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Textbook Affordability at Smith College: Affirming Smith's Commitment to creating an inclusive, equitable and accessible educational community

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Textbook Affordability at Smith College

Affirming Smith's commitment to creating an inclusive, equitable and accessible educational community

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With support from the Smith PIRG Team

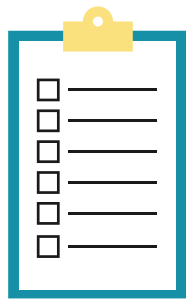Special thanks also to Jessica Ryan and Denys Candy for your advice, guidance, and consultation!

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Executive Summary

The U.S. Public Interest Research Group's (PIRG) Education Fund, notes that "in 2020, 65 percent of students surveyed reported skipping buying a textbook because of cost" (Vitez & Nagle, n.d.). The costs of course materials are rising at astronomical rates. According to the Student PIRGs, "the cost of textbooks and course materials has increased at three times the rate of inflation since the 1970s" (Xie, 2023). Textbooks are unnecessarily expensive and are increasingly a barrier to education access and student success. Extensive research has demonstrated that while publishers can get away with (and profit off of) high prices, students who need these resources to complete their education are suffering.

The high cost of textbooks impacts students' personal and academic lives. Not only are students struggling to purchase course materials in a way that causes their academics to suffer, according to a study conducted by the University of North Carolina there is a link between textbook costs and student food insecurity. Original survey data collected for this project also confirms that students are having to make decisions about what necessities they can purchase in order to afford their course materials.

We propose Smith College implements three systems to address this problem inimical to our institutional values. It would be to our benefit as an institution to 1) adopt and implement an open education resource (OER) use policy, 2) to create a system which allows reuse of course materials to the extent reasonable and possible (e.g. a textbook library), and 3) to, in the short term, direct resources towards price transparency efforts through the establishment of a course marking system which would provide students with information about the costs of a course before they enroll in that course.

Significant research, some of which will be reviewed herein, has demonstrated the need for an alternative to course materials as they are at Smith, and many other institutions, today. While textbook costs may seem like an unavoidable reality to some, we owe it to ourselves to look beyond the manifestation of this problem for innovative solutions. Given our institutional, and personal, commitments to equity and accessibility in education and at large, we cannot accept the status quo as an unavoidable reality.

The Problem: Textbook Prices

Many students at Smith College, peer institutions, and other colleges and universities across the nation are experiencing high textbook costs as a barrier to educational attainment. In late February 2022, Sherry Li '25 wrote a letter to the editor (LTE) which was published in Smith's student newspaper, The Sophian (Li, 2022). In the LTE, Li spoke to the problems that the prices of textbooks and other course materials present for students at Smith and across the nation, citing data from the Open Textbook Alliance. The data revealed that 65% of students have forgone purchasing a textbook they needed due to prices.

In December 2022, Li's LTE was followed by an opinion piece written by Louisa Miller-Out. Miller-Out noted that "these alarming statistics and practices represent a major equity and accessibility issue," and went on to discuss Smith's institutional values (Miller-Out, 2022). They added that if

Smith was to align with these values we "must dare to imagine a world in which no one has to pay extra for required educational materials" (Miller-Out, 2022). Smith College prides itself on being "a community dedicated to learning…" as well as one "committed to creating an inclusive, equitable and accessible educational community" (Mission of Smith College, n.d.). We must act on these core values and ensure that all students have access to this educational community regardless of their personal and financial resources. Luckily, there is an alternative to traditional course materials sold at high costs; there are solutions available and waiting to be implemented!

> " these alarming statistics and practices represent a major equity and accessibility issue "

Current Initiatives

There has been some action at Smith College to address the problems posed by the high costs of textbooks. There are many student-led initiatives in this area, some big and some small, as well as a larger campus initiative. Overall, these initiatives are not fully addressing the large problem posed by textbooks costs. Additionally, they are not sustainable (both in terms of longevity and environmentally). So, what resources do Smith students currently have access to?

Student Resources

There are a couple of resources available to students by virtue of their status as students in a community. First, students often have friends studying in the same department as them. Sometimes, students can pass down books directly in this way. Similarly, when students don't know anyone who needs a specific textbook, but they no longer have a use for it, they often leave books in their house libraries. This is another, more indirect, way students can find books they need. This often works for classes that are regularly taught, for example Calculus 1 or Smith's political theory course -- Gov100. Both of these methods, however, are not guaranteed. They rely on another student giving away the book and the class still using that edition of the book. For this reason, these are strategies, but not surefire ways to obtain one's needed course materials.

Smith PIRG Resources

Smith PIRG, a student activism club at Smith, has engaged in work to create resources for students searching for textbooks. In addition, Smith PIRG has also encouraged the use of affordable resources among faculty members on campus.

The club has created a resource guide for students to reference when searching for affordable textbooks. The guide includes a quick links section as well as descriptions of various resources, for example: the Smith College Libraries catalog search tool, a handy website called BookFinder, and Smith's academic funding application.

In terms of encouraging more affordable resources, including Open Education Resources (OERs), Smith PIRG student activists have collected petition signatures from faculty members. Most recently, members of PIRG launched an awareness and appreciation campaign to thank professors using low cost resources in their courses!

Thank you cards that were written to Smith Professors who are using low/no cost materials already, alongside a note that Smith PIRG drafted about the project and its purpose.

Campus Resources

The resource in this space that is provided directly by Smith is accessed through the Academic Funding Application in the Smith Social Network. Upon navigating to the application, students are met with a notice which explains that they are expected to budget for books. The form goes on to state that "students whose book costs exceed their budgeted allowance may apply for aid" (Smith Social Network - Form, n.d.). While textbook funding is a great resource for students, this clearly demonstrates that it is a limited resource. Additionally, it is more of a band-aid solution to high textbook costs since it does not get at the root cause of why students need this resource in the first place.

While this section clearly demonstrates that there exist resources which students can turn to, it also shows that many existing resources are not constant, that they rely on students themselves and, beyond that, are often a matter of chance. Even the final resource described, which is institutionally supported, is not fully meeting student needs on campus.

Luckily, there are available, fairly easy-to-implement alternatives---

The Solution

The best solution to the current challenges presented by the high cost of course materials would be a multi-pronged approach including the endorsement of Open Education Resources (OERs) and the implementation of an OER program, as well as a course marking policy, and a program to encourage textbook reuse.

The Solution →
- Open Education Resources
- Course Marking
- Textbook Reuse
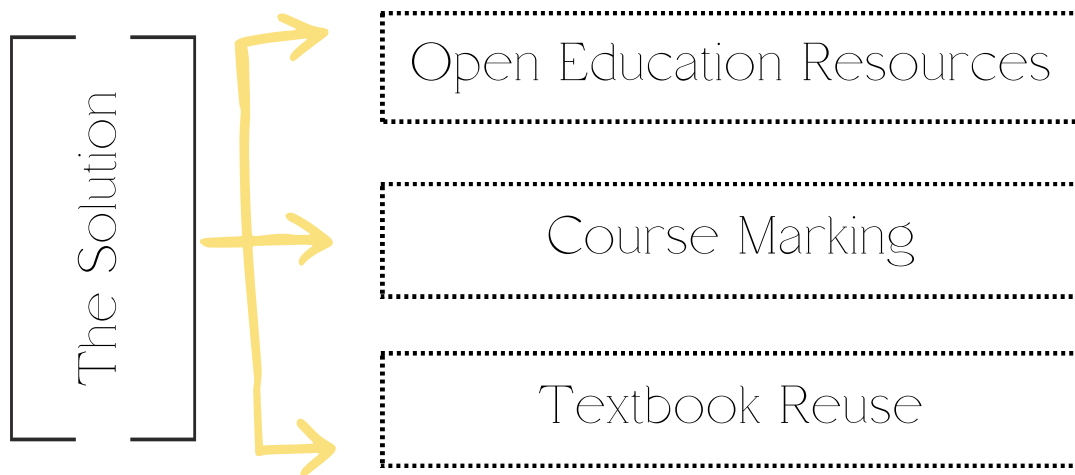
Open Education Resources (OERs)

OERs are high-quality, peer-reviewed materials which are free to access. In a recently published report, entitled "Open Textbooks >> The Billion Dollar Solution," Student PIRGs pointed to the "cost-saving potential of free open educational resources (OER) --teaching, learning and research materials that are openly licensed for use, adaption, or redistribution at no cost" (Xie, 2023). This is certainly not an assertion that all materials needed for any course are already available as OERs. Though there are many great, existing OERs, at the present moment, it is probable that there are courses which will still require more traditional course materials. This is why a multi-pronged approach including course marking or price transparency, and textbook reuse programs is so important!

Course Marking or Price Transparency

Course marking, is a policy, also known as price transparency, whereby the cost of course materials is disclosed to students before course registration. Course marking programs vary in terms of how exactly they disclose course material costs. For example, some note a numerical value, while others indicate no or low cost courses only. In addition, some institutions require all professors to participate, while others implement course marking on an opt-in basis. Decisions like this depend on an institution's systems, preferences, and goals. In any case, the feature that is consistent with course marking programs is that it helps students budget, so that later they aren't surprised by higher costs and forced to make decisions like dropping a course or skipping buying other essentials. (Price Transparency - Course Marking - FAQ, n.d.)

Textbook Reuse Programs

Textbook reuse programs are not as widely defined, but the general idea is that textbooks, for example those that students no longer need, are collected and redistributed to students who need them. This can look a lot of different ways, but the key is that instead of making student after student pay for books (sometimes even providing each student with additional aid to support that purchase), institutions can provide a means for students to connect with their peers and exchange textbooks.

Why These Avenues to Textbook Affordability?

As the following sections will demonstrate, these three avenues toward increasing textbook affordability are good ones to pursue. They have been taken on in various formats at colleges and universities across the United States and they would affirm and further the mission and values of Smith College.

Temple University

Temple University supports textbook affordability through a campus initiative known as "The Textbook Affordability Project (TAP.)" The project awards professors who make their course more affordable with monetary prizes ranging from $500 to $1500. A professor can make a course more affordable in a variety of ways including using library-licensed materials or OERs or even by creating their own learning materials (Temple University Libraries | Textbook Affordability Project, n.d.).

On the TAP webpage, the history of the project is briefly recounted. The program was founded in 2011 by a Librarian at the University by the name of Steven Bell. In the last 12 years, it has granted awards to "faculty across nearly every discipline at Temple University and saved students over one million dollars!" (Temple University Libraries | Textbook Affordability Project, n.d.) Drawing on the previous efforts of actual faculty members, the webpage outlines the ways professors can use (and have used) OERs to make courses more affordable for their students.

Beginning with adopting OERs, the webpage explains the story of a faculty member in the chemistry department, Daniele Ramella. Ramella "replaced a $238 Molecular Chemistry textbook… with a freely accessible, open textbook from OpenStax… saved students $11, 900 and observed that student participation increased as a result of better preparedness for class." Another faculty member, teaching in the Department of Higher Education, Jodi Levine-Laufgraben opted out of "us[ing] a traditional textbook" and instead "carefully curated readings from multiple library resources and identified public domain, primary source documents…" (Temple University Libraries | Textbook Affordability Project, n.d.).

Georgetown University

At Georgetown University, in the Center for Multicultural Equity and Access (CMEA), there is a co-op library '"which provides students in need with access to textbooks donated by their peers" ("Academic & Student Support Services," n.d). Students are able to borrow the books they need completely free for the entire semester. Students who have demonstrated financial need are also eligible to apply for book loan scholarships. Students who are granted these scholarships request their books, CMEA purchases the books on their behalf, and when the semester is complete the books become part of the co-op library.

University of Kansas

The University of Kansas (KU) supports affordable course materials through a cost transparency initiative. The initiative, fairly new at the time of this writing, was put into place in time for Spring 2021 course registration. The system defines an "affordable course" as one which uses "exclusively…no-cost ($0) and low-cost (less than $45) resources as required course materials" (KU Course Marking, n.d). According to the website, course materials (in the context of this program) means "textbooks, workbooks, homework systems, and other learning content," but excludes supplies (KU Course Marking, n.d).

How does it work? At KU, there are icons in the credit hours column of the course search engine which indicate when a course is no cost or low cost. The absence of one of these icons indicates either that the course material cost is not yet available, the course material cost exceeds $45, or the course is of a type that does not require materials (i.e.: a discussion section).

KU Course Marking Icons indicating low cost (left) and no cost (right)

It is also worth noting, as the KU website does, that in addition to the institutions implementing course marking "as a matter of policy," "marking affordable courses has been legislatively mandated in seven states since 2015, including Oregon, California, Washington, Texas, Colorado, Virginia, & Louisiana" (KU Course Marking, n.d).

Smith Values

At Smith College, students, faculty, administrators, and other community members are proud to be part of "a community dedicated to learning, teaching, scholarship, discovery, creativity and critical thought" (Mission of Smith College, n.d.). In alignment with this value, "Smith is [also] committed to creating an inclusive, equitable and accessible educational community…" (Mission of Smith College, n.d.). In recent years, Smith has made great strides in making education more accessible. For example, in October of 2021, President Kathleen McCartney announced the College's commitment to replacing student loans with grants. The College noted the life-changing nature of this decision for a large number of students.

For many students, there is no doubt that this shift will continue to be life-changing. That said, for most of those same students, that is just one of the barriers they face to attaining a post-secondary education. Another large barrier students face is the cost of course materials.

Student Survey

What are students experiencing and saying? We conducted a survey of a small sample of Smith students to find out. Seventy-seven students completed the survey and, out of those students, thirty-nine percent had spent over seventy-five dollars on course materials this semester. Many students made it clear that this cost was a burden for them. Fifty-one percent of students surveyed said that the cost of their course materials this semester imposed financial strain. For many students this is limiting their education and stretching them thin. Here is just some of the thoughts students have about textbooks and other course materials:

> " I avoid taking some classes because it's too stressful to find the money for their required textbooks. So the cost of textbooks literally limits my education. "

> " I can barely afford to come to school here; buying textbooks makes that financial strain heavier. "

> " It's stressful when I have to be thinking about money instead of focusing on classes. "

> " The ability to buy or not buy textbooks creates an unfair access to resources to people in the class. "

Clearly, there is a disparity between our institutional commitments and the way students experience education at Smith.

In order to affirm Smith's values, we must work towards a multi-pronged program which enhances textbook affordability and centers the student experience. As stated on the College's Office of Equity and Inclusion (OEI) site, "a commitment to equity requires us to remove obstacles to full participation and recognition for members of our community, and to pursue corrective justice for those unfairly denied full participation and recognition" (Equity & Inclusion, n.d.). If we fail to make education equitable and accessible, particularly where clear opportunities exist, we fail ourselves. We have a responsibility to this community to ensure that every student on this campus is given the same fair chance at educational attainment. In the words of the former Majority Leader of the United States George Mitchell (2016), "in America no one should be guaranteed success, but everyone should have a fair chance to succeed."

How Might it Work?

There are many ways that these programs and ones like them can take, and at other institutions have taken, shape. One way is not necessarily inherently better. For example, some course marking programs use low or no cost markers, while others indicated ranges or numerical values. The success of these programs ultimately depends on whether they are implemented and managed in a way that is responsive to student needs. For that reason, the following descriptions address some of the things we may want to consider as we work towards increasing educational equity by decreasing course material costs. These descriptions take into consideration data from a small subset of students. Based on those data points, the goal should be to move swiftly to implement building blocks for each of these programs. From there, learning what works for the larger student body and adapting as needed will be essential. Making strides towards implementing all three of these programs is important. As we will see, not all of these programs have benefits, but alone they don't solve the milllion dollar problem that is the textbook industry.

Implementing Course Marking

Course marking, as previously noted, is a "term for programs that disclose course material costs to students before they register for the class" (Price Transparency - Course Marking - FAQ, n.d.). According to the Open Textbook Alliance, course marking is "an expansive term" (Price Transparency - Course Marking - FAQ, n.d.). By this, they mean that price transparency can look a lot of ways -- for example, mandatory or optional, numerical indicators or binary cost/no cost markers, etc. They offer a few examples. Georgia State University students are able to filter courses by their material costs as the search, for example, and students at the University of Connecticut are able to see NoLo (no or low cost) markers on the registration page. (Price Transparency - Course Marking - FAQ, n.d.)

At Smith, we may want to consider beginning with indicating courses that use only open or free materials. To pilot this program, it may be desirable to consider making it voluntary for the first year. The key is simply increasing price transparency sooner

rather than later. As an Open Textbook Alliance FAQ Sheet notes "more information is always helpful for students…institutions should choose a course marking model that makes the most sense for their circumstances." (Price Transparency - Course Marking - FAQ, n.d.).

When taking these things into consideration, a common concern that arises is "what if students don't take a class because of the cost?" (Price Transparency - Course Marking - FAQ, n.d.). It is important to address this clearly with concerned faculty members. The unfortunate truth is that students already are selecting out of classes they can't afford. The only difference is that, currently, they do so during the add/drop period. Ultimately, "students deserve to make informed decisions about their finances," and if they choose not to take a certain class in a specific semester or at all, then "that is rightfully their choice." Allowing students to consider cost information and make this choice prior to registration would make courses operate more smoothly for everyone.

Employing Open Education Resources (OERs)

There are "many high quality open textbooks… available right now -- written by leaders in their fields, peer reviewed, and professionally designed" (Open Textbooks - FAQ, n.d.). All we have to do is search for them and opt to use them! This may require some training to increase awareness of open educational resources and outlets where they can be found, but ultimately, it is a low cost box to check as there is very minimal barrier to doing so. An Open Textbook Alliance OER FAQ notes that "there are websites that aggregate faculty reviews of open textbooks and can help professors find books for their subjects" (Open Textbooks - FAQ, n.d.). It provides a few examples of these websites that can help faculty get started using OERs: "a few good places to get started are are the Open Textbook Library from University of Minnesota, OpenStax from Rice University, and LibraText from UC Davis" (Open Textbooks - FAQ, n.d.).

Open textbooks are "the most affordable and flexible option" for students and "a number of studies have found that OER are as or more effective than traditional

books" (Open Textbooks - FAQ, n.d.). Sometimes there is confusion about the difference between OERs and other e-books. The difference is the type of license they are published under. "Typical e-books are still quite expensive and have many drawbacks, like access that expires, and limits on printing," while OERs, published under an open license, are always free to use and don't have printing restrictions (Open Textbooks - FAQ, n.d.).

Another advantage of OERs is that professors can often, depending on the exact license, adapt them to best serve the course they are teaching. Faculty are even able to publish their own OERs if they wish! "There are many foundations, states, companies, and institutions that will pay professors to write open textbooks" (Open Textbooks - FAQ, n.d.).

Creating a Textbook Reuse Program

Textbook reuse is an even more expansive, all-encompassing phrase than course marking. For the purpose of this proposal, we envision a program which makes the best use of additional course material aid (for example, at Smith, Academic Funding) by reusing textbooks. An additional layer is added when students who purchased textbooks with their own money opt to donate them when they are done with them. In both of these scenarios, books purchased can be collected and redistributed to any student that needs them, thereby maximizing the use of each book and decreasing the money each student must spend on course materials. An example of this was seen in the aforementioned case study of Georgetown University.

At Smith, we already have a great example of how a similar system works -- Common Goods. Students could maintain the inventory of such a program in exchange for work study money, the inventory could be searchable through an online database, and at the beginning of each semester students in need of course materials they are unable to afford could request their books. This would require a system to collect books at the end of each semester, but it could be as simple as bins in the Campus Center or the library. A program of this nature would take a little work to implement, but would more than pay off in the amount of dollars saved (including those provided to students by the college in the form of academic aid) on textbook and other course material spending.

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