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Supporting Librarians in Making the Business Case for OER

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ABSTRACT
College textbook costs increased at three times the rate of inflation between 2002 and 2012 (United States General Accounting Office [GAO], 2013). One solution to high textbook costs is Open Educational Resources (OER) and institutional librarians, because of their reach throughout the institution and particular skillsets, are keenly positioned to make the business case for OER and become leaders of the OER movement. This article discusses the issues most relevant to OER adoption and provides an environmental scan of OER resources currently available to institutions, faculty, and students.

KEYWORDS
affordability; OER promotion; special librarian; OER librarian; textbook costs

Introduction
College affordability is one of the most pressing challenges facing higher education today. One expense, that significantly influences overall college cost is the high and rising costs of textbooks and other instructional materials. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the price of textbooks rose at three times the rate of inflation between 2002 and 2012 (GAO, 2013). Furthermore, 77% of Florida students responding to a statewide survey on textbook and materials costs, reported spending up to $200.00 for instructional materials beyond the cost of textbooks (Florida Virtual Campus, 2016).

One solution to reduce the high and rising costs of textbooks and instructional materials is to replace them with open educational resources (OER), which are free or low cost online textbooks, articles, videos, labs, etc, that faculty members may choose for use in their classes in place of purchased materials. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (2015), funder of the National OER Project, defines OER as “…high quality teaching, learning, and research resources that are free for others to use and re-purpose.”

There are, however, challenges to overcome. Faculty voice concerns over lack of familiarity with OER, availability of OER, and the additional time and effort required to use them, while administrators consider the overall business model required to support and sustain them over time (Allen & Seaman, 2016).
Overcoming concerns will require institutional-level efforts and the institutional libraries, because of their pervasive scope and the specific skillset of their librarians, are keenly positioned to become the leaders of OER adoption movements (Woodward, 2017). Additionally, library support for OER adoption helps to establish the value of libraries within the institution. According to Woodward (2017), “Adoption of OER to ensure student access to course materials can be seen as a starting point on the path to student success.”

Many institutional libraries are already heavily engaged in the OER movement (Salem, 2017), from national-level initiatives like the Open Textbook Network (OTN), a network of institutions that collaborate on new ways to increase the use of open textbooks, to system-wide initiatives like Affordable Learning Georgia (ALG). ALG is an initiative of the University System of Georgia that is led by the system’s academic libraries to help faculty locate and obtain access to low-cost, free, or open e-resources in the public domain as well as subscription resources provided by the university system libraries. Libraries also spearhead many institution-wide initiatives like the Open Education Initiative at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst that provides OER support and professional development to faculty (Salem, 2017), the development of internal repositories of open resources and materials, and, while not a formal open resource, the incorporation of e-resources licensed by the library into their institutions’ learning management systems (LMS).

Providing leadership on high-profile issues such as cost-containment and improved college affordability through the use of OER is an important endeavor for institutional libraries as they strive to prove their value to students in this era of reduced state funding and ongoing cuts to college and university services (Association of College & Research Libraries [ACRL], 2017).

To support institutional libraries in their efforts to position themselves as leaders in the movement to promote OER, this article provides librarians with information they may use to demonstrate the increasing value of OER given the impact of rising textbook and instructional materials costs on college affordability and student success. The article also provides an environmental scan of resources and organizations currently available to librarians to assist them in their efforts.

**Impact of textbook cost on college affordability and success**

The cost of attending college has steadily increased in recent years at a rate significantly higher than the cost of living. In 1996, a four-year bachelor’s degree from public institutions, in real dollars, cost an average of $50,500, while the real dollar average cost of the same degree in 2012 was $65,650, an increase of 30% (Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, 2015) and a study from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (ACRL, 2017) confirms that college costs have
increased significantly faster than median income growth. There are several factors that contribute to the cost of a college degree, and one expense that has increased even more dramatically than tuition and fees is the cost of textbooks. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the price of textbooks rose at three times the rate of inflation between 2002 and 2012 (United States Government Accounting Office, 2013) and the average new textbook cost $82 in 2014–15, up from $79 in 2013–14 and $72 in 2012–13 (National Association of College Stores, 2016, as cited in ACRL, 2017). A 2016 survey of 22,000 college students found that more than half (53%) reported spending over $300 on textbooks during the spring 2016 term and 10.6% reported spending over $300 on required materials (Florida Virtual Campus, 2016a).

A report by Student Watch (Senack, 2014, as cited in ACRL, 2017) did find that average student spending on textbooks and course materials decreased in 2015–16, which may be due to an increase in textbook rentals. Of concern, however, is the possibility that student spending is decreasing simply because students are not acquiring the books they need. In its 2016 survey of over 22,000 Florida college students, the Florida Virtual Campus (FLVC) Office of Distance Learning and Student Services found that 67% of respondents had not bought a course textbook, which, in turn, contributed to earning a poor grade (37.6%) or failing a course (19.8%) (Florida Virtual Campus, 2016a). Nearly half the survey respondents reported that, because they cannot afford the textbooks, they sometimes take fewer courses (47.6%) or do not register for a course (45.5%); approximately a quarter reported either dropping a course (26.1%) or withdrawing from courses (20.7%). All of these effects have the potential to extend time to graduation which adds to overall college costs through what economists call opportunity costs: the earnings a student foregoes every year that she or he is not actively employed in the workforce (Sullivan, 2010). When the average salary of a new college graduate is $50,556 (Poppick, 2015), every additional semester a student spends in college becomes a very expensive endeavor. Furthermore, extending time to graduation is a dangerous trend when one considers research findings that show time is an enemy of college completion and the longer it takes to complete a degree, the less likely students are to finish (Complete College America, 2011; Hayward & Willett, 2014).

Solution: Open educational resources

The use of Open Educational Resources (OER) is the one potential strategy for reducing the high cost of textbooks and materials. Colleges and universities that use OER can save students hundreds and even thousands of dollars over the course of a college degree. Openstax, a leading producer of high-quality, peer-reviewed open textbooks (i.e., textbooks that are free online), recently reported its textbooks have saved college students more than $68 million since 2012 and $42 million in the 2015–16 school year alone.
(Ruth, 2016). OER also have the potential to reduce costs by reducing time to degree. A recent study of colleges that used grant dollars to create courses and programs that use only OER, found that students in the OER programs took, on average, a full semester load of 13.3 credit hours, compared to an average 11.1 credit hours taken by students using traditional books (Achieving the Dream, 2016). If this average were maintained throughout a 60 credit-hour degree program, students using OER would complete their degrees a full year earlier which is a critical factor in degree completion; research has shown that the longer it takes a student to complete required coursework, the less likely the student is to finish (Complete College America, 2011; Hayward & Willett, 2014). Findings such as these likely contribute to increased institutional acceptance of OER as evidenced by the Campus Computing Survey administered annually to information technology administrators. From 2014 to 16, favorable responses to the use of OER continued to increase, to the extent that, by 2016, 79% of respondents reported that they believe OER will become an important source of course content in the near future (Green, 2016a). However, it is important for librarians to note that this positive forecast for OER is made by technology professionals who, in the same survey, also acknowledged that faculty concerns continue to be a barrier to OER proliferation. In a separate 2015/16 survey also conducted by the Campus Computing Project, 39% of nearly 3,000 faculty members at 29 colleges and universities, reported that they have never heard of OER and only 15% use OER (Green, 2016b).

The objections to OER cited frequently by faculty include lack of information about OER overall, lack of discoverability of repositories of OER, and confusion over the difference between OER and digital resources (Belikov & Bodily, 2016). Faculty also often express concerns about the amount of time and effort it takes to use OER coupled with concerns about their availability over time and their overall quality compared to traditional textbooks and materials (Allen & Seaman, 2014; I. Hess et al., 2016). Faculty must not only locate OER, but also evaluate their appropriateness for the given course or lesson they are intended to support, the amount of revision or adaptation that is required, and the overall quality (i.e., accuracy and comprehensiveness) of the resource, and faculty report that this is a particularly time-consuming task. If the open resource being selected is an open textbook, faculty must often not only revise the resource itself, but also create the ancillary materials to go along with it such as presentation slides, assessment items, and practice labs. Traditional textbook publishers often provide these.

A final challenge to the widespread use of OER is development of a viable business model. Until many more faculty and other developers begin to systematically contribute their personally developed books and materials to OER repositories, resources will have to be developed through faculty-compensation initiatives or by outside vendors who, currently, are often funded through grants or venture capital. After development, OER must be managed and maintained just
like any other resource utilised or provided by an institution. The conundrum for OER, as is true with many educational innovations, is that long-term monetization for sustainability is a basic requirement to offset the significant development investment and realise a return on investment. For OER, a viable monetization model has not been developed, so it is vital that the free and open contribution of resources becomes systematised and valued within institutions to the extent that contributions to the system becomes self-perpetuating before today’s current philanthropic funding sources are depleted. This pressing need makes the promotion of OER all the more important in higher education today and paves the way for librarians with a deep understanding of the issues to take a leadership role in creating the business model for successful OER adoption.

**OER resources and organizations**

Also of importance to librarians who wish to take on leadership roles in promoting OER is an awareness of the multitude of resources available to faculty and students. This section updates the environmental scan of OER resources and organizations first conducted in 2015 by the Open Access Textbook and Educational Resources (OATER) task force of the Florida Virtual Campus (Florida Virtual Campus, 2016b).

**Content provider companies**

Content provider companies are in the business of helping institutions to provide quality digital content as inexpensively and easily as possible. In regard to OER, such companies provide institutions with the services and technical assistance needed to integrate zero- and low-cost open texts, media, and course materials into their courses and programs. Actual product and service offerings differ among companies. Faculty support levels, for example, range from full-service to self-service and typically allow faculty to use any combination of their own content, third party content, and content from a vendors’ collection. Technical assistance can include integration of the OER into the learning management system (LMS) so faculty can monitor student use and interaction with the content as well as indices or institution-wide repositories of materials. Some of the most well known content provider companies, actively working within institutions today (in alphabetical order) are: EdMap, Intellus, Lumen Learning, VitalSource, and XanEdu.

**Achieving the dream**

The national community college student success organization Achieving the dream launched a $9.8 million project to develop OER-based degrees at 38 community colleges in 13 states (Zalaznick, 2016). The goal of the initiative is
“to boost college access and completion, particularly for underserved students, by engaging faculty in the redesign of courses and degree programs through the replacement of proprietary textbooks with open educational resources” (Achieving the Dream, n.d.).

**Community college consortium for open educational resources**

The Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources (CCCOER) is a joint effort of individual community colleges, regional and statewide consortia, the Open Education Consortium, the American Association for Community Colleges, and many other educational partners to develop and use OERs. CCCOER states that, their primary goal is to create awareness of OER and help colleges use OER to improve teaching and make education more accessible (Florida Virtual Campus, 2016b). Una Daly, director of CCCOER, reports that an increasing number of colleges are supporting campus wide OER projects, whereas a few years ago, there were only individual faculty efforts (Zalaznick, 2016).

**Creative commons**

Creative Commons (CC) is a nonprofit organization established over ten years ago to create a repository of free, open resources available through the internet for people to legally borrow, copy, edit or re-mix, add to, re-purpose, and distribute for their own use. According to the CC website, millions of people have posted their photos, videos, writing, music, and other content for use by any member of the public– completely free. CC’s Director of Open Education, Cable Green, advocates for open licensing policies specifically within the education domain to promote access to quality, affordable educational resources for everyone in the world. Materials posted to the commons can be licensed under various conditions that provide various levels of ‘openness’ using their free, easy-to-use legal tools and copyright licenses. Complete definitions of the licenses are on the CC website (Creative Commons, n. d.).

**Multimedia educational resource for learning and online teaching II**

Multimedia educational resource for learning and online teaching (MERLOT) is described as a “curated collection of free and open online teaching, learning, and faculty development services contributed and used by an international education community” (MERLOT, n.d.). The MERLOT project began in 1997, when the California State University (CSU), Center for Distributed Learning began to provide access to its online course resources. While still managed by CSU, other state higher education systems and institutions have been added throughout the years to form a cooperative,
contributing teaching and learning materials and developing evaluation and peer-review processes to sustain the quality of MERLOT. MERLOT now holds an annual conference; provides faculty development information; helps institutions to customise their websites to include MERLOT functionality; assists with the integration of MERLOT search functionality and MERLOT resources into learning management systems; and provides an infrastructure for the creation and peer-review of OER materials (Florida Virtual Campus, 2016b).

**OER commons**

OER Commons is a project created by the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME), an independent education nonprofit. ISKME provides a number of OER services, including Open Author, a publishing tool that assists in the creation, description, and discoverability of OER and Application Programming Interface (API) integration tools for the LMS. Their OER Commons, funded by the Hewlett foundation, is a free teaching and learning network of over 50,000 educational resources, mostly developed for the K-12 sector and some specific to the Common Core. The OER Commons repository contains textbooks within subject areas including arts, humanities, social sciences, sciences, etc. (Florida Virtual Campus, 2016b).

**Openstax college at rice university**

OpenStax College is a nonprofit organization that started at Rice University and is now supported by multiple foundations. OpenStax is considered by many to set the standard in quality textbooks. OpenStax textbooks are free to view online or download to print at very low cost. OpenStax texts can be customised for interested institutions through their Institutional Adoptions program, under which they will work with the interested party to make the institutional process as smooth as possible (Florida Virtual Campus, 2016b).

**Open textbook network**

The Open Textbook Network (OTN) provides support to institutions in working to implement open textbook initiatives and increase faculty of open textbooks. The OTN is a by-product of the University of Minnesota’s Open Textbook Library, and was created to fulfill the support and information requests from the other institutions wanting to create their own open libraries. Institutions all over the U.S. now participate in the OTN to collaborate on the development of strategies and practices for increasing open textbook awareness and adoptions.
National science digital library

The National Science Digital Library (NSDL) provides access to high-quality online learning materials, particularly in support of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education. Contributing partners include STEM education organizations, that provide digital resources, as well as services and communities of practice to support all levels of STEM education.

Stanford intellectual property exchange

Stanford intellectual property exchange (SIPX) began as a research project at Stanford to create a scalable technology that would support and promote faculty use of open/free content, that is in compliance with copyright rules and also reasonably priced. SIPX is described as a “platform- and content-agnostic service for finding, managing, distributing and analyzing the use of course materials, easily and cost-effectively” (ProQuest SIPX, n.d.). SIPX was acquired by ProQuest in April 2015.

Scholarly publishing and academic resources coalition

Scholarly publishing and academic resources coalition (SPARC) is a global coalition committed to open research and education. SPARC’s 200+ members are primarily academic and research libraries who have committed to actively “promote Open Access to scholarly articles, the open sharing of research data, and the creation and adoption of Open Educational Resources on their campuses” (SPARC, n.d.).

Summary

As the costs of textbooks and instructional materials have increased at rates significantly higher than the cost of living, stakeholders in higher education are demanding affordability solutions. A potential solution is the use of OER, but achieving acceptance and widespread adoption is a challenge for institutions. Many libraries have already assumed leadership roles in national-, state-, and institution-level initiatives to promote OER, providing OER support and professional development to faculty and making business case arguments for the use of OER in improving college affordability and student success. These are important activities for libraries, both for the successful proliferation of OER use and for demonstrating the value of libraries to their institutions. The information provided in this article is intended to support librarians in these efforts by providing them with a more detailed understanding of the trickle down
effects of high textbook and materials costs on college affordability and student success, the common faculty objections to OER, and a greater awareness of the resources available to them to promote OER.

**Declaration of interest**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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