Boosting Student Success and Reducing Inequalities with Free Access to Course Materials

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Abstract: Research shows that COVID-19 has exacerbated student challenges and inequalities. One of

the most impactful ways the University of Arizona Libraries foster student success and reduce

inequities is through our course material initiatives: providing students with free day-one access to

required materials. We are seeing greater demand for online resources, which can be challenging for

academic libraries to provide. Our approach leverages campus partnerships, advocacy and education,

and a "do-it-yourself" model supplemented with one-on-one assistance as needed. These practices

can be replicated at other libraries with limited resources.

Keywords: *OER, textbooks, course materials, affordability, student success, COVID-19*

"Will 2020 be gladly forgotten, or will it be remembered as the year that catalyzed so much

necessary and positive change?" mused Kueker (2020, para. 5).

As I write this column in early 2021, glimmers of hope are emerging. COVID-19 vaccine

distribution is expanding. Thanks to better-than-projected tuition revenues, the University of Arizona

(UA) has ended employee pay cuts[1] and lifted its hiring freeze. The UA Libraries' budget cut for fiscal

year 2020–21 was reduced from 22% to 15%.

Throughout the pandemic, the UA Libraries continued to look forward and engage employees

in Future State planning. Recognizing that we cannot keep doing more with less, the library is

refocusing its strategic priorities. Student success is a cornerstone of our reorganization. We eagerly

await the completion of a $56 million Student Success District, bookended by the Main Library and

Albert B. Weaver Science-Engineering Library, in 2022.[2]

While students faced many challenges pre-COVID, a Campus Health (2020) survey of UA

students[3] supports the contention by Campbell (2020) that "the pandemic has only exacerbated the

inequalities that already exist in the system" (para. 5).

In sharing results from the COVID-19 Student Needs survey, Campus Health (2020) noted

disparities in UA students' reported anxiety and financial struggles. A higher percentage of LGBTQ+

students, students with disabilities, and Latinx students reported overwhelming anxiety. Financial

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[1] The University of Arizona instituted employee pay reductions from August to December 2020 through Furlough and Furlough-Based Salary Programs. For employees with gross annualized pay over $44,500, pay was cut 5.38% to 20%, based on a sliding salary scale.
[2] Student Success District project updates are shared at https://successdistrict.arizona.edu and https://successdistrict.arizona.edu/news-updates.
[3] The COVID-19 Health and Wellness and Online Classroom Experiences Student Needs Survey was completed by 2,352 undergraduates and 1,040 graduate students at the UA in May 2020. Full survey results are not publicly available but Campus Health published findings on students' mental health and well-being. See References.

struggles were more common among Native American, Black, and Latinx students, as well as students with disabilities and Pell Grant recipients (p. 7).

In addition to mental health and financial struggles, a list of "common student challenges and concerns" circulated internally by the UA's Student Success & Retention Innovation office in Spring 2020 included greater family responsibilities (e.g., increased work hours to support family or homeschooling younger siblings), struggles with online course modalities, and lack of technology access or privacy at home to participate in Zoom courses.

Qualitative responses from UA students in the COVID-19 survey revealed additional concerns related to immigration status, high-risk medical conditions, lack of childcare, and rural locations with little internet access. Some concerns also related to ethnicity, such as the severe impact of COVID-19 on the Navajo Nation in Arizona.

Student comments were heartbreaking, often detailing job losses and struggles to pay for basic needs such as food and housing, let alone tuition or textbooks.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021), youth (ages 15-24) and women saw the biggest employment losses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Women and youth are majority populations at the UA; 55% of our students are female and 72.7% are under age 25 (University Analytics & Institutional Research [UAIR], 2021).

Challenges that students face will not be temporary. "All of us in higher education are contemplating and debating the pandemic-related changes that will likely persist long after the virus subsides," observed Bell (2021, para. 2).

Campbell (2020) wrote about sustaining an ethic of care in "these Unprecedented Times" (para. 2). She expressed concerns that "this level of physical, mental and emotional labour can't be

sustained in the long term without it taking a considerable toll. … and there are serious concerns whether we have the strength, stamina and resilience for it" (paras. 6, 8).

Change and sustainability are important considerations for libraries in terms of student support. Many of us have shrinking budgets and reduced workforces. How can we leverage our limited resources to better serve students? What should we prioritize? In the rest of this column, I will make the case for work that is near and dear to my heart: course materials.

Pandemic Impact

At the start of the pandemic, when UA library buildings closed and courses quickly pivoted online, we saw a sharp increase in demand for digital course materials from instructors and students. Bell (2021) observed that "the increase in online courses and degree programs in the curriculum is widely forecast to become a permanent fixture of higher education" (para. 2). Indeed, enrollment in Arizona Online grew from 362 students in 2015 to 6,282 in 2020 (UAIR, 2021) and UA micro campuses are expanding around the world. All of these courses rely on online materials.

In many ways, the UA Libraries were well positioned to deliver online materials when the pandemic hit. Digital had been our preferred format for many years, we had eliminated print reserves more than a decade ago, and demand-driven ebook options were well established. Our User Experience team and Web Strategy Group had been expanding web content and improving its usability. The Research & Learning Department had revamped all tutorials.

We already had an extensive technology lending program as well, which is integral to students' ability to take online courses and use digital resources. COVID-19 spurred the library to buy 300 more laptops (T. Teetor, personal communication, January 29, 2021). The library also purchased wireless hotspots to help students with unreliable internet access.

During the pandemic, the library waived late fees and extended technology checkout periods (increasing the loan period from five days to an entire year for some individuals, Teetor said). We shipped devices to users on the Navajo Nation and to out-of-state students (J. Miller-Wells, personal communication, January 29, 2021). From March 1 through December 31, 2020, Miller-Wells said the library loaned/renewed 1,620 laptops, 133 tablets, 139 headphone sets, and nearly 500 cables and chargers.

High Return on Investment

Our course material initiatives are one of the most impactful ways the UA Libraries foster student success. We estimate that UA students have potentially saved more than $9 million thanks to open educational resources (OER) and library-licensed ebooks since 2012.

High textbook costs are a known barrier for students (Office of Distance Learning and Student Services, 2019). By providing free day-one access to course materials that students need, libraries can reduce inequities and level the academic playing field. Colvard, Watson, and Park (2018) found that when University of Georgia students had free day-one access to OER, outcomes improved for all students, but especially for Pell recipients, part-time students, and those from underrepresented groups.

I wish we could provide students with free access to all course materials. Z-Degrees and Z-Majors (the Z stands for zero textbook cost) are on my library's strategic map. The closest I have come to a Z-Degree is with the new College of Veterinary Medicine. Working closely with instructors, the library provided free ebook access to 38 of 41 required textbooks for Fall 2020.

How We Do It

While many academic libraries run textbook affordability or OER programs, I think what is innovative about the UA Libraries' strategy is our selective and targeted approach, focusing on campus partnerships, advocacy and education, and a "do-it-yourself" model. We do not do course marking, incentive or grant programs, extensive OER publishing projects, or faculty awards. I admire (and envy) the ambitious and successful course material initiatives of colleagues across North America. But the UA Libraries currently have neither the bandwidth nor the budget to tackle large-scale initiatives. As I do Open Education Network (OEN) presentations nationally and mentor participants in the OEN's Certificate in OER Librarianship,[4] I hear that we are far from alone.

The bulk of the UA Libraries' course material savings for students come from our ebook program, which colleagues have written about extensively (Filion & Wallace, 2018; Hazen & Wallace, 2017; Martin & Wallace, 2017). Since 2012, the library has partnered with the UA BookStores to provide students with free ebook access to required textbooks whenever possible. Each semester, the bookstore shares lists of required textbooks, and we check to see which ones we already own as ebooks and which ones we can acquire. We supply ebooks to hundreds of classes each semester. We load available ebooks in D2L Library Tools (a homegrown platform), and I email instructors to inform them of availability. After renaming the ebook program Course Driven Acquisitions (CDA), I initiated/implemented several changes in 2020. Some were designed to reduce library costs and some to improve the user experience:

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[4] The Certificate in OER Librarianship is an eight-month professional development program. The 2021 cohort includes 64 librarians.

- We restrict ebook auto-purchases from EBSCOhost Collection Manager and ProQuest's LibCentral (our primary sources for CDA ebooks). Our policy is to cap spending at $1,000 per title for CDA, but ProQuest and EBSCO do not let us set cumulative spending limits. As a result, users had triggered purchases of 27 one-user licenses for a single title. Our new settings prevent this. We do enable auto-upgrades.

- I proactively upgrade ebooks in LibCentral when free upgrades are available.

- We focus only on unlimited-user ebooks for CDA. We had previously allowed lower-level ebook licenses, but students and instructors were frustrated by access limitations. We now say we cannot guarantee access to one-user, three-user, or nonlinear/concurrent ebooks. I designed a way to provide licensing information for ebook listings in D2L Library Tools.

- We select ebooks without digital rights management whenever possible.

- I monitor ebook turnaways and email students and instructors about ways to minimize them. I also feature these tips on our *Find & Use ebooks* page.

During the pandemic, I also launched a new online form that allows instructors to check for ebook availability from the library *before* they adopt particular textbooks. I wanted a way to be proactive rather than reactive to course material requests. Our campus bookstore is great about sharing textbook adoption data with us, but once adoptions are submitted by instructors it is too late to switch textbooks.

In an email to all UA instructors before the Spring 2021 textbook adoption deadline, I advertised our new *Check for ebook availability form* and explained the library's course material policies and deadlines. Faculty response to the new form has been positive; 20 instructors immediately responded. When the requested ebooks are unavailable, liaison librarians and I suggest other free-to-

use options. I find it helpful to frame options as a "spectrum of affordability." We start with OER

because they are free, customizable, and offer perpetual access. Next, we look at library-licensed

materials, such as ebooks, streaming video, and fair use of articles and book chapters. These materials

are free to use but not customizable, and access is usually not perpetual. If all free-to-use options have

been ruled out, I refer instructors to the UA BookStores' inclusive access program and explain some of

its pros and cons.[5]

The campus-owned bookstore has been a fantastic partner in all of our course material

initiatives. We regularly exchange data and jointly report student savings. The bookstore provides

library ebook information on student booklists so students can check for free library access before they

buy their textbooks. In November 2020, bookstore leaders and I gave a joint presentation to Faculty

Senate on why faculty/library/bookstore collaborations are vital to student success and why we

oppose the idea of outsourcing the bookstore.

Partnerships like this are key to our course material program. I am starting my 13th year at the

UA Libraries and have progressively built relationships across campus. In addition to our bookstore, I

partner with instructional designers, the teaching and learning center, disability resource center,

information technology unit, student government, and departments and colleges.

Campus partnerships led to the formation of impactful learning communities. In 2019–20, I co-

founded an OER Professional Learning Community with Nutritional Sciences instructor Jennifer Ravia.

We invited faculty, staff, instructional designers, and program managers to learn about OER, copyright,

Creative Commons licenses, and more. In Summer 2020, Krys Ziska Strange (an instructional

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[5] For an in-depth look at inclusive access, see my 2018 book chapter Inclusive access: Who, what, when, where, how, and why?

technologist from Digital Learning) and I co-led a learning community that focused on the [UA's new](#) [PressbooksEDU publishing platform](#) and open pedagogy (involving students in the creation of openly licensed learning materials). I find learning communities, workshops, presentations, videos, and a "train-the-trainer" approach with liaison librarians to be the most time-efficient ways to advocate and educate on my campus.

Ziska Strange and I launched the Pressbooks site in Summer 2020. We intentionally designed a soft launch with little publicity. Still, word about Pressbooks has spread and more than 85 projects have been created. We are running Pressbooks as a "do-it-yourself" service until we can get additional personnel and funding to support expanded publishing. Our Pressbooks sign-ups are unmediated, and we feature extensive help resources on the site. One of the reasons we chose Pressbooks was because it offered great user manuals, guides, and videos, as well as online support. We offer Pressbooks consultations to creators but haven't been able to provide editing or design services.

The library website also features many self-service resources for ebooks, OER, streaming videos, and fair use of chapters and articles. My *Finding & using OER* page offers a customized version of the easy-to-use OASIS search box.[6] Rather than listing dozens of OER sources, I showcase my top recommendations. Web pages and forms link to my contact information if instructors want one-on-one help.

Not Without Challenges

While the return on investment for course material initiatives is high, libraries do face challenges. With ebooks, the biggest hurdle is that publishers are often unwilling to sell them to

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[6] The State University of New York Geneseo shares its OASIS search widget code at https://oasis.geneseo.edu/about.php.

academic libraries (Bell, 2021; Fazackerley, 2021; University of Guelph Library, 2020). This was true even pre-COVID, but Fazackerley (2021) reported that "the problem has come to a head during the pandemic because students urgently need digital resources" (para. 6).

As of March 22, 2021, more than 3,800 academic librarians, researchers, lecturers, and students in the United Kingdom had signed an open letter (*Campaign to investigate the academic ebook market*, 2021) calling for a government investigation into the "increasingly unaffordable, unsustainable and inaccessible" ebook market for academic libraries.

The open letter details numerous hurdles, such as expensive licenses, sudden and seemingly arbitrary price increases, and user frustration with often-confusing and restrictive licenses. Fazackerley (2021) also noted issues with expensive bundled deals and one-person-at-a-time limitations (if an ebook is available at all). We have experienced all of these problems at the UA, in addition to ebooks in subscription packages disappearing midsemester. Borrowing ebooks from public libraries comes with a different set of challenges for users (Public Library Association, 2020).

Canada's University of Guelph Library (2020) emphasized, "Approximately 85% of existing course textbooks are simply unavailable to libraries in any other format than print" (para. 2). It named problematic publishers and offered alternative solutions. Several U.S. libraries adapted the message.

In emails to UA faculty, my routine message has been: "We buy unlimited-user ebook licenses for required course textbooks whenever possible. Publishers often don't make these licenses available to academic libraries (they find it more profitable to sell or rent to individual students)." When instructors ask why the library cannot simply buy ebooks for students from sites like Amazon, I explain the difference between multi-user licenses for academic libraries and ebook sales to individuals.

Instead of relying on commercial publishers' course materials, Bell (2021) urged librarians and faculty to adopt OER to the fullest extent possible. "Any sustainable future for affordable and accessible digital learning materials must come from within the academy," Bell wrote (para. 15).

We face hurdles with OER too, however. These include discoverability challenges, lack of awareness, concerns about quality, time required, technology barriers, scant coverage in some subject areas, lack of ancillaries (e.g., test banks), competition from well-funded publisher sales teams, and promotion and tenure concerns (Cuillier, 2020).

Fortunately, there are ways to alleviate many of these pain points (Cuillier, 2020). To specifically address faculty concerns about not getting credit in promotion and tenure for using or creating OER, Dean of Libraries Shan Sutton is leading a UA task force that hopes to add open access and OER to criteria for promotion and tenure. Another idea is to write letters of support that faculty OER authors can include in their dossiers (S. Pai, personal communication, February 1, 2021).

In addition to recommending OER, I encourage instructors to engage in open pedagogy.[7] When instructors bemoan the lack of OER content in their subject area, I suggest that they involve students in creating educational materials to share with the world. Open pedagogy can engage students in deeper, more meaningful learning. It also increases course materials' diversity, equity, and inclusion by representing a wider variety of student voices, especially at a Hispanic-Serving Institution like ours.

Big Budget Not Required

I believe our course material model can be replicated by other libraries with limited resources or administrative support. Our major expenses are licensing and employee time. My OER budget is $0

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[7] Find open pedagogy resources on the UA's Pressbooks site.

(although I can request other library funds for OER events, membership in organizations like the OEN, and conference travel). The cost of the UA's PressbooksEDU subscription is split between the library's Information Access Budget and the UA's Digital Learning unit.

The topic of "what can be achieved with a lot of enthusiasm for OER and very little formal or financial support" was explored at the February 2021 OEN Tea Time. One suggestion was to reframe what "success" looks like in course material initiatives (J. Poritz, personal communication, February 1, 2021). Creating large-scale textbooks is not the only end goal and Poritz encouraged support of more modest approaches: developing smaller-scale bits that are highly useful, connecting students and instructors with easy-to-use tools, and building a campus culture that supports "open" goals and social justice. If state grants or institutional funds are not an option, other libraries have successfully leveraged donor funding,[8] small course fees,[9] or crowdfunding.[10] The webinar *No money for OER program? How to support OER and students in a time of COVID* (Bjork & Hofer, 2020) shared many other useful tips for libraries.

Could we do more with more? Undoubtedly. And I love the recommendation by Teri Oaks Gallaway, Associate Commissioner of the Louisiana academic library consortium LOUIS, to keep an expansion plan in your back pocket in case sudden funding or partnership opportunities come your way (OEN & Rebus Community, 2021). This is great advice. The OEN's Certificate in OER Librarianship offers openly licensed Action Plan templates and examples to help libraries plan for the future.

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[8] Donor funding supports Portland State University Library's PDXOpen: Open Access Textbooks publishing program.
[9] Kansas State University's Open/Alternative Textbook Initiative is funded by a $10 student fee per class.
[10] The University Libraries at Virginia Tech raised $2,554 through the university's crowdfunding platform to create freely available textbooks and learning resources.

Conclusion

By supporting course material initiatives, libraries can achieve a high return on investment in terms of student cost savings, impacts on retention and success, fulfillment of campus strategic goals, and positive publicity. There is no "one-size-fits-all" model, but I encourage libraries to develop customized initiatives using the limited resources they do have.

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