

Affordable course content

A cross-unit collaboration to develop institution-wide strategies at the University of Maryland

The cost of higher education is a growing concern. Tuition, housing, and other fees have risen more than 160% since 1980. Textbook costs, which contribute to these financial worries, have nearly doubled in the past two decades. A recent national survey found that 65% of student respondents avoided the purchase of a required textbook because of cost. The same study reported instances of students taking fewer courses, not registering for specific courses, earning a poor grade, or dropping a course because of the cost of textbooks.¹ This message of avoiding purchases or suffering undue hardship to buy course materials is echoed again and again throughout the nation:

- 80% of students at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign report not buying textbooks or access codes due to cost.²
- 66% of students report avoid buying course materials due to cost, significant numbers report working extra hours, skipping meals, or selecting (or avoiding) courses based on course content costs.³

At the University of Maryland, we see evidence of this problem as well. A campus survey conducted in fall 2021 shows more than 40% of undergraduate and graduate students declined to purchase a textbook in the past year due to cost. Clearly, the price of textbooks and other course resources is influencing student behavior and possibly impacting academic success. Libraries and other campus units have taken steps to address textbook costs, mainly through the promotion of existing resources, open education resources (OER), and inclusive access models. The libraries also have a librarian with responsibilities for OER. However, at Maryland and at many institutions, efforts to gain traction are slow and lack a cohesive, university-wide approach to addressing the problem of affordable course materials.

Affordable course content continues to gain legislative traction. The Maryland General Assembly passed the Textbook Transparency Act of 2020 requiring all state institutions to conspicuously display the cost of course materials when students are registering for classes.⁴ Further interest in this issue is evident by the increasing number of state and federal grants devoted to the development of open educational resources. Our collaborative approach, described below, is our effort to define and implement a strategy to address this issue for our university community.

Gary W. White is senior associate dean of University Libraries, Research and Academic Services, at the University of Maryland Libraries, email: gww2@umd.edu, and Mary E. Warneka is associate director of learning experience at the University of Maryland Teaching and Learning Transformation Center, email: mwarneka@umd.edu.

Task force

In Spring 2021, the dean of University Libraries and the associate provost for Academic Planning and Programs charged a Task Force on Affordable Course Content Options@UMD to explore this issue and to produce an institutional report to address the main question: *What can be done to expand access and reduce the cost of course materials for students at UMD?* The task force was co-chaired by the two authors from the libraries and the Teaching and Learning Transformation Center. Committee members included the associate vice president and dean of students, the director of Learning Technology Design from the Division of Information Technology, the associate dean of the Office of Undergraduate Students, and a student member. We were charged with delivering a report to the sponsors by December 2021 that would include

- recommendations regarding available options for more affordable course content;
- analysis about the benefits, disadvantages, and potential impact of different models;
- stakeholder input from units and individuals on campus; and
- estimated resource needs.

Affordable course content

The task force began by discussing the scope of affordable options to be reviewed. Shanna Jagers et al. define affordable course materials to include licensed library materials, textbooks, OER, and inclusive access commercial textbooks whereby course materials are made available to students by the first day of class for a flat rate that all students would pay.⁵ The group decided to take a very broad perspective and included additional learning sources such as coursepacks, instructor-created learning assets, and open source quizzes, data sets, and practice problems.

Information gathering

Drawing from Strategic Learning processes, the group embarked on a situational analysis to understand patterns and trends as well as implications for our university community. The task force gathered information on customer insights, industry dynamics, and our own realities to determine key priorities.⁶

- When exploring customer or student and instructor interests, the task force found an informed population of learners and a concerned group of faculty. The group spoke with student advocacy groups and learned how financial concerns and student debt weigh heavily on their minds. The task force met with faculty advisory boards and senate committees. Instructors face increasing teaching loads and diminishing time for instructional preparation. Many have sought grants to compensate their time while replacing expensive course materials but report that the workload can be extensive and not always politically advantageous.
- When researching industry dynamics, the task force met with corporate partners, Maryland state institutions, and Big Ten Academic Alliance peers. Especially interesting was the advice and cautionary tales from others regarding the extensive need for legal guidance and instructor support. Another key piece of information came through meetings with representatives from our university bookstore. The emerging “inclusive

access models” from the publishing industry were beginning to seep into our campus environment, and their motives and models needed a watchful eye.

- Finally, through meetings, surveys, and research, the task force examined our own realities to gauge economic, political, and technological conditions that could advance or hinder affordability goals. The task force held meetings with units including the Libraries, Teaching and Learning Transformation Center; the Office of Undergraduate Studies; Student Affairs; Academic Technologies; finance and legal offices; and the campus bookstore. They assessed what staffing, resources, expertise, and funding were available and determined the gap. Technology infrastructure updates and cultural adaptations surrounding promotion and technology infrastructure updates rose to the top of the list. Although equally aspirational, they could be the “why” and the “how” to activate change.

When the task force convened and shared the summary of their insights the resulting propositions came easily into focus. The three strategic choices covered in the sections below could not have been drafted at the outset of the groups’ work nor could they have been compiled by a single individual.

Recommendations and priorities

Expand open educational resources and infrastructure

The task force strongly recommends that the university engage in efforts to build OER support infrastructure and to promote use of OER materials as a strategic priority. Specific activities to support this initiative include (1) hiring a campus OER coordinator to work with the libraries and the Teaching and Learning Transformation Center and to provide leadership for overall OER efforts, (2) providing funding to target materials in high-enrollment courses, and (3) encourage program directors, department chairs, and academic deans to market and highlight courses with no content costs.

Maximize student access to library course reserves and related services

The libraries bring a great deal of OER options to the university community already. They host a robust course reserves program and, by calculating enrollment for the top 100 courses, library staff offer the top textbooks program to make many books and course materials available as well. By highlighting the role libraries play in making scholarly resources open, and by leveraging the expertise within instructional design and technology units on campus, we further build momentum for change. The task force recommends additional support for library reserves and funding to expand the top textbooks program to scale up services.

Further monitor the bookstore “inclusive access” models

Most faculty still regard the bookstore as the primary source for course materials. Bookstores will likely remain an essential part of material selection for years to come. The task force focused its efforts on evaluating a proposed campus-wide “inclusive access” program through a bookstore vendor for bulk purchases of all course materials at a set fee. Student concern for increased fees, faculty apprehension of inequity, and administrator skepticism regarding logistics all fuel the unanimous hesitation. The task force recommends additional study of this model and monitoring of other institutions.

Tactics to help translate the priorities

The task force realizes that the implementation of these recommendations will be a culture change for our campus and others addressing this issue. Beyond the three categories of recommendations discussed above, the task force makes the following broad recommendations, which can also be adapted at other institutions:

1. Make affordability a university-wide priority to be included in strategic planning.
2. Make course costs transparent at the point of registration.
3. Begin to systematically collect student data on affordability issues and faculty data on low-cost material adoption rates to make data-driven decisions in the future.
4. Continue to investigate and monitor emerging commercial bookstore models.
5. Build on existing infrastructure for scalable OER efforts, including technology, instructional design, library services, and copyright support.
6. Increase capacity and coordination across multiple units on campus.

Advocacy, implementation, and funding

The task force submitted its report at the end of 2021 and presented findings at many levels. The co-chairs met with the provost and her leadership team to review national and local data and to discuss their recommendations. Next, campus leadership was engaged through a variety of forums where input was received to clarify the message. Concrete steps began to emerge naturally with increasing momentum and support from college leadership.

The libraries were granted funding to hire an additional full-time staff member to bolster course reserves and to expand our top textbook program. Further discussions are taking place about the hiring of an OER coordinator and possible funding to reduce learning material costs in high-enrollment courses. The campus is also exploring software modifications to make course content costs transparent at the point of registration. These short-term wins fuel momentum for our action plan by maintaining visibility and increasing participation in the conversation.

Conclusion

We are in the early stages of implementation and will continue to advocate for this work through the university's strategic plan. Our experiences will hopefully provide guidance to others who are seeking to conduct a situational analysis and identify strategic choices regarding affordability. To that end, we leave you with this list of suggestions for your work:

1. **Include a *diagonal slice*.** Bring together individuals from different teams and from various levels in the organization to consider affordability from a broad perspective.
2. **Engage with stakeholders across campus.** Strive to uncover the existing alternatives to textbooks and the realities and challenges that accompany them.
3. **Gather local data.** National data makes the problem clear, but by working with student organizations you can highlight a compelling narrative that is specific to your context.
4. **Partner with your bookstore.** Work closely with your division that manages the campus bookstore and its operations. Transparent conversations about revenue are crucial to understanding the implications of potential solutions.
5. **Win hearts and minds.** Develop a simple communication strategy that is compelling for academic leaders in all areas of the institution. Administrators of faculty, students,

libraries, information technology, student affairs, etc., will be necessary to help execute the key priorities.

6. **Drive momentum at the ground level.** Actively engage with learning technology, instructional design, library, and legal personnel to maximize participation.

7. Perhaps most importantly, **be willing to do the work.** To truly collaborate across campus, units must be willing to share time, resources, and energy to enact widespread change.

Libraries already have a great deal of experience with OER and with making materials available via course reserves. By leveraging this expertise and working with other campus units that also directly support course content, efforts such as this can serve to broadly highlight the library's role in making scholarly resources open and accessible and can serve to build stronger relations between the library and other campus units. //

Notes

1. Robin Donaldson, John Opper, and E. Shen, "2018 Student Textbook and Course Materials: Survey Results and Findings," <https://www.oerknowledgecloud.org/record2630>. See also <https://wusfnews.wusf.usf.edu/university-beat/2021-03-01/survey-textbook-costs-having-greater-impact-on-students-during-pandemic>.

2. Sara Benson and Brian Farber, "Classroom Materials Cost Task Force Report," University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, June 2020, https://www.senate.illinois.edu/20210426senate/EP21072_FINAL_20210426.pdf.

3. Melanie Hanson, "Average Cost of College Textbooks" Education Data Initiative, August 12, 2021, <https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college-textbooks>.

4. Maryland General Assembly, University System of Maryland—Textbooks—Availability of Free or Low-Cost Digital Materials (Textbook Transparency Act of 2020), <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgaweb/Legislation/Details/SB0667?ys=2020RS>.

5. Shanna Jagers, Kaity Peieto, Marcos D. Rivera, and Amada L. Folk, "Using Affordable Course Materials: Instructors' Motivations, Approaches, and Outcomes," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 22 no. 2 (April 2022).

6. Willie Pietersen, *Strategic Learning: How to Become Smarter Than Your Competition and Turn Key Insights into Competitive Advantage* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010).