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Book Review
Affordable Course Materials: Electronic Textbooks and Open Educational Resources

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by Rita Premo

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Affordable Course Materials is a collection of case studies written by library workers (with the exception of two instructional designers), published by the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services, and designed to inform those engaged in or considering involvement in affordable learning initiatives on their campuses. The book consists of nine individual chapters, each presenting a case study of how a particular institution addressed textbook availability and affordability. The vignettes selected for the volume feature a variety of approaches to this topic and differing program results, but the schools themselves are mainly large doctorate-granting universities or branch campuses of same. Community colleges, liberal arts institutions, and teaching-centered schools are excluded from the narrative.

That said, most readers, no matter the size or focus of their institution, will find multiple ideas that are scalable to their own academic setting. Some programs emphasize textbook affordability broadly through mechanisms such as using library reserves, choosing less pricey course packs, and retaining a textbook for multiple semesters. Others are focused on the adoption or creation of alternative course materials using open textbooks as well as materials put together under the principle of fair use. What I took away from the book, as someone with a growing role in campus affordable learning initiatives, could be divided into "activities we could do" and "issues to watch out for."

The former demonstrates comparable approaches that are tailored to the specific institutions. The similarities in design are no coincidence. Several of the chapters note that the institutional programs were modeled on two particular early textbook-affordability efforts:

at Temple University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst. A key component of those projects is a tiered system of grants for faculty willing to adopt, modify, or create affordable learning materials, an approach that several of the chapter authors' universities included in their own programs. The grant program and specific campus interests, in turn, directed what actions the libraries took. For instance, some libraries targeted the discovery of open textbooks, such as by creating guides for both faculty and students that included open education resources as well as library-licensed materials. Another chose to focus on supporting instructors in the creation of their own learning materials: authoring open textbooks or building course content using library-licensed and open resources.

Some cases look closely at internal library functions in affordable learning initiatives, such as modifying collection development processes and policies to align print and electronic resources with instructional needs (particularly for courses with large numbers of students and high learning materials costs), analyzing course materials lists for existing holdings or potential purchases, using reserves systems as a single interface for getting course materials to students, developing various web tools to aid discovery and training, and connecting open education resources and pedagogy to other library initiatives, such as makerspaces and usage reporting. Libraries also offered instructor training in instructional design, digital publishing, copyright, and more.

On the topic of "what to watch out for," consideration of the human factor in the success of a project was a central theme, no matter what activities the individual library chose to pursue. For instance, a strategic, thoughtful library purchase plan for textbooks means nothing if instructors do not support affordable learning initiatives or if they do not understand what alternatives exist. The cases reported here address those concerns: building a team so that all relevant parties understand instructor teaching needs and how they intersect with the library, finding a library role in the campus textbook adoption process without alienating the bookstore, building on traditional liaison functions to collaborate with instructors, garnering administrative support for affordable learning, and identifying the most effective mechanisms to reach out to various stakeholders at the individual institution.

One of the most compelling reports in terms of concerns that might arise relates to contractual issues across campus. The affordable learning working group in one case found that many of its efforts, such as creating a guide for students on alternatives for locating course materials, violated language in the bookstore contract (operated by a party outside the university) giving the bookstore exclusive rights as the "buyer and seller of all required, recommended, or suggested course materials and tools" for campus. Flexibility for textbook affordability efforts was incorporated into a new contract.

At only 160 pages, the book is easily digestible, and most of the text is written in plain language, although some jargon specific to libraries and higher education is present (and not inappropriate considering the publisher and subject matter). A fairly robust index allows readers to access specific topics within the text beyond the case study perspective. However, I would have loved a related table that would let the reader see at a glance which cases included which common affordable learning components: e.g., tiered grant programs, copyright training, student advocacy outreach, course materials analysis, faculty communities of practice, or bookstore collaboration. Each chapter includes bibliographic lists for further exploration of background information, and many cases use illustrative figures to bolster the text, such as rubrics, training materials, user interfaces, and data visualizations.

In sum, the book may seem pricey for the size (though the cost seems standard for professional literature of this sort). A quick search shows that some of the information presented about each individual program may be freely available from university websites, conference proceedings, and higher education journals and blogs, as are case studies from other institutions about their affordable learning efforts. Nonetheless, *Affordable Course Materials* to my mind is worth the expense, as it provides rich content about multiple institutions' affordable learning planning processes, activities and engagement, and assessment mechanisms in a single volume. This content makes the book a useful informational tool, particularly for libraries at the beginning of their involvement in open/affordable learning.

BIOGRAPHY

Rita Premo is the scholarly communications librarian at Sonoma State University. Her professional background includes publishing as well as academic and medical librarianship.