COST OF TEXTBOOKS
BURDENS STUDENT LEARNING

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

Since Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1439, access to books has shaped student learning. But as publishers' prices have increased in recent decades, a growing number of faculty nationwide have joined the effort to make college more affordable by using Open Educational Resources (OER) instead of traditional, market-rate textbooks.

According to the Education Data Initiative, the cost of college textbooks increased 1,000% between 1977 and 2015, with the average full-time student now paying more than $1,200 per year to buy books. For many, that means working extra hours while in school to cover the cost — or even skipping meals in order to afford books required for class. Other students will attempt to get through the semester without purchasing course books, which impedes their academic success, or will simply cut back on the number of classes they take, which slows their progress toward graduation. A single hardcover textbook can cost as much as $400, and although the average price tends to range between $80 and $150, these are not small amounts for students in hourly wage jobs.

The textbook market is currently dominated by only five publishers who control over 80% of the course material assigned in American colleges. The shift to e-books during the COVID-19 pandemic has actually made it harder for some students to save on their book bills because there are fewer options to buy used texts and there is more pressure to pay mandatory licensing fees charged by publishers for required online course materials.

In the midst of this crisis, the movement to promote Open Educational Resources offers an avenue toward greater equity. Professors in all subject areas — literature, law and history as well as math and sciences — are pioneering the use of open-access materials so that their students will not be burdened by choosing between a meal and a textbook.

OER materials are more than just free, and they aren't solely online. To truly be an Open Educational Resource, the material must allow students and faculty permission to download, edit and share with others in order to provide open access for all. Without copyright restrictions, OER can legally be converted from digital into print formats and can be translated into other languages or adapted into large print, Braille or audio versions for students with specialized learning needs.

Many open textbooks are peer-reviewed and go through rigorous editorial oversight, so they are equal in quality to traditionally published texts. Resources such as the Open Textbook Library and OpenStax also allow faculty to post reviews, which help guide their colleagues when selecting an OER text to assign.

For centuries, the student experience has depended on reading. Like Gutenberg, who expanded access to the written word in medieval Europe, Open Educational Resources are removing the economic limits to modern-day student learning.

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