

Open-source textbooks gain in push for college affordability

February 11 2016, by Michael Melia

The standard textbook for Fundamentals of General Chemistry I at the University of Connecticut has a list price of \$303. For students who use the version professor Edward Neth is preparing for the fall semester, the cost will be zero.

An early adopter of open source textbooks, Neth said he turned to the new technology out of frustration with spiraling prices of commercial textbooks.

"It's seeing the costs go up every semester and almost feeling powerless," Neth said.

Universities and state governments are lining up behind the cause as a way to make college more affordable. The open textbooks, produced with publicly available material, are issued to students for free or a small fraction of the hundreds of dollars they typically spend annually on books.

The movement has made rapid gains over the past year, often driven by students, such as UConn activists who sparked a campaign that led to state legislation last year endorsing open-source materials.

But commercial texts won't go the way of chalkboards anytime soon. Proponents say hurdles include awareness among faculty members and the still-limited availability of material for courses that go beyond introductory levels.

The driving concern has been costs so high that many students report skipping some book purchases. The annual cost of books and supplies for a college student is about \$1,200, according to the College Board, and a survey released this month by the Student PIRGs (Public Interest Research Groups) advocacy group found 30 percent of respondents used financial aid to buy books.

The open textbooks are assembled with material that is available in the public domain or through a Creative Commons license, which allows for the use of a billion works that are otherwise copyrighted.

Oluwatoyin Akinnusotu, a UConn senior and PIRG member involved in the campaign to promote open textbooks, said it grew out of student frustrations with costs.

"Students always were complaining about it," he said.

Tidewater Community College in Norfolk, Virginia, set out in fall 2013 to become the first school to offer a degree program built entirely on open-source materials, for an associate's degree of science and business administration.

Instructors initially had to develop their own content to fill large gaps, professor Linda S. Williams said, but the amount of quality material has since grown dramatically as U.S. federal agencies and private foundations have required grant recipients to make their work available for broad usage.

The open-source approach can make more work for [faculty members](#), who are constantly revising content and updating courses, Williams said, but it also has been easier to align reading material with areas of instruction. And students have deeply appreciated the effort.

"The student reaction has been really overwhelming," she said.

David Anderson, executive director for higher education at the Association of American Publishers, said the industry is already shifting from print to digital in a change that will bring down student costs.

Open textbooks will coexist with, but not replace, commercial textbooks, he said, noting that instructors' demands vary widely and developing open-source materials involve costs, too.

"A big issue for the open source movement has been its sustainability. And that's one of the reasons you're seeing a lot of legislation about it because they are looking basically to the taxpayer," he said. "It goes back to professors and what they see as being important."

As they transition to digital, Anderson said, commercial publishers will appeal to professors as they develop learning platforms that include quizzes, tests and games that give students real-time feedback.

More than a dozen states have pursued legislation related to open textbooks, and U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, an Illinois Democrat, has proposed a federal grant program to expand the use of open textbooks. The laws passed by states include unfunded mandates to study and promote open texts, as in Connecticut, and a California law creating an incentive fund to reward efforts to adopt open educational resources. A 2015 Arkansas law requires use of open resources at University of Arkansas eVersity, an online institution.

At UConn, Neth received a grant from the student government to take an open chemistry textbook developed by OpenStax, a nonprofit at Rice University, and adapt it for the teaching approach he uses. When it's completed [students](#) will be able to receive an electronic version for free or pay about \$50 for a hard copy.

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