

## **Textbooks 101: What You Really Need to Know About Textbook Access Codes, Inclusive Access, Open Access, and More!**

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### **Abstract**

Over the past decade there has been a lot of discussion about the rising cost of textbooks in higher education, which has resulted in an increased interest in electronic textbooks and digital coursework. When classes moved to a virtual environment in 2020, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, many campuses needed to quickly provide students with alternatives to traditional print texts and course materials.-This scenario resulted in many challenges for faculty, course management administrators, librarians, and campus IT to provide students with access to online and electronic resources. This session will examine the need for affordable and accessible materials and provide a basic overview of textbook options including open education resources (OERs), inclusive access resources, course access codes, and more. In addition, there will be discussion about the benefits and challenges these formats provide students, faculty, and information professionals.

### **Presenters' Bios:**

Jennifer Hughes has over 25 years of library experience and currently serves as the Associate University Librarian at Coastal Carolina University. She received her MLIS from the University of South Carolina and MBA from Coastal Carolina University.

Joseph Taylor has served as a Circulation Supervisor at Kimbel Library of Coastal Carolina University for the last 7 years with current responsibilities including Course Reserves. He received his MLIS from the University of Missouri.

### **Introduction**

Textbook costs have long been a topic of discussion in higher education due to the significant and rapid escalation of prices. With increased access to and interest in used print textbooks, electronic textbooks, and digital course materials in recent years, faculty, publishers, and vendors have sought better solutions to make learning more affordable. When classes moved to a virtual environment in 2020, due to the COVID-19 Global Pandemic (COVID-19), many campuses needed to quickly provide students with alternatives to traditional print texts and course materials. This scenario resulted in many challenges for faculty, course management administrators, librarians, and campus IT to provide students with access to online and electronic resources. This paper will examine the need for affordable and accessible materials and provide a basic overview of textbook options includ-

ing course access codes, open education resources (OER), and inclusive access resources. In addition, the paper will identify some of the benefits and challenges these formats provide students and the faculty and information professionals who support students.

### **Rising Textbook Costs**

Textbook costs increased by over 1000% between 1977 and 2015, while overall inflation during this time increased by less than 300%. (Hanson, 2021 and Webster, n.d.). However, many publishers and vendors began initiatives that would allow them to maintain profit margins while reducing the cost to students. Those programs, focused on rental options and electronic formats, led to textbook costs finally stabilizing and even decreasing for students from 2016-19. During the period between 2015-2019, the higher education publishing industry revenues decreased by \$1.3 billion (Hanson, 2021).

In January 2020, Kimbel Library of Coastal Carolina University hosted a #textbookbroke event to obtain a sample of how much money students spent on textbooks for Spring 2020. The high textbook costs were reported by students in all disciplines: 12% spent over \$600, 12% spent \$500-599, 17% spent \$400-499, 18% spent \$300-399, 14% spent \$200-299, 13% spent \$100-199, and 14% reported spending less than \$100. Though not solicited, the library received 66 comments from the 215 participants. There were complaints about the high prices, especially the cost of access codes. Those who commented about their low prices mentioned the library, free online sources, Amazon, Chegg.com, or their decision not to purchase required materials.

As COVID-19 impacted in-person education, many professors adopted electronic textbooks (e-books) and other digital content and publishers offset the profit loss from print textbooks by focusing on the electronic content. Between Fall 2019 and 2020 the average cost of print textbooks decreased by 3.5%. During this same period, however, the cost of e-books rose by 23%, and Pearson and Cengage both reported profit increases of 30-40% in 2020 (Hanson, 2021). Due to the additional financial struggles students face as a result of the pandemic, textbook affordability remains a serious concern for students despite the textbook prices being lower now than they were in 2017.

### **Consequences of High Prices**

Federal law requires colleges to post their cost of attendance including tuition and fees, room and board, books and supplies, and other associated expenses. College Board estimates the cost for full time undergraduate students' books and supplies to be \$1,298 annually (2022). Even though the price of textbooks is not as expensive as other costs associated with higher education, it does cause a financial burden to many. For example, federal work study programs are often awarded to those students with the most financial need. Earning minimum wage working an average of 11 hours per week, it would take a student a full semester's wages to cover the cost of textbooks.

Because tuition, housing, and board, are the essential and non-negotiable costs for attending college. Many students consider textbooks to be a non-essential cost. Often students will begin the semester without a textbook until they decide if the readings are essential to their success in the course or choose not to purchase the textbook at all. According to the 2018 Florida Virtual Campus Survey measuring the impact of textbook costs on students, 64% of students reported that high textbook costs caused them to not purchase the required textbook (2019).

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Students without textbooks are more likely to receive poor grades, take fewer courses, withdraw from courses, and fail courses. The study also revealed that 36% of students reported earning a poor grade, 43% took fewer courses, 41% chose not to register for a course, and 23% dropped a course because they could not afford the textbook (Florida Virtual Campus, 2019).

As part of the #textbookbroke event in January 2020 at Kimbel Library students were asked when they buy their textbooks. Almost half (49%) of the students who participated indicated that they waited to buy them when the text became necessary for an assignment, 16% said they buy them for the first day, 13% wait for financial aid checks to be distributed, 10% borrow textbooks from their friends or the library, and 12% indicated that no textbook purchases were necessary because they used free online resources. There were 42 comments from the 216 participants. There were two topics that received the most comments: gratitude for access to free textbooks available in the library and statements in support of tuition including the cost of textbooks.

### **Print Textbooks**

Print textbooks are physical textbooks that are printed on paper. There are a lot of advantages to print textbooks, which is why they have been the preferred resource for hundreds of years. Academic libraries typically have course reserve collections that house professor-provided textbook copies for students to use while studying in the library, and some libraries commit funds to purchasing textbooks for some or all the course offerings. In many cases one student would purchase a textbook and share the use of the book with their roommates and classmates. At the end of the semester, many campus bookstores offer buy-back programs that encourage students to sell their used textbook to the bookstore for a small fraction of the price they paid, which allows future students the opportunity to purchase the used textbook at a reduced cost.

The disadvantage of the print textbook is that it must be physically present to access it. Students have to carry the book to class, the library, and back home to use it at all those locations. In addition, hardcopy textbooks can cost as much as \$400. Updates to the book's content require new editions to be published, which occurs every 3-4 years on average. Each edition of textbook increases its cost by about 12%, and the cost of the new edition is often 50% more than a used copy of the previous edition (Hanson, 2021).

For many, a physical book is still their preference. A 2017 study found that over 90% of the students said they focused better when reading print textbooks and a majority of faculty believe their students perform better with print textbooks (Domtar, 2020). Between 2018-20 Kimbel Library spent \$28,267 to purchase 300 textbooks for all core curriculum courses and courses with a Drop Fail Withdrawal (DFW) rate greater than 20%. Use of the collection was popular, and the books were checked out a total of 1644 times (\$17.19 per use). Students who checked out textbooks from the library's collection were less likely to drop, fail or withdrawal from a course than students who did not check out textbooks from the library at a statistically significant level. In Fall 2018, the DFW rate was 15.84% for those students who checked out a library textbook and 20.35% for those students who did not. Also, courses with materials in the library's textbook collection had lower DFW rates than courses without materials in the library. In Spring 2019, the University saw a 0.22% increase in the DFW rate for all courses, however, courses with materials available in Kimbel Library saw a decrease of 3.86% in the DFW rate.

### **Electronic Textbooks**

Electronic textbooks (e-books) are electronic versions of a text that can be read on a desktop computer, mobile device, or e-reader. The obvious advantage with an electronic format is portable access that does not require a

student to carry a five-pound biology book around campus. The textbook can be accessed wherever the student is with their device. Another advantage of electronic textbooks is that they may also include additional content, such as multimedia content and hyperlinks, which would be impossible to render in a printed text. Some electronic textbooks may also include interactive content, self-assessments, or guided questions that provide real-time feedback.

To access e-books, the student will need some type of device that has access to power and the internet. Financially users are often disadvantaged because there is not a resale market. Students cannot resell their book at the end of the semester and are unable to purchase a used copy at a reduced price. In addition, some e-books are not eligible for a refund at all even if the student drops the course within the allotted period. On top of this, individual e-book vendors determine the digital rights management and control access to copyrighted material. The license limits the number of users and devices to prevent sharing. There are also limits on the number of pages that can be printed and downloaded, and some e-books are only available for a limited duration of time, usually 120 days.

### **Textbook Rentals**

Textbook rentals allow a student to pay a fee for access to print or electronic textbooks for the semester. Print textbooks are returned to the vendor at the end of the semester and electronic access automatically becomes restricted. The student knows up front the cost of using the book for the semester without guessing how much they might receive during buy-back periods. There can be financial advantages to renting textbooks as rentals are less expensive than buying them.

Although many campus bookstores and online vendors offered rental programs, the popularity really seemed to increase as vendors and publishers introduced innovative programs and partnerships. For example, Chegg sought partnerships with book distributors and publishers and in 2017 Pearson made 50 digital and print textbooks titles available as rentals only with Chegg as the exclusive outlet. Pearson also reduced the price of 2,000 e-books by up to 50% that year (Paige, 2017). In 2019, Pearson became the first higher education publisher to commit to “digital-first” when they announced that 1,500 U.S. titles would be born digital. The original digital copy will be updated on an ongoing basis, and the print copies will only be available for rental in limited quantities. (Katzman, 2019).

In 2018, Cengage developed their own solution as well, Cengage Unlimited, a textbook subscription service that provides unlimited access to all of Cengage’s titles for one price (Cengage Group, 2017). Initiatives like these had a positive impact on students’ use and perception of textbook rentals. During the period between 2016 to 2018 the number of students willing to rent print or digital textbooks increased from 51% to 59% and when asked how to reduce costs renting digital textbooks jumped from 30% to 41% (Florida Virtual Campus, 2019). Textbook rentals are a great option for students who do not wish to keep their textbooks beyond one semester, but if a student wants to keep it longer, they may be better off buying instead of renting. In addition, students should be aware that they are charged additional fees if the textbook is returned late or damaged.

### **Access Codes and Courseware**

In the last ten years, access codes have become a necessity for students since they provide online access to required readings and assignments that will be necessary to be successful in their chosen course. The literature indicates that this is especially true for introductory courses, particularly within the areas of STEM and Foreign Language. Traditionally students in these areas could source required course materials from the used textbook

market, through friends and/or acquaintances that previously took the course or from their local library lending programs (Nagle & Vitez, 2021). The widespread adoption of Access Codes has essentially removed these options (Young, 2012).

In addition to the above complications, the online nature of most course materials means that students must have a stable internet connection just to read a chapter in their text, complete homework assignments, answer essay questions or to take tests and quizzes (Nagle & Vitez, 2021). Even though students may have purchased the codes to access course material, they are limited by their access to a stable internet connection, the lack of which renders the access code completely useless to the student (Nagle & Vitez, 2021).

While many have voiced concerns regarding the use of access codes for courseware, there are clear benefits to these programs. Courseware requires a greater level of commitment and engagement from students as they interact with materials such as homework assignments, quizzes, and tests. There is evidence to suggest that courseware may be effective in reducing Drop Withdraw and Fail rates. A study of nutrition students published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* evaluating the utilization of e-books and courseware, showed those enrolled in a course utilizing and electronic and online supplemental course materials, had significantly reduced DFW rates of a period of 5 years (Armstrong, 2019). Research also indicates that students in introductory courses can have favorable impressions of online courseware with regard to its impact on study habits. In some cases, students have found that online assignments and supplemental materials have increased the amount of time spent studying for a class and improved understanding (Smolira, 2008).

The need for online access reached a crescendo during COVID-19 which saw rapid and widespread adoption of online learning materials as educators struggled to rapidly convert traditional courses into an online format. (Florida Virtual Campus, 2019). This shift from traditional in-person classes to online occurred at nearly every level in the education system. The increased demand that resulted from this shift would accelerate movement toward the Inclusive Access model, which will be discussed in another section.

### **Open Educational Resources (OER)**

In response to rising textbook costs and adoption of courseware access codes, many in education began to look toward Open Education Resources (OER) as an alternative strategy to reduce student costs. OER are generally defined as materials provided at no-cost and with free and open access for usage, and also carry legal permission for open use. These materials may include articles, books, multimedia, tests and examinations, apps, and even entire courses (Coastal Carolina University, 2022).

OER present many advantages for adoption as course materials in that they are adaptable, provide opportunities for inclusion of new research, and can be continuously updated and improved as needed. OER provide faculty with the ability to customize course materials, creating the “perfect” course packet or textbook instead of being bound to a traditional one-size-fits-all model. (Penn State University, 2022). In addition to the above benefits, research suggests student perceptions regarding OER are favorable, however it should be noted that financial savings may be a contributing factor (Hilton, 2016).

While there are clearly documented benefits to utilizing OER regarding cost and adaptability, adoption rates of OER by faculty have remained relatively low. Bay View Analytics survey of over three thousand faculty found that while awareness of OER has increased steadily, their use as required materials has plateaued since 2019 (Seaman & Seaman, 2021, p. 35). Many faculty were forced to rapidly adapt their in-person courses to online

during COVID-19, and it is suggested that as a result, chose not to alter required texts and materials from Spring 2020 to Fall 2020 to avoid adding further complications and confusion to an already stressful situation (Lederman, 2021).

In addition to complications brought on by COVID-19, faculty have expressed reservations regarding the quality of OER materials. In some cases, faculty feel that OER materials are not as comprehensive, and that OER do not provide inquiry-based approaches when compared to conventional texts from publishers (Seaman & Seaman, 2021, p. 44). OER quality concerns can also be linked to IP, copyright, language and cultural barriers as well as the technology and internet access concerns previously noted with access codes and courseware (University of the Pacific, 2021).

It may also be argued that the slowdown in OER adoption is also due to the rise of Inclusive Access programs between educational institutions, publishers, and campus bookstores. This program offers a turn-key solution to provide faculty with online and supplemental course materials (InclusiveAccess.org, 2022). There is however considerable debate in the academic community as to whether this is a benefit to students (Seaman & Seaman, 2021, p. 17). This topic will be explored further in the following section.

### **Inclusive Access**

The newest solution to the problem of high textbook costs is the Inclusive Access model of e-text and courseware distribution. This model is being actively promoted by the various major publishers such as Cengage, McGraw Hill, Pearson, Wiley, VitalSource, RedShelf and Macmillan, and among the two major campus bookstore retailers, Barnes and Noble and Follett (Cullier, 2018).

There are essentially two variants of Inclusive Access. In the first variant, which appears to be the more common among publishers and retailers, students pay discounted rates for textbooks, courseware, and materials. These discounted rates may apply to all courses, texts, and courseware offered, or only a select few courses based on the agreement between the educational institution and the publisher and/or bookstore retailer. The cost of the course materials is then added to the tuition or charged as a flat fee where institutions are unable to raise tuition. On the first day of classes, the required materials are digitally loaded into the institution's Learning Management System (LMS) and made available to the student. Enrollment in the program is automatic although the student has the right to opt out.

The second variant of the Inclusive Access Program is quite similar to the first in terms of the delivery but is considered to be "All Inclusive" meaning there are no additional fees for courseware, access codes, texts, and supplemental materials. Rather than paying discounted rates, the cost is bundled into tuition sometimes on a per credit hour basis or may be charged as a flat fee (Barnes and Noble, 2022). Delivery of materials is the same as the first variant. Digital materials are loaded into the institution's LMS and made available to the student on or before the first day of class. Physical materials are considered rentals and will be ready for the student to pick up at the campus bookstore (Barnes and Noble, 2022). Students still have the right to opt out of this variant during the period agreed upon by the vendor and the institution. In some cases, students can opt out of the program until the end of the drop/add period, and students can also opt back into the program if they change their mind (Barnes and Noble, 2022).

Both programs carry a host of advantages for students and faculty. Students can get access to course materials, access codes, and supplementary items on the first day or before the start of class at discounted prices. If the Inclusive Access program is offered through a retailer such as Follett or Barnes and Noble, faculty can choose a

wide range of materials from various publishers rather than being locked in to using materials from a single publisher. For each variant, the cost is a known amount and often represents a savings over traditional textbook purchases. It should be noted; however, that even with all the perceived advantages, there is still some uncertainty among educators, activists, and students regarding Inclusive Access Programs.

There is a great deal of concern that publishers or retailers could drastically alter the price of course materials or cancel agreements based on usage quotas. In 2017 the University of Central Washington entered an Inclusive Access contract with Cengage publishing which gave Cengage the right to terminate the agreement should Central Washington fail to achieve purchases for 85% of students enrolled in relevant courses (Koenig, 2020). Advocacy groups, such as USPIRG, warn that quotas and could cause further financial problems for students if discounts are cancelled due to missed quotas (Vitez, 2020, p. 11). In addition to usage quotas, there is concern over unclear pricing terms from publishers which are carefully guarded as trade secrets and there is worry that prices and quotas could increase drastically over time (Vitez, 2020, p. 9).

Outside of economic and usage concerns, questions arise regarding the collection of learning analytics and student data through usage of Inclusive Access. What kind of data is being collected and how is it being used? Can this data be used to identify the student, is it in compliance with FERPA, and who has access to this information (Cullier, 2018)? Additionally, concerns have also been raised regarding access to material and user support concerning technological issues over the initial roll out phase and life of the program (Cullier, 2018).

### **User Support Considerations**

Division of Labor – Who provides front line assistance and service to inclusive access students?

Just as there are multiple forms of Inclusive Access programs, there seem to be myriad procedures for providing support to users that encounter technical issues in terms of access and LMS integration. In some cases, local campus IT provides the initial support for access issues (Liberty University, 2022). In other cases, the campus bookstore is the first point of contact (Austin Community College, 2022). It is important to note that while the bookstore can aid regarding transaction or delivery problems, issues regarding integration with LMS will require additional assistance from the publisher and from local campus IT. In still other cases, such as distribution of access codes to course materials, the course instructor might be the first point of contact to resolve access issues, or students might be directed to a publisher's customer service department (Kutztown University, 2022).

The lack of customer technical support standardization across the platforms and institutions is a matter that can cause confusion for students and users requiring assistance. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities of each of the partners to provide support will reduce confusion and frustration for students when a technical problem is encountered (Cullier, 2018). Furthermore, clearly defined roles will produce further dialog between partners that may lead to other opportunities for collaboration.

A further consideration, and one that is not particularly new, is that the program requires a stable internet connection to access course material and bundled courseware. Universities have acted during the pandemic to provide emergency support by providing hotspots or remote access points for students. These measures provided a stop gap solution as courses were forced online during lock down. Now as COVID-19 protocols are ending or have ended, Universities are discontinuing internet access assistance at a time when inclusive access is ramping up. How will this affect students enrolled in distance programs or those that may be resident students but reside in areas where internet connectivity is not readily available? How will the university and affiliated parties ensure that the student is able to access the course materials that they paid for in their tuition?

University Libraries, especially those with a technology lending program can be valuable partners in this effort. Kimbel Library has taken steps to increase access to online materials by adopting a laptop lending program. The library currently has 450 Dell Laptops and 150 MacBook laptops which currently registered and enrolled students may borrow for an entire semester. In addition to the laptop program, during COVID-19, CCU and Kimbel Library along with other SC universities and Colleges in partnership with the SC commission on Higher Education loaned WIFI hotspots to remote and resident students that did not have access to a reliable internet connection. A similar program could be adopted for students in need of WIFI connectivity to access their online course materials.

The Inclusive Access model will require a new level of collaboration and cooperation among IT, Faculty, Library, Campus Bookstore, and Publishers that is unprecedented. In an ideal situation a joint committee composed of members from the above parties should be formed. This Inclusive Access Committee could facilitate open communication and transparency as well as provide a source for the creation of new policies and procedures to support users. This committee may also reveal opportunities for further collaboration, cooperation, and lead to the formation of stronger partnerships between all parties.

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