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The Textbook Initiative and Research at Michigan



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The Rising Cost of Textbooks and Michigan Initiative

The textbook initiative and research at Michigan aim to articulate the lack of textbook affordability and explore both opportunities and challenges for intervention in the rising costs of textbooks. The increasing financial burden of textbook costs on college students is a growing concern in the Michigan community. Today, student expenditures on textbooks reach approximately \$1,000 annually. Textbook costs remain remarkably high and continue to climb steadily.

The proposed solutions to lower these costs include a variety of federal and state government policies and programs, including advocacy and legislative pressure on textbook publishers requiring transparent pricing, unbundling of supplemental material, and less frequent textbook revising. In tandem, campus initiatives and activities are equally important, because they help us identify the solutions that align well with the competencies and the particular needs of the University of Michigan.

In 2009, the University of Michigan Library undertook a year-long study in order to examine the economics of textbook publishing and distribution and to propose a variety of new and more creative methods of textbook development, publishing, and distribution. As part of the Michigan case study, the textbook project team invited all faculty of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LS&A) to take part in a survey in order to help us identify which factors most influence the selection of instructional materials and to better understand faculty views about rising textbook costs, more affordable alternatives to traditional textbooks, and the potential role that the University Library might play in textbook publishing. To follow up the textbook survey, we conducted extensive interviews with twenty-four Michigan faculty members. Our empirical findings revealed interesting differences across disciplines and various faculty demographics.

Upon the completion of the 2009 textbook study, we have continued to assess opportunities to help alleviate student's financial burden with a special focus on the uses of e-textbooks. While e-textbooks are already rapidly becoming a big part of the digital revolution sweeping college campuses across the US, are these high tech textbooks really the solution to textbook affordability? What are the Michigan student and faculty preferences in selecting and using textbooks? By focusing on the uses of e-textbooks, we have addressed the question of how we can help increase productivity and efficiency of teaching for faculty and provide lower-cost course materials for students, making education and resources more affordable.

Are E-Textbooks the Solution to Textbook Affordability?

With textbooks already amounting to the previously mentioned \$1000 yearly expense, many argue that e-textbooks are the solution to textbook affordability. The average price of an e-textbook is already approximately 50-60% of the list price of a new print edition. Upon the arrival of competing electronic reading devices on the market, the National Association of College Stores (NACS) is predicting that 10 to 15% of college-store textbook sales could be digital publications by 2012. Other market statistics also indicate a fast growing e-textbook market due to emerging technology innovation and increased affordability. However, skeptics argue that digital textbooks can be as costly and sometimes more expensive than print counterparts because of the costly infrastructure to produce and distribute new type of content. There are potential problems regarding competing standards and formats for digital content and different platforms to access it, which portends e-textbooks as an unaffordable option. The recent study conducted by the Student Public Interest Groups (Student PIRGs) suggests that many digital textbooks are not necessarily affordable alternatives to traditional print books if total cost of ownership (i.e. printing and access restrictions) is calculated.

The Growing Trend in E-Textbooks

The discussion of today's digital textbooks is rich in the way that a growing trend is characterized by affordability, a complex ecology of competing formats, and technological innovation. Each of the discussions leads to a marketing opportunity and a more fundamental challenge for both the textbook industries and higher education. We all acknowledge that educators, students and book publishers are all predicting less costly e-textbooks will change the way teachers teach, students learn and textbook publishers sell their content. But it is important to remember that any transition to high tech textbooks will be driven by user preferences and demand. The question is what students really want as e-textbooks continue to proliferate. Do many students still prefer the printed versions over electronic whereas students eagerly anticipate lower costs?

A survey conducted in the fall of 2009 at 19 campuses by OnCampus Research, a division of NACS, found that 75 percent of polled students still prefer printed textbooks when taking a class while 25 percent preferred digital. The survey conducted by Student PIRG in October 2009, showed that while print is still preferred over digital, students liked both. By focusing on student attitudes toward new ways of consuming their textbooks, the Student PIRGs asked 1,133 undergraduate students from 17 colleges about whether they would prefer to use textbooks only in print, only on a computer, or some combination of the two; 70 percent of the polled students said they prefer to use textbooks primarily in print, and 30 percent said that they prefer computer. However, given the choice, 75 percent indicated that they would rather use a combination of print and digital versions rather just one or the other if cost is not a factor. If cost is taken into account, only 30 percent of those who preferred the combination of print and digital said that they would pay extra to have both.

A variety of media choices has quickly diversified users' preferences for textbook formats whereas digital textbooks have yet to replace print versions. Students are not yet ready to give up their print

textbooks despite being interested and attracted to new ways to consume their textbooks, including portable devices to access digital contents. Perhaps, affordability and usability of portable devices continues to shape student choices in textbook format.

Winter 2011 E-Textbook Pilot at the University of Michigan

To better understand student textbook format preferences in their own context, many institutions have conducted e-reader and e-textbook trials across the US. The University of Michigan is no exception. In tandem with the previous textbook initiative, the Campus-wide E-textbook Working Group was formed in April 2010 by Maria Bonn, Associate University Librarian for Publishing at the University Library, in consultation with Paul Courant, Dean of Libraries, and Lester Monts, Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. The group comprises representatives from the Information and Technology Services (ITS), LS&A Instructional Support Services, the Office of the Registrar, and the University Library, including myself from MPublishing. Since its formation, the E-textbook working group has tried to more fully understand the electronic textbook environment.

Among many activities, the group identified and evaluated a number of e-textbook services and selected one commercial e-textbook provider, CourseSmart, for a Winter 2011 trial. The trial consists of five courses of different levels and from a variety of disciplines. Using the CourseSmart platform, 172 students are provided the content at no cost via CTools, Collaboration and Learning Environment (CLE) currently in use at the University of Michigan and built upon the open source Sakai community software. In exchange for free access to e-textbooks for the trial, students are asked to participate in pre- and post-pilot surveys as well as focus groups to gauge their perception of e-textbooks. The pre-pilot survey results show that students have relatively high expectations regarding ease of access, affordability, portability, and usability of the e-textbook without substantial gender or disciplinary differences. In

March 2011, we are scheduled to administer a longer, online student survey probing the issues of textbook cost, format preferences, purchasing behavior, usability experience of the e-textbook platform, and overall learning experience with e-textbooks. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses based on two student surveys and focus groups should help us identify the advantages and disadvantages of using e-textbooks in different courses at the University of Michigan.

During this semester, we also will gather feedback from faculty members who volunteered for the pilot. Among their motivations for doing so was; their interest in digital teaching materials, confidence with student's technological competency, and expected benefits to students in both cost-savings and learning. The chair of the E-Textbook Working Group, as recently reported in both University Record and the Michigan Daily, hopes this pilot will illuminate the advantages and disadvantages of using e-textbooks in courses.

So, what are the Michigan student and faculty preferences in selecting and using textbooks? The answers await our full analysis based on this e-textbook pilot. In general, however, e-textbooks are already rapidly becoming a big part of the digital revolution sweeping college campuses across the US. As more students embrace the interactivity, media-rich content, search capability, digital note-taking and highlighting functionality available with e-textbooks, we may see e-textbooks and other digital content becoming much more widespread. It may be true that technology is the future of textbook, but to transform the conventional textbook market, digital textbooks have to do more and cost less. No doubt, there are many innovations yet to arrive that will continue to change the e-textbook landscape and many unknowns yet regarding affordability.

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