

Academic Libraries and Open Educational Resources:

Addressing Student Textbook Affordability

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ABSTRACT

College students face many financial obstacles in their pursuit of an education, with one of the most difficult being the high cost of course materials. This article explores the issue of textbook affordability along with one practical solution—open educational resources (OER) or alternative textbooks and materials for college courses that are free of cost and access barriers through open licensing. The use and creation of OER has been supported by universities and colleges in Maine and throughout the northeastern states, with libraries playing a crucial role in both the discovery of existing OER and the support of the creation of new materials. We argue that Maine stands poised to take a more active role in the use and creation of OER within our colleges and universities.

report not purchasing required course materials because of cost barriers, which results in poorer academic performance (Wilfong et al. 2023).

While many faculty are also concerned with the cost of course materials, they have the added responsibility of prioritizing information accuracy and cultural relevance in the course materials they ultimately assign to students. As a direct result of these competing priorities and the rapid consolidation of commercial publishers, publishers have remained able to charge high prices for their specialized products, and college students continue to be forced to choose between

financial wellness and academic success.

INTRODUCTION

Required course materials—defined as educational materials like textbooks, workbooks, and supplies necessary for the successful completion of a class and a full subject matter understanding—are a perennial point of concern for college students and educators alike. While the overall inflation rate has increased by 74.4 percent between 2000 and 2022, the price of college textbook has increased by more than 160 percent during this period (Perry 2022). The 2022 Florida Virtual Campus survey indicated that students struggling to afford a college education often choose to forgo purchasing course materials (53.5 percent), even though they may suffer academically as a result (FVC 2022). Likewise, a California study found that Latinx students were three times more likely than their white peers to fail a class because they could not afford the textbook, and first-generation students were twice as likely to fail a course than their continuing-generation peers for the same reason (Jenkins et al. 2020). The same study also found that transfer students are 53 percent more likely to experience negative academic performance due to not buying their textbook for class. The same issues are present in Maine, where students

One viable way to address these issues of affordability, as well as to encourage the use of updated and culturally relevant course materials, is through open educational resources (OER). The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) defines OER as “teaching, learning, and research resources that are free of cost and access barriers, and which also carry legal permission for open use.”¹ To clarify, OER are more than just free materials. Creators of OER provide copyright permission through the Creative Commons licensing model for anyone to retain, reuse, modify, and share their work, allowing instructors to create custom course materials by aggregating the most useful and pedagogically sound parts of any number of OER.² Students access the materials from links in the course syllabus or the institution’s learning management system (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard, or Canvas), and print versions are often available for a minimal cost. Support and education for faculty about OER is largely provided by academic librarians and instructional designers. An Association of American Colleges and Universities study found that “OER adoption does much more than simply save students money and

address student debt concerns. OER improve end-of-course grades and increase completion rates for all students. They also improve course grades at greater rates and decrease DFW (D, F, and Withdrawl) letter grades rates at greater rates for Pell recipient students, part-time students, and populations historically underserved by higher education” (Colvard et al. 2018: 1).

The publishing industry has also offered a solution to textbook affordability through *inclusive access* programs, whereby textbook suppliers add the cost of digital course content directly to student tuition and fees, which eliminates student agency in reducing costs by buying textbooks in the secondhand market. These programs are more appropriately named automatic textbook billing programs.³ We should closely examine solutions offered by those who contribute to the problem, especially given that inclusive access initiatives eliminate affordability solutions such as purchasing used books, borrowing a copy from the library, or sharing the cost with classmates. Even the federal government has noticed this issue and drafted a proposal for eliminating automatic textbook billing programs by requiring that students have the ability to opt-in rather than the responsibility of opting out (The White House 2024).

In this article we illustrate the initiatives undertaken by higher education institutions in Maine to enhance affordability of course materials and promote the adoption of OER. We will explore how other states are supporting similar efforts through policy and funding and subsequently propose a pathway forward for Maine.

THE STATE OF OER IN MAINE

Absent statewide policy or funding, higher education institutions in Maine have approached course material affordability and OER promotion in individualized ways based on their campus context and available resources. However, even with this individualized approach, there has been significant overlap in the types of services offered by Maine’s public and private academic institutions, with the academic libraries within those institutions leading the way.

Ongoing Efforts

Most academic libraries in Maine have begun their OER outreach journeys by developing educational programming for their campus communities. Curated online guides by institutions such as Central Maine Community College (CMCC) and University of Maine at Augusta

(UMA) have raised awareness and allowed faculty to discover, engage with, and refer back to OER information and tools at their own pace.⁴ Librarians and related staff at nearly every institution in Maine have offered training for faculty on topics such as open licensing, digital accessibility, open pedagogy, and evaluating OER. For example, in 2019, Bates College received a Davis Educational Foundation Presidential Grant to host a one-day symposium focusing on the creation and use of OER in higher education (Wilfong 2019). The symposium brought together academic colleagues from across the state to establish a baseline understanding of OER and to begin building statewide momentum in this area. In 2024, the Maine Library Association (MLA) initiated a dialogue around open education topics with the development of a Maine Statewide Open Education Discussion Group. This virtual

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forum convenes library professionals to set goals that align ongoing initiatives across our campuses. Funding from the University of New England’s (UNE) recent Davis Educational Foundation grant, along with support from Colby College Libraries and the Institute for a Racially Just, Inclusive, and Open STEM Education (RIOS), gathered discussion group members in-person for a one-day workshop in early August.

Needs Assessment and Community Engagement

Academic institutions across Maine have gathered data from their campus communities about course material affordability. In 2019, University of Southern Maine (USM) Libraries surveyed faculty and students to explore the negative impacts of high-cost textbooks on students and some of the barriers faculty face when wanting to adopt OER. In 2020, a faculty and student survey at Colby highlighted the issue of course material affordability among students and offered increased OER adoption as a potential solution. In 2022, Bates and Colby, in collaboration with several other private schools, implemented a student textbook survey confirming textbook affordability

as a key student issue, even at small private liberal arts colleges. In fact, 94 percent of respondents indicated that they have taken measures to reduce the cost of their course materials (Wilfong et al. 2023). UNE has a campus-wide OER steering committee composed of faculty, administrators, professional staff, and students to collect data and oversee the development of more formal OER efforts. In early 2024, Bowdoin College's president formed a campus taskforce to address the issue of textbook affordability on campus and to examine the college's relationship to traditional textbooks, publishing companies, third-party textbook providers, OER, and pedagogical practice. Bates, Colby, and UNE Libraries have dedicated library staffing in scholarly communications, of which OER plays a critical part. In 2024, the University of Maine Library is taking on a more robust OER support role through the addition of an open scholarship librarian and an OER librarian to its staff. Within the Maine Community College System, individual campuses have delegated staff in various departments to work on OER, though a system-wide approach would be beneficial. A lack of dedicated staff or turnover in staff has been a challenge in increased OER outreach by Maine's academic libraries.

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OER ADOPTION AND CREATION SUPPORT

Although OER are free for students, their creation involves considerable instructor labor that falls outside of faculty contracts, and this labor needs to be compensated accordingly. In 2015, UMaine piloted the Textbook Alternative Program (TAP). TAP provided modest grant funding to five faculty members who explored low- or no-cost alternatives to the expensive traditional textbook they previously chose. While the TAP pilot provided UMaine students savings of over \$110,000, the momentum from the program has been difficult to sustain without additional funding to appropriately compensate faculty (University of Maine 2016). Librarians and learning experience designers collaborating

at UMA have received internal funding to establish UMA Libraries' OER Honorarium Program, which has awarded faculty who redesign courses around OER a \$500 honorarium.⁵ The program resulted in the redesign of ten courses in winter 2022 and seven courses in fall 2023. The Davis Educational Foundation has demonstrated ongoing support for OER initiatives by generously funding faculty stipends at Bates, UNE, and USM for reviewing, adopting, or creating OER, in addition to providing money for institutional memberships to the Open Education Network. Their investment, alongside fiscal support from the Unity Foundation and the Harold Alfond Foundation, has enabled Thomas College to assist many faculty members in transitioning to OER use. Led by the provost's office and supported by the Library, these efforts at Thomas College have led to roughly half of full-time faculty teaching sections with low- or no-cost materials. Thomas has also recently worked with the New England Board of Higher Education on a course-marking grant project, which has further increased awareness and use of OER on campus by highlighting low- and no-cost course options during student registration.

THE STATE OF OER IN THE NORTHEAST

Organized OER work in Maine began with robust collaboration among institutions, and participants quickly identified lack of state policy and inconsistent funding sources as the main obstacles. Meanwhile, other states in the Northeast have made bigger moves, namely Massachusetts and Connecticut. Massachusetts introduced language into the FY2017 appropriations bill authorizing its Department of Higher Education to establish guidelines and protocols in accordance with 34 CFR 668.164(c)(2) to encourage and assist colleges and universities with the implementation of programs which reduce the cost of textbooks and other educational materials.⁶ This work led to their OER strategic initiative, which increased capacity for addressing textbook affordability within the state (MDHE 2019). In 2019, Connecticut's Public Act Number 19-117 established the Connecticut OER Coordinating Council under the Office of Higher Education. This 17-member council representing both public and private institutions was charged with identifying courses that make the largest financial impact on students, establishing a grant program to assist faculty in converting those courses to using OER, and reporting back on the program's results (Connecticut House Bill

No. 7424: Public Act No. 19-117). According to the council's 2023 report, the state's investment of \$217,363 since 2020 has saved 9,699 students nearly \$1.2 million in textbook costs. More than 150 faculty from 28 institutions were awarded grants to convert 362 course sections. In addition, interest in OER has spread to the state police, who have saved nearly \$50,000 by creating and using it for their antiracism and implicit-bias training (CT OER Coordinating Council 2024). SPARC maintains an OER policy tracker that aggregates information from all 50 states and a state policy playbook. Maine is not listed among the 31 states with enacted OER-related policies.

On a national level, Sen. Angus King (I) of Maine, has supported the creation of the Open Textbooks Pilot Program, which has sponsored projects at eligible higher education institutions to create new open textbooks and to expand the use of open textbooks in courses that are part of a degree-granting program, particularly those with high enrollments. In FY24, the program granted nearly \$7,000,000 to six institutions, including Framingham State University in Massachusetts.⁷ The continued renewal of this program will affect thousands if not millions of students over time.

MOVING FORWARD

It is time for Maine to join 31 other states in supporting OER use and creation through state policy and funding to help remove critical financial barriers of textbook accessibility for our students. The achievements individual institutions have made thus far should not remain siloed, especially since professional librarians, instructional designers, and academic technology consultants across Maine are poised to support faculty in moving to OER. Likewise, the impact of OER initiatives is currently centered on students attending institutions that have the time, staffing, and expertise to write grant proposals. This reality is particularly problematic for the state's community colleges, where free tuition programs have exposed course materials costs as a significant barrier to student retention, achievement, and completion. We believe that the state should develop a plan similar to Connecticut, where a council of representatives from both public and private institutions is appointed by the Maine Library Commission to develop a plan for expanding the adoption of OER in Maine and to create a competitive grant program in support of this initiative. These efforts would have a measurable effect on access to course materials

for all Maine's college students and provide Maine state taxpayers with evidence that we are working to make higher education more accessible and affordable.

NOTES

- 1 <https://sparcopen.org/open-education/>
- 2 <https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/cclicenses/>.
- 3 <https://www.inclusiveaccess.org/>.
- 4 <https://guides.cmcc.edu/newoer>; <https://umalibguides.uma.edu/c.php?g=1351764&p=9976905>
- 5 <https://umalibguides.uma.edu/c.php?g=1131892&p=8866665>
- 6 <https://sparcopen.org/our-work/state-policy-tracking/>
- 7 <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/otp/index.html>

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David Smith is the associate director of library services at Thomas College. He has been an academic librarian for nearly 20 years and has been involved with the open education movement for most of that time. Smith began working on OER-related projects in 2017.

Kate Wing is the electronic resources and scholarly communication librarian at Bowdoin College. Wing has been facilitating access to information in public and academic libraries for 20 years. She is an ardent supporter of textbook affordability initiatives and assists faculty in using OER in lieu of traditional textbooks.

Ann Morrison Spinney is the assistant dean for learning resources at Northern Maine Community College. In a previous position in the Ivy Tech (Indiana) library system, she worked on OER projects. As a professor of ethnomusicology she created, adapted, and used OER for her courses.

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