danuta Nitecki, Beth Ten Haven (Director, Library Academic Partnerships), Larry Milliken (Manager, Learning Partnerships), and Stacy Stanislaw (Communications Manager).

The goals of the program included showing faculty and administrators the potential advantages of the OER. It would liberate faculty to be more flexible in designing their courses, offer them the opportunity to join a pedagogical movement, and a new publishing platform. It would show them new tools for improving their curriculum and pedagogy. It creates a space for faculty to work with the Library in enacting change across campus. Finally, it addresses potential ethical dilemmas related to the cost of textbooks and access to the required course materials. The high costs of some textbooks, by limiting access to course materials, undermines faculty effectiveness and learning outcomes.

The challenges in implementing the OER program is that it would require faculty to change their teaching culture in general and their courses specifically. As is clear from the interviews discussed below, this requires training, time, and financial resources for faculty to make course revisions. The program would also need to be sensitive to the diversity of curricula across campus, ranging from math, science and business courses aimed at large student populations to small seminars all of which require different kinds of texts.

The Interviews:

Faculty use a diverse set of materials for their courses, and this range of approaches and curricula became apparent during the interviews with faculty. One epidemiology professor who expressed a strong interest in exploring ways to improve teaching, does not use textbooks in his

graduate statistics courses, but rather teaches from his own notes. A professor in communications, addressed issues related to the publishers. On the one hand, textbooks often have outdated information. He wondered about publisher reactions to the open textbook movement and wants to be sensitive to copyrights. A public health professor noted that she uses either an eBook textbook or journal articles, all available through the library. A professor from the College of Nursing and Health Professions (CNHP) support the Open Textbook movement especially since she teaches at the Master's level and does not use textbooks.

Interest in Open Textbooks:

The faculty are very interested in using Open Textbooks but would like some support to do this well. One would consider learning about the OER opportunities, especially if they are flexible enough to allow for using a chapter rather than an entire textbook, and if they can help prevent students from looking outside the course for other materials, which he noted causes confusion. Another faculty member noted that offering a free textbook would encourage students from using Dark Web resources such as BitTorrent rather than official bookstores.

Faculty Investment of Time:

It is clear to the Faculty that switching to Open Textbooks will require revisions, which necessitates research, evaluation, and restructuring; all of which puts more demands on instructor time. Evaluating books demands a lot of time and effort—as one faculty member reported, it takes a community. The challenge of revising courses stems, one faculty mentioned, from the process of creating pilot courses. We become 'imprinted' on a textbook when we design our first version of a course, thus the structure and assignments in a course remain at its core. To switch to a new textbook requires a comprehensive reformation of the course. It is hard, but not impossible, to break our habits. They will need to balance their efforts in moving from publishers who offer packages of secondary and primary sources, and testing materials in a single package, to doing the research and compilation work to create their own assemblage. Time demands also is perceived as a barrier at CNHP in a different way: they see themselves being responsible for teaching graduate students "how to learn and how to teach."

Encouraging Faculty to Adopt Open Textbooks:

The carrot is the only way. In wondering about the appropriate or effective amount of funding or course relief to encourage this shift to Open Textbooks, the faculty observed that, first, it would need to be optional so that people can decide on their own terms whether to adopt them. We will also need to recognize the different faculty roles: Teaching Professors with large course loads, Tenure Track Professors who have lower loads, but higher research requirements, Adjunct Professors who are less attached to our University, and Faculty with administrative roles. An example of the latter is CNHP Faculty Assessment Fellows who have limited time for course revisions. This will need to be addressed when offering compensation for course design work. A similar approach was taken earlier to encourage Faculty to create new online courses, which offered funding for designing and teaching these. At CNHP, they have organized monthly "Tools of the Trade" talks which provides a forum for addressing the Open Textbook program.

Faculty Understand their Students well:

Drexel students expect courses that match the Drexel style. Thus, faculty know to offer ones that reflect the entrepreneurial, applied, creative, and real-world aspects of our environment here. The Open Textbook can help with that, especially in regard to sending a message to prospective students and their parents. On the one hand, courses using Open Textbooks will save them money, and on the other, it will offer a more creative and Drexel-style course because the curriculum is driven not by an outside standardized text but represents the Drexel faculty background and experience. In addition, we recognize that new students are ‘digital natives’ and read and work differently. We want to build a sense of ‘life-long learning’ in our students and the Open Textbook—because it shows a dedication to innovation in teaching and engaging the newest approaches and information—support this. It can also help create spaces in courses for the contribution to knowledge.

Faculty are ready to get to work!

All the Faculty I interviewed and the various groups I engaged around Open Textbooks (Faculty Senate, CoAS and History Department faculty, all expressed a sincere interest in learning more about Open Textbooks and in OER programs beginning Fall 2018. The general consensus in the faculty is that partnering with the Library is essential and desired. To make this work for the faculty we recommend raising an awareness of the cost of adopting Open Textbooks across campus, develop a system of educating faculty, students and administrators about them, developing incentives for adopting them, and organizing a team to support this.

When asked if we should continue this effort, one faculty said “Absolutely, for the students!”