Librarian Advocacy for Open Educational Resource Adoptions and Programs

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Abstract

Academic librarians are resource finders and are always available and ready to assist faculty and students with research help. Now, with the rising cost of textbooks across the country, movements have developed to help students save money through textbook affordability initiatives and open educational resources (OER). Without hesitation, librarians, along with other constituents, began to take a closer look at initiatives that would be feasible for their institution and for saving students money on textbooks. The process of creating an initiative, finding funding or incentives, and working with administration and faculty is no easy feat. Faculty and administrators want to save students money, but are often skeptical as to whether the initiative will work and whether the money and time spent is worth it. This article will address various scenarios and challenges that librarians may face when discussing different options for faculty and stakeholders on campus. It will also provide examples of ways librarians can collaborate with faculty and others in educating them on the purpose of OER and how to incorporate these free, high-quality resources into their curriculum.

Keywords: open educational resources, academic librarians, OER initiatives, textbook affordability
Introduction

Academic libraries are increasingly being called on to assist with or lead open educational resource (OER) initiatives for their institutions (Smith 2018; Todorinova & Wilkinson 2019). This new responsibility places academic librarians in the driver seat of advocating for student success through textbook affordability, which is a natural extension of their traditional role advocating for student success through access to resources. During this advocacy work, however, librarians and library administrators will likely encounter difficult conversations and tough questions that appear to be outside their realm of expertise. Librarians involved in OER advocacy will need to engage in discussions with key constituents on their campus, including faculty, administrators, fellow librarians, and students; in other words, nearly everyone on campus. Many of these are constituents with whom librarians are accustomed to interacting, but for different purposes, and they may have been more focused on provision of typical library services rather than advocacy of free course materials. Thus, librarians may feel uneasy about discussing textbook selection with faculty, who are unarguably the experts in their discipline. Discussions with campus administrators about stipends, release time, and tenure and promotion processes might seem beyond some librarians’, and even library administrators’, comfort levels. Conversations with fellow librarians about how to support discipline faculty who are considering OER can be similarly challenging. Yet librarians’ expertise as resource-finders, their ability to instruct others on how to effectively use discovery tools, and their well-established role in supporting curricular activities for academic departments perfectly situates them for expanding librarian-faculty collaborations to integrate OER into courses. This paper aims to be a helpful guide for librarians and other advocates on college campuses who are committed to implementing or growing an OER program but feel underprepared to deal with the
challenging conversations that will inevitably occur. We offer tested and proven practical strategies for responding to a variety of concerns and barriers from several different campus constituents. In doing so, we want to acknowledge and thank the members of the open community from whom we have learned these strategies; the value placed on sharing by this community is unmatched and this paper is nothing short of a remix of research, statements, soundbites, and ideas that have been shared with the authors to make us better advocates for open practices.

In crafting an advocacy pitch for OER, librarians should consider their audience, the motivations for adopting OER, and the common misperceptions and hesitations around OER. Each audience will have different motivations for adopting or advancing OER on campus and different reasons for not participating in OER programs. Whether an institution is at the planning, implementation, or adoption phase of an OER initiative, it is crucial for librarians to consider which audience is most essential to get on board and which piece of persuasive data or pitch will influence them. Clearly, it is most important to find faculty champions who recognize the importance and benefits of OER, but how do librarians encourage and support those faculty who are more hesitant or have subscribed to misconceptions about OER? Administrators are often the target audience when seeking institutional support and funding. How can librarians cultivate and contribute to those larger conversations that need to happen at the upper administrative levels? Librarians have been uniquely positioned to interact with students, helping them navigate confusing online homework managers, locate or access course reserves through the library, and search for cheaper editions of their assigned textbook. How can librarians leverage this knowledge of students’ “get by” behaviors to advocate for OER adoptions?
Responding to Challenges

Here are some questions and comments that librarians may likely encounter when promoting OER on campus along with suggested approaches for how to answer and engage in further discussion.

“I’m using the best textbook on the market for my class. Why would I switch?”

Faculty who are unhappy with their current textbook may be more inclined to implement an open textbook. But what about faculty who are satisfied with their current $150 textbook and feel strongly that it is the best course material available? Answer: “Students can’t learn from textbooks they don’t have” (Allen and Cohen 2017). No matter how effective that textbook is or how renowned the author is in the field, if students cannot afford it, or resort to part-time access to the textbook (i.e., library reserves or borrowing it from a friend), they are very likely not learning from it, nor will it become a fixture on their bookshelf for future reference. Despite a faculty members’ best intentions, student attitudes about the longevity of their textbooks have changed; cost more often supersedes value and students are choosing temporary course materials if they are more affordable. Librarians having this discussion can ask faculty if the majority of their students have the textbook in the first week of classes (they probably do not), or how often students seem to fall behind because they are not reading the textbook. This conversation, even with a resistant faculty member, may bring awareness to issues of textbook affordability and how that challenge is playing out in their classroom. The faculty member who wrote off poor performance because “they are not reading the textbook” may now start to wonder if the real issue is that students are not buying the textbook.

If faculty are adamant about keeping their expensive textbook, there are other alternatives to get them acquainted with OER. Librarians can share with faculty OER they find that coincide
with course requirements or look for faculty members from other institutions using OER for a similar course. Librarians may also ask faculty to consider including an open access (OA) article in their course readings or to listen to an online lecture from an OER repository. Offering small methods for implementing OER may persuade faculty over time to support and implement OER for a single class or more. Exposure to high quality OER can help overcome one of the biggest barriers to faculty adoptions: concerns about quality.

“**We’re only using half of this textbook, but there’s nothing that really fits my class**” or “**I don’t use a textbook.**”

These comments may come from faculty members or students and are a prime opportunity to begin a conversation about the benefits of OER. Unlike faculty who are perfectly happy with the standard text in their field, those who already recognize that existing commercial textbooks do not meet the needs of their course are well situated to consider an open textbook or a remix of openly licensed materials. Move the conversation beyond the issue of affordability (which is not an issue in a class where the instructor does not require a textbook purchase) and into the flexibility of open content. Explain to the faculty member that chapters from open textbooks can be remixed with chapters from other open textbooks or various OER. Unlike a commercial textbook with a fixed and immutable organization and structure, faculty using open textbooks have the freedom to modify and reorganize the content of an open textbook. Many faculty who are motivated by affordability to switch to OER find that what they ultimately appreciate most is the flexibility and adaptability of the resources: the content can be customized to best meet the needs of the students rather than having to adjust the syllabus to fit the commercial textbook.

Although truly open materials are the most flexible and give students the opportunity to own their education forever, sometimes using traditional textbooks or articles from library
subscribed resources will also save students money. Faculty tend to use what they are used to and they keep assigning the same textbook, when really only a couple of chapters are relevant or valuable to their curriculum. Librarians can suggest meeting with reserves staff and see if it is possible to put those one or two chapters on reserve with appropriate copyright permissions, and then guide faculty through various OER repositories to find supplemental material that will add to their curriculum. Faculty who do not use a traditional textbook can be encouraged to integrate scholarly articles they find in the library’s electronic resources. Although not open—or free for that matter—these resources are free to students and introduce faculty to the idea of remixing resources.

“What’s a $150 textbook in the grand scheme of the cost of college?” or “They can afford it.”

Related to these comments is an expectation among some faculty that “I did it, so they should too.” Like many aspects of higher education in the twenty-first century, however, the textbook market has changed dramatically from when many of us and our colleagues were undergrads, as has the overall cost of attending college. For many students, the sticker-shock of college textbooks comes to them as an unexpected cost. Although institutions are now required to disclose to potential students how much they should budget for books and supplies, this cost is often not real to students until they are standing in the bookstore looking at the overwhelming number of options, most of which they consider completely unaffordable. Although the cost of one textbook for one course might seem insignificant in the grand scheme of higher education costs, a student taking a full course load may need to budget well over $1,000 for all of the required textbooks, and this unexpected financial obligation could be the breaking point for a student or family that is already struggle to afford a college education (Senack 2014). Librarians can share with faculty the study by Student PIRGs, which found that 65 percent of students
decided against buying a required textbook because it was too expensive, and that nearly all of the students that did so admitted being concerned that not having the required textbook would affect their grades. Even at institutions where students are less likely to be struggling financially or where they are not mandated by the state to consider lower-priced course reading options, there will always be a number of students who would benefit from courses with free or low-priced course reading. Additionally, it is important to educate faculty that although students at their particular institution can afford the cost of textbooks, the OER movement goes beyond their classroom and their students.

A highly effective method for communicating to faculty the reality of students’ textbook behaviors is to interview actual students about their experiences. If possible, librarians and OER advocates can record videos of students describing how they obtain textbooks, what influences them to purchase a textbook or not, how often they use a textbook when they do or do not purchase it, and what creative means they use to avoid paying for a textbook they consider overpriced. Hearing directly from students can deliver a powerful message that might surprise some faculty into thinking twice about how OER might be an attractive option for their course.

“What about all the supplemental materials my current publisher provides?”

Fortunately as the OER movement gains momentum and faculty teaching high enrollment courses recognize the benefit to students of providing free and open course materials, this issue can be less of a concern for faculty in certain disciplines. When a faculty member relies on publisher materials that accompany a textbook, the answer may be to recommend looking for existing open textbooks and related platforms, many of which now have available instructor slides, quizzes, test banks, and other supplemental materials. For example, math faculty may consider switching to MyOpenMath (https://www.myopenmath.com/), an alternative to
Pearson’s MyLab Math (https://www.pearsonmylabandmastering.com/). Additionally, other platforms built on open resources, such as Libretexts (https://libretexts.org/) and WebWork (http://webwork.maa.org/index.html), also contain helpful supplemental materials.

Faculty may also be concerned about cheating when materials are so “openly available”; in these situations, librarian advocates may need to help faculty face the harsh reality that every answer to every problem and test bank provided by their commercial publisher is available somewhere online for the enterprising cheater to find. Cheng and Crumbley (2018) find that close to half of the students in a course had used a publisher test bank to memorize question-specific cues and the correct answers, and those students performed significantly better on exams. Perhaps the answer, “they’re doing it anyway” is not the best to give, but concerns about increased cheating due to the openness of course materials can be alleviated through educating faculty on the reality of students’ cheating behaviors.

If a funding source has been identified and librarians are advocating for course conversion projects, they can ask faculty how many others teaching the same course would be willing to work on OER adoption and try to put together a team who can create the materials that will no longer be available from publishers. Successful OER projects and initiatives are team efforts, including individuals other than teaching faculty who may also be able to contribute to the creation of supplemental materials. Librarians themselves can assist faculty in locating multimedia content—open or licensed—that can be embedded in course management systems. Instructional designers can be instrumental in assisting with the creation and accessibility requirements of materials beyond the textbook. Teams of faculty can divide up the work of creating test bank questions, instructor slides, review packets, and whatever else is needed. Course leads or coordinators may have come to rely on publisher ancillaries to ensure that
adjunct/contingent faculty are prepared with the necessary materials to teach a class even on short notice; a team of faculty who takes the time to develop those ancillaries for an OER course can then roll out that course package to any other faculty member in much the same way publisher materials would be provided. Librarians can also play an important role in helping faculty store and share those materials for wider use and should consider offering those services as they are having this conversation with a faculty member.

“Budgets are tight. Why should I allocate money to faculty stipends for OER?”

If selecting course materials is considered part of a faculty member’s professional responsibility, administrators may not understand why they are being asked to fund faculty stipends for OER adoption and creation. Librarians who are advocating for funding to support OER should be prepared to explain how an incentive (either in the form of stipend, time, or professional recognition) is important in moving an OER initiative forward. Oftentimes, it is easier for faculty to choose a popular textbook because looking for other resources takes time. Varying degrees of monetary stipends can compensate faculty for the significant amount of time that is typically required to replace course materials with OER, sometimes up to as much as forty hours of work. OER advocates recognize that “instructors feel pressed for time” and “colleges need to show they understand that before asking them to embrace a shift away from textbooks” (Jaschik 2017); stipends are such a demonstration. Before librarians discuss funding with administration, it is crucial to have the library director or dean on board and helpful to have a few faculty members who already embrace OER.

Particularly when asking for monetary stipends from potential funding sources outside of the institution, librarians can demonstrate the significant return on investment (ROI) afforded by OER adoptions. Consider a $3,000 stipend awarded to a faculty member who is currently using a
$150 textbook. If there are forty students in each section and the faculty member teaches three sections in one semester, the student savings for that semester will be $18,000. (Yes, it is unlikely that all of those students would have purchased a new textbook for the course, but let’s go for the big win on this one.) Identify likely adopters and calculate the potential ROI to share with possible funding sources. Get really creative and pitch OER stipends to donors as a scholarship that is awarded not just to one student, but to hundreds of students, semester after semester. Valentino (2015) notes that donors like to support programs that have a cascading effect, that make a significant impact on an important issue, and that others have supported. If campus administration is reluctant to commit institutional funding, librarians can ask for assistance from donors seeking to fund a student success or completion initiative.

“Our strategic plan is focused on enrollment and retention. What does OER have to do with those issues?”

If librarians find themselves in the position to advocate for OER support at the administrative level, connecting the goals and benefits of OER to institutional strategic planning can move those conversations forward. What does OER have to do with enrollment and retention, the two items that are likely high on any institutions’ list of strategic priorities? Research shows that OER may help with both. Fischer et al. (2015) find that students who took an OER course enrolled in a significantly higher number of credits the following semester. Although they acknowledge the difficulty in establishing causality between OER and enrollment intensity, the conclusions of this large scale study across fifteen different undergraduate courses at ten institutions suggests “enhanced probability” of a relationship. Colvard, Watson, and Park’s (2018) findings that Pell eligible students had dramatically reduced DFW rates in courses using OpenStax textbooks suggest that OER could be one among many high-impact practices that improve retention among more vulnerable populations. The body of research around OER is
growing quickly; librarians advocating for OER can turn to resources like the Open Education Group (https://openedgroup.org/) for published research on OER impact that can be shared with administration and faculty.

“What about these inclusive access packages offered by the publishers? Aren’t they a sufficient way to save students money?”

The concept of inclusive access is appealing to many bookstores and universities across the nation. However, there are a few considerations beyond cost savings. The impingement on academic freedom is particularly troublesome because in order for students to really save money, faculty would have to agree to use textbooks from one particular publisher or vendor. If faculty truly have academic freedom to select the most appropriate course materials, then there is no guarantee that a student who pays for an inclusive access package will have access to all of their textbooks under that package. Additionally, e-textbooks through inclusive deals are really rentals because publishers typically only offer access for one semester or academic year for the quoted price. Bookstore rental plans currently in place have similarly restricted students’ ability to “own” the education they are paying for, but at least students often still had the choice to purchase used or older editions if they wanted a text they could write in or keep. With inclusive access plans, which are also moving in the direction of digital-first or digital-only (i.e., no print textbook included), student autonomy is further eroded by publishers. While OER are also digital-first, print options are typically more readily available and are far cheaper, while the digital versions are downloadable, are available in more accessible formats, and include permission to modify the content as needed to fit a student’s learning style. As Nicole Allen, Director of Open Education for SPARC, states, inclusive access is “the opposite of inclusive, because it is premised on publishers controlling when, where and for how long students have access to their materials, and denying access unless they pay for it” (McKenzie 2017). There is
really no guarantee that anything offered on a publisher platform—notes or the text itself—will be available for future use by the student. The platform itself may cause technical difficulties for students and is likely designed in a way to lock down the content for only those uses prescribed by the vendor.

In addition, as we as a society grow more and more concerned about online privacy, the selling and bartering of personal data, and the lack of transparency around what corporate entities are doing with our personal data, librarians in particular should be raising concerns with faculty and administration about students’ online privacy when an institution signs on for inclusive access. Although institutional contracts with publishers may state that data covered under FERPA is not collected, students are required to accept publisher terms of use and end-user license agreements that have been found to include language giving permission to collect, use, and share personal information (Meinke 2018). Librarians may be uniquely positioned on campus to raise these concerns with administration and educate on data collection and sharing practices that do not have students’ best interests at heart.

“Won’t the bookstore have a problem with this?”

With the rising use of online retailers, Amazon for example, bookstores have understood that their main revenue is from university apparel and other merchandising. Steven Bell (2018) explains that “libraries and bookstores are not adversaries but share a common goal. Both want students to succeed academically.” He encourages librarians taking on OER initiatives on their campus to schedule a meeting with bookstore management and get an idea of their workflow in regards to cost savings for students. It is also pertinent that librarians educate the bookstore on the importance of OER, if they are not familiar with the concepts, and discuss with them strategies to facilitate the implementation of OER among various departments on campus.
Creating a textbook affordability taskforce that includes representation from the bookstore will allow several constituents on campus space to discuss various steps or initiatives that can be taken to help students save money on textbooks. One way the bookstore can participate is to offer print copies of creative commons licensed OER or open textbooks for students and faculty who still prefer print. The key to this relationship is communication with the bookstore throughout an OER initiative.

“I’m just a librarian. Why would I talk to faculty about what textbook they use?”

Stop by the reserves desk during the first week of classes at any academic library that offers textbooks on reserve and it will be evident how many students do not own (or even rent) their course materials on the first or second day of class. At some academic libraries, the textbook reserve collection may be the most highly circulated collection. Librarians regularly hear from students how they struggle not just with the cost of their textbooks, but with the process of obtaining and using access codes for homework managers or with bookstores that do not have the correct edition in stock. As accessible student service providers, librarians often have firsthand knowledge and observation of students’ challenges with course materials and find themselves helping students troubleshoot or find work-arounds. Librarians also are aware of and maybe even witness the illegal downloading and printing of pirated textbooks on library computers in ways that faculty may be completely unaware of. Who is in a better position to bring these issues to faculty members’ attention? Liaison librarians in particular have likely already built relationships with departments and faculty that they can tap into for starting conversations about the reality of how students (fail to) access course materials.

Librarians also have unique skills that are essential to finding and evaluating OER. Some OER repositories may be manageable for faculty to negotiate, like the Open Textbook Library,
which is intentionally designed to replicate the interface of textbook publisher websites. However, for subject areas where faculty may need to do more curation of resources than straight adoption of an open textbook, librarians’ ability to search, filter, refine, and evaluate results is unmatched. Beyond this, West (2016) notes that the work librarians already do in the areas of instruction, outreach to faculty, service to the institution, and especially collection building is a natural fit for including OER. She states quite eloquently, “The all-encompassing work of supporting a useful, organized, relevant, timely, and healthy collection of materials that both stimulates scholarly inquiry and meets student information needs is an ongoing challenge for all libraries. That very challenge has made us uniquely talented at helping our colleagues make decisions about educational materials” (1439). If that is too much, the simple answer is: this is the kind of work that librarians do all the time, in preparing course reserves, selecting materials for collection development, teaching information literacy skills, and more.

“Are you expecting the librarians to do all of this?”

Simple answer: of course not. This answer might cause the conversation to circle back to the previous question, but the bottom line is that whether librarians are voluntarily taking on OER advocacy for student success and social justice reasons or they have been tasked with organizing an initiative because they have a track record of productive collaboration, a successful OER project or initiative will require participation from several individuals focusing on what they each do best. Working alongside librarians and faculty may be instructional designers, accessibility experts, technology services, and even students. Team approaches to OER selection, implementation, and assessment have proven to be not only the most efficient and successful, but also to be the most robust, innovative, and sustainable. What lone advocate librarians may need to communicate to their colleagues is that while librarians should not be expected to do this work
in a vacuum, all librarians at the institution—not just the “OER librarian,” scholarly communications librarian, or equivalent—could potentially contribute something valuable to a campus OER initiative. When advocating to fellow librarians, it is worthwhile to first seriously consider what those colleagues can bring to the table and then emphasize the unique value they will each add to the project when asking for their participation.

**Conclusion**

The process of creating an OER program, working with administration, educating and persuading faculty, and implementing OER in the classroom is no easy task. However, many institutions have found methods for creating successful initiatives to save students money and improve student outcomes. These initiatives do not happen overnight and require consistency and patience. Liaison librarians can assist faculty in locating great OER repositories, but it is ultimately the faculty member who is the subject expert. Stakeholders across campus who are resistant to change will have several reasons for not implementing or considering OER but that should not deter librarians from using the responses above to gain some traction with hesitant faculty members or administrators. The key is to stay abreast of the latest OER news, updates, and events; update administration on student savings, both on campus and across the nation; stay relevant with faculty by sending them interesting OER related to their field of work; and seek funding to offer stipends that will provide faculty with an incentive to try it out. As one Open Textbook Network trainer put it, “remember that you are playing the long game.” Change will not happen overnight, but continued advocacy for students and access to resources is well aligned with librarians’ mission.
References


