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Library Leadership in Open Educational Resource Adoption and Affordable Learning Initiatives

Laurie Borchard and Lauren Magnuson

Abstract

The library serves as a natural nexus for coordinating open educational resource adoption and facilitating the use of affordable learning materials. Librarians are knowledgeable about trends in scholarly communication, copyright, and publishing, and our connection to students is unique and positions librarians as key advocates for students. Library values of free and equal access to information aligns closely with affordable learning goals to reduce costs for students and increase the use of open access, freely available and/or low-cost high quality learning materials. This article reports on results from a student survey regarding textbook costs at a large, urban public university, and recommends strategies library subject liaisons can use to engage with faculty to support affordable learning initiatives.

Keywords: open educational resources, academic librarianship, outreach, textbooks

Introduction

The high cost of textbooks and required course materials is a major problem facing most college students. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) the cost of textbooks in the United States has risen by 73% in the last decade. The average student spends around \$600 (NACS, 2016) on textbooks every year, but the average cost of required materials including textbooks and supplies can cost a student up to \$1200 (College Board, 2016). Students find ways to save money by renting or borrowing, however, some students may have no choice but to go without their learning materials. In a 2016 study of Florida university students, 66% of respondents reported not purchasing required materials due to cost (Florida Virtual Campus, 2016).

Many students served by public urban universities find rising educational costs a significant barrier to educational attainment (Knaggs, Sondergeld, and Schardt, 2014), and higher textbook costs may affect these students more profoundly. Textbooks may account for a large portion of student costs; in California in 2007-2008, textbooks accounted for 59% of the total cost of attending community college (Goodwin, 2011). Textbook costs are often paid through student loans, so the actual cost of the textbook is compounded by interest over time. For example, one study found that a \$150 textbook purchased with a typical student loan interest rate would ultimately cost the student approximately \$184 (Senack & Donoghue, 2016).

Higher education has responded to this problem by developing initiatives that promote faculty choosing course materials that are either free or low-cost. Open Education Resources (OER) initiatives are becoming increasingly common across the United States, especially within large state university systems. According to Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), 27 states currently have OER initiatives or projects and some states also have legislation that supports reducing the cost of course materials for students (SPARC, n.d.). These initiatives often focus on OER adoption, utilizing library resources and services, e-text creation, and course redesign.

The library is placed in an ideal position to lead these initiatives because library professionals possess knowledge of the publishing industry, copyright and fair use guidelines, expertise in finding and evaluating information, and have often cultivated unique relationships with students and teaching faculty. The following article reviews current research on textbook affordability, reports on original research on the impact of high textbook costs at a large, urban university, and describes experiences and best practices for utilizing librarian expertise in supporting OER and affordable learning campus initiatives.

Context

The authors work at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), which is a large, urban, public university in southern California, with student enrollment reaching over 40,000 that belongs to one the largest four-year public university systems in the United States. The

university system estimates that across all campuses in the system, nearly one in ten students are displaced or homeless, and one in five students experience food insecurity (Crutchfield, 2016). The student body is one of the most ethnically, economically, and academically diverse in the nation, and more than a third of the students are first-generation college goers. Providing high quality, affordable education is one of the pillars of this university system, and in response to the rising cost of course materials, the central office developed an Affordable Learning Solutions (ALS) initiative. This initiative offers each campus in the system an opportunity to receive funding to develop a team of individuals who support faculty in making their courses more affordable. This funding can be used to purchase library materials, fund faculty stipends, and plan events. This initiative has existed for over five years and every campus has a coordinated group focusing on textbook affordability.

The work of each campus team is to provide resources and services to faculty in an effort to reduce the cost of course materials. The teams are usually made up of librarians, instructional technologists, bookstore employees, teaching faculty, and a representative from disability services. These campus initiatives focus on promoting the adoption of OER, utilizing library resources, and the development of faculty authored educational materials. The system-wide ALS team provides guidance for campus coordinators with regular training including webinars, workshops, and resource sharing. In 2015 the authors received \$20,000 through the ALS initiative to start a coordinated group on campus. Since 2014 the team has focused on faculty outreach and support, the development of marketing materials, and communicating with campus administrators. Members of the team include two librarians, a campus bookstore representative, a staff member from campus disability services, an instructional designer, and a faculty member who created her own OER.

Since the passing of the California Textbook Affordability Act in 2015, there is more funding widely available for any campus within the state to receive up to \$50,000 to support OER/textbook affordability initiatives (AB-798 College Textbook Affordability Act of 2015). The application for funding by the Act required the development of a detailed plan of implementation, and a list of course sections with projected savings had to be included. The application also had to include a textbook affordability campus resolution passed by faculty governance, which would officially make textbook affordability a priority on campus.

The Impact of Textbook Costs on Students

While research has been done on the efficacy of OER initiatives in terms of learning outcomes and in terms of faculty choosing affordable materials over traditional textbooks (Hilton, 2016), the authors wanted to better understand the financial and academic impact of textbook costs on students. In May 2016, a survey was distributed to 10,000 randomly selected enrolled students at CSUN. Survey questions were designed with three goals in mind: first, to identify the causes and frequency with which students forego purchasing required course materials; second, to identify how students are impacted by the high cost of textbooks, and third, to identify preferred alternatives among students to high cost course materials, such as the availability of learning materials on library reserve and embedded within learning management systems. The

anonymous survey received 477 responses, with 86% of respondents indicating they were undergraduates. Only 41% of students indicated purchasing textbooks 100% of the time, while 28% indicated they purchased textbooks half the time or less frequently (*Figure 1*).

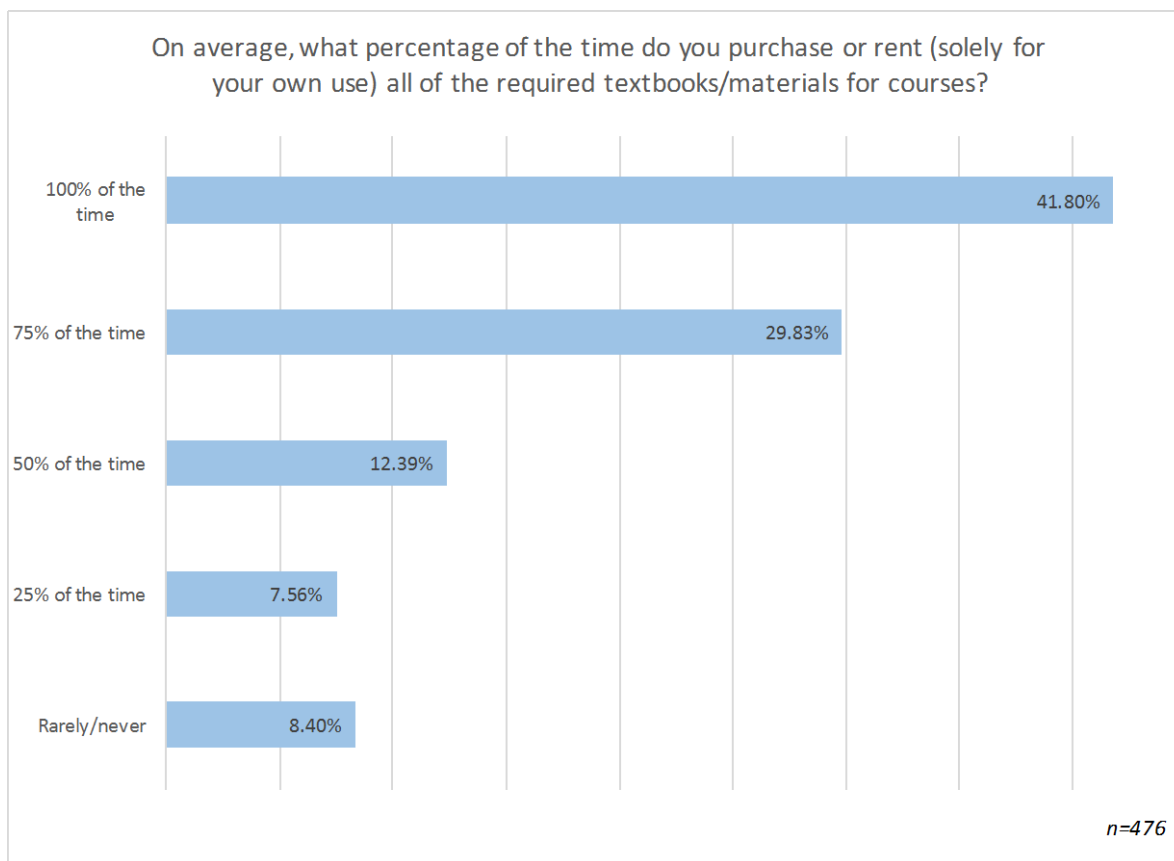


Figure 1. Textbook purchasing behavior.

When asked why required textbooks or materials were not purchased, common reasons given included that “the materials were too expensive” (77% of respondents), “only a small portion of the book is being used in the class” (46%), and “I don’t find the required materials necessary or useful” (26%). When asked, “How much do you think a typical textbook should cost?” \$21-\$41 was the most popular choice, followed by \$41-\$60 and \$20 or less (*Figure 2*). The authors found it interesting that students do expect to pay for textbooks and they see value in course materials.

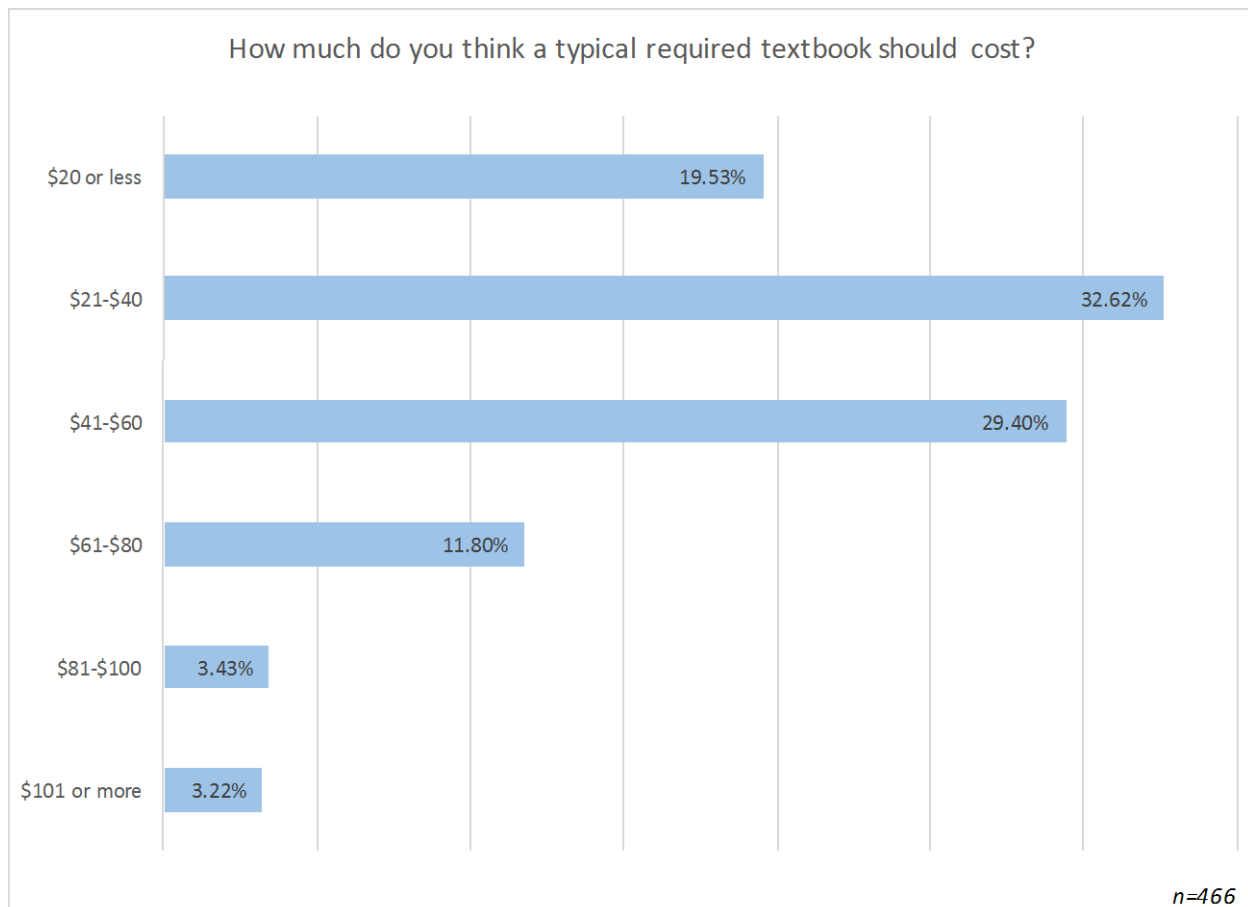


Figure 2. Perception of appropriate textbook cost.

When asked, in open-response format, about how lower textbook costs would impact their financial life, most respondents (96%) indicated a general positive impact, with the most specific areas that would be impacted including the ability to allocate more funds to food (13%), transportation (8%) or housing (6%), as well as reduction in stress (11%) and improved savings or debt reduction (12%). Although only 4% responded that lower textbook costs would not impact their financial life, it's worth noting that those students indicated that they've already not been purchasing required materials due to cost. For example, one respondent wrote: "Well, I had to stop buying books because I was spending too much on them so right now it would not really impact me."

Survey respondents also indicated that they would like more of their course materials to be placed on library reserve (86%) and directly in their learning management system (LMS) courses (Moodle) (Table 1). Despite the high level of agreement that more professors should place textbooks/materials on library reserve, only 43% of all respondents had ever used library reserve services. When responses were limited to those who *had* used library reserve, agreement that library reserve should be used more often increased to 94%.

Table 1		
<i>Library Reserve and Learning Management System Options</i>		
Survey Question	Agree	Disagree
Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "I would like more of my professors to place textbooks/materials on library reserve."	86.24%	13.76%
<i>n=465</i>		
Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "I would like more of my professors to place digital textbooks/materials or links to textbooks/materials directly in Moodle courses."	94.93%	5.07%
<i>n=473</i>		

When asked what affordable alternative to purchasing high cost material is preferred, most respondents indicated that renting materials at a lower cost was the solution they used most frequently. However, some respondents mentioned that they prefer to permanently own materials for their major, as they may wish to consult those materials in the future.

The results from this survey of students are similar to results from other surveys of college students and textbook purchasing behavior (Senack, 2014; Florida Virtual Campus, 2016). In these surveys as in ours, students noted frustration with both the high cost of materials and the tendency for faculty to not use all of the content from the required course materials in class. As one respondent wrote in our survey, "My biggest complaint is when a textbook is required and then never used. Last semester it was a [custom edition] book that I never opened and can't return." This comment also highlights another problem students encounter: materials that are customized for a particular course or campus, which limits their resale value. Publishers may market these kinds of custom editions as more affordable for students, but their limited resale value may not always result in savings for the student.

The data from this survey has proved to be a very compelling marketing tool when speaking with campus administrators and faculty. It presents current data on "our" students and provides insight into their textbook purchasing behavior. The campus community can see that students aren't purchasing their materials as often as expected and it provides data as well as very personal comments on the impact of the high cost of course materials.

Faculty Outreach Strategy

One of the biggest challenges facing textbook affordability initiatives is persuading faculty to participate. Educating faculty on issues relating to textbook affordability is key in developing marketing and outreach strategies. It's important to make it clear why affordable learning is relevant, and how it directly relates to student learning and retention. It's also imperative to define what affordability means, including what OER are, how the library can help, as well as identifying alternative resources such as rentals, international copies, or older editions.

Despite the fact that knowledge and use of OER by faculty is increasing (Allen & Seaman, 2016), there is still a lot of confusion about OER and reluctance to dedicate time to making course materials more affordable. In the most recent Babson report (Allen & Seaman, 2016) researchers found that “many academics have only a vague understanding of the details of what constitutes open educational resources. Many confuse ‘open’ with ‘free,’ and assume all free resources are OER.” Even though faculty report that they're aware of what OER are, they may not fully understand the definition or have the knowledge to appropriately identify OER and OER licensing conventions. Content licensing and copyright issues are therefore essential in the development of educational campaigns and outreach strategies. The Babson report also discusses the most common barriers to OER adoption, which include: not enough resources in a specific subject area, difficulty finding OER with no comprehensive search tool and lastly, concerns about the quality (Allen & Seaman, 2016). The OER Research Hub survey from 2014 also reported that knowing where to find OER was one of the biggest challenges to adopting (for both educators and learners), and knowledge of OER repositories was low (de los Arcos et al., 2014).

Affordable Learning Pilot with Five Faculty

After several unsuccessful attempts to reach faculty through emails, presentations at departmental meetings and the promise of stipends, the authors were able to attract participants through collaborative teaching and technology workshops. These workshops focused on course redesign and instructional technologies and were conducted in collaboration with the campus Faculty Technology Center as well as Faculty Development. The audience for these workshops are faculty who are already committed to student learning and are interested in teaching technologies. The authors found it effective to reach out to faculty during the time of the semester where they are devoted to working on their courses, such as right after one semester ends and in the weeks before the new semester begins. After following up with participants from these workshops, five faculty members committed to making their courses more affordable for Fall 2016 semester. Each faculty participant was promised \$1,000 stipend for reducing the cost of their course materials by at least 30%.

The participating faculty came from Astronomy, English, Health Sciences, History, and Business Law and all had very diverse needs. Three of the faculty were teaching lower level undergraduate courses and two were teaching upper level undergraduate courses. The authors began by meeting with each faculty individually and creating a “case study” for each course. These case studies included a list of the current course materials, their syllabus, a description of the issues with the current course materials, as well as current gaps in the curriculum. This

allowed the authors an opportunity to better understand what their needs were and allowed them to actively assist with the searching of courses materials.

The next step was a workshop that included a short presentation on textbook affordability issues, a clear definition of what OER means, and resources for searching. There was a follow-up discussion where faculty could share their own experiences with affordability issues in their classrooms, as well as their expectations for this pilot. The second half of the workshop was spent utilizing various search tools for finding OER content as well as library resources. These search tools included a link to the campus bookstore search embedded in the learning management system (which includes OER in its search results), various OER collections (MERLOT, OER Commons, OpenStax), and Intellus Learning.¹ Library databases and discovery tools were used as well, and the authors also had access to library acquisition resources, including GOBI Library Solutions from EBSCO.

One participant could not find any new content that he liked so he decided to stick with some of the resources he already used (which were already free to students), and he also decided to create content on his own. *Table 2* shows the cost savings for the remaining four faculty. The strategies used to make these courses more affordable for students included the following:

- Adoption of portions of OER,
- Digitizing portions of traditional texts (within fair use guidelines),
- Linking to already existing library digital resources,
- The library purchased ebooks with unlimited user access utilizing already existing funds for course reserves.

The authors found that participants struggled with searching for and finding content, whether it was OER or library content. Participants were also unaware of library resources and services, including reserves, accessing and linking to ebooks, and copyright allowances for digital content. The authors also facilitated the digitization of content, as well as the modification of OER PDF material using Adobe Acrobat Pro.

¹ Intellus Learning is a subscription-based course reading list and OER discovery service which was available to the campus on a temporary trial basis. More information about this product is available at <http://www.intelluslearning.com/>.

Table 2					
<i>Affordable Learning Pilot Program Cost Savings</i>					
Course Description	# of Students Enrolled	Original Cost per Student*	New Cost per Student*	Savings per Student	Total Savings
Lower-Division English Course	27	\$197.95	\$0	\$197.95	\$5344.65
Lower-Division History Course	60	\$70	\$39.52	\$30.48	\$1828.80
Upper-Division Health Sciences Course	19	\$94	\$0	\$94	\$1786.00
Upper-Division Business Law Course	44	\$270	\$0	\$270	\$11,880.00
<i>Total Savings</i>					\$20,839.45
*Note: Cost of materials is based upon publisher's list price of new, unused purchased (non-rental) copy retrieved from Amazon.com, August 2016.					

Adapting the Librarian Liaison Role to Facilitate OER Adoption

The role of the academic library subject liaison has traditionally focused on collection development, and increasingly focuses on faculty outreach and deep collaboration for facilitating information literacy instruction (Henry, 2012). Liaison interaction related to collection development has often been functionally separate from library services related to course reserve and textbook availability, with some university libraries featuring explicit policies against using collection development funds for purchasing textbook due to limited funds.²

² For example, see Oregon State University's Textbook Collection Policy, which states: "Like most academic libraries, the OSU Libraries is not able to purchase textbooks. Library funds are limited, and thus, the Libraries' priority is books and other materials that supplement and enhance coursework and research. Since not all books required for a course are textbooks, and in some

University libraries face challenges with regard to textbook availability on reserve due to extremely high demand by students, limited collection development funds, and publisher limitations on ebook licenses for textbooks. Many textbook publishers and providers do not enable libraries to purchase electronic licenses for textbooks at all through platforms such as ProQuest's ebrary and EBSCO's EBSCOHost, and those that do may offer limited use licenses, such as single-user licenses that only enable a single user to use the textbook at any given time. While single-user licenses may appear to be similar to traditional print-reserve circulation (whereby only one user can check out a book at a time), such licensing is often not conducive to online reserve, because if there is no fixed loan period for an ebook, it can be difficult for the user to predict when the material will become available. Copies of textbooks available on physical reserve are useful for courses delivered in-person, but are not helpful for distance learners.

One potential solution to these challenges is to adapt the library subject liaison role to work closely with faculty to embed OER or library-licensed material in their curriculum. By analyzing course curriculum and currently required course materials, library liaisons could research available potential OER options or identify library electronic materials that have unlimited user or other flexible licensing options. This strategy builds upon library subject liaison strengths in understanding and evaluating curriculum, awareness of resources and e-resource licensing models, and expertise in locating materials in support of curriculum. Collaborating with faculty to identify OER, low-cost, or library-licensed material as a replacement or supplement for traditional textbooks can be an effective way to expand upon existing embedded librarian services while lowering costs for students at the same time.

This type of collaboration with faculty is extremely time intensive and requires a high level of buy-in from the faculty member as well as leadership in the faculty member's department, library administration, and academic administration generally. One suggested approach is to propose a resolution in favor of affordable learning projects in faculty governance,³ or work with the office of the chief academic officer to develop a memo to faculty and academic leadership in support of these initiatives. It is important for affordable learning initiatives to seek either internal or external grant funding, as compensation for faculty time, in the form of stipends or release time, may be essential, given the time-intensive nature of these initiatives. Recognizing participation in affordable learning initiatives as valued campus service in the faculty tenure and promotion process can also be an effective incentive for faculty to invest time in making their course materials more affordable.

Librarian buy-in, like faculty buy-in, is equally important, as the support faculty need in order to effectively use OER may be different from the traditional library liaison role. It is important for library liaisons working on affordability initiatives to have skills in permanent linking to electronic resources and knowledge of basic troubleshooting of on-campus and off-campus

instances a textbook provides the only or best coverage of a subject, or is a significant or historical study of the subject, exceptions can be made. Faculty members are encouraged to place a personal copy of a course textbook on reserve.”
<http://osulibrary.oregonstate.edu/collections/textbooks>

³ An example resolution passed by California State University, Northridge's Faculty Senate is available at <http://www.csun.edu/sites/default/files/ALS-resolution.pdf>.

access to electronic materials. We found it also essential to have access to library acquisitions tools such as GOBI to be able to search for, effectively price, or even make selections with faculty quickly and efficiently to ensure materials are available to students by the time the course begins. Experience using Adobe Acrobat Pro or other content authoring tools are also useful, and experience using the campus learning management system is helpful. Requesting material to be digitized by the library can be a complex process, so the authors facilitated having portions of materials digitized for courses (in some cases, physically retrieving material from the shelf and walking it over to the digitization department, or even scanning the materials ourselves if time was of the essence) and provided some general copyright and fair use information. While providing some of these services has perhaps been traditionally outside the domain of traditional library subject liaisons, providing assistance with making campus courses more affordable enables faculty to discover library content and services they were not previously aware of, and enables the subject liaison to more deeply understand the content of the courses their faculty are teaching.

In working directly with faculty, the authors identified several key areas the library could improve workflows to better meet the needs of faculty when using library materials in their courses. First, library website forms used for requesting that material be placed on course reserve were found to be confusing and in need of simplification. Second, a clear process for requesting digitization and delivery of files to faculty needed to be established. Third, the process for requesting materials to be purchased for the library's collection was also in need of streamlining, and online forms clarified and simplified. Finally, it was determined that the library should develop integrations with the campus learning management system to enable faculty to quickly and easily embed library resources in their online courses without having to learn multiple methods of perma-linking. Finding and using library resources can be confusing, and ensuring that library processes are clear, straightforward, and predictable can increase usage of library resources and deepen the library's connection to faculty and curriculum.

Conclusion

Affordability initiatives in higher education can be challenging. They take time gain momentum and they require volunteers that are dedicated to improving outcomes and services for students and faculty. The high cost of textbooks and course materials has a significant and deeply detrimental impact on students, and librarians are placed in a unique position to lead affordable learning initiatives. While libraries already support an array of services that make learning more affordable, faculty may not know about these services or may have difficulty making the most of these services. Library subject liaisons can play an essential role in helping faculty navigate library services, develop collections that can be used in place of expensive textbooks, and support faculty in finding and using open educational resources. In turn, library liaisons can learn from faculty how library services can be improved to better meet their needs, by streamlining digitization and course reserve services, improving discovery tools, and integrating library resources more closely in learning management systems.

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