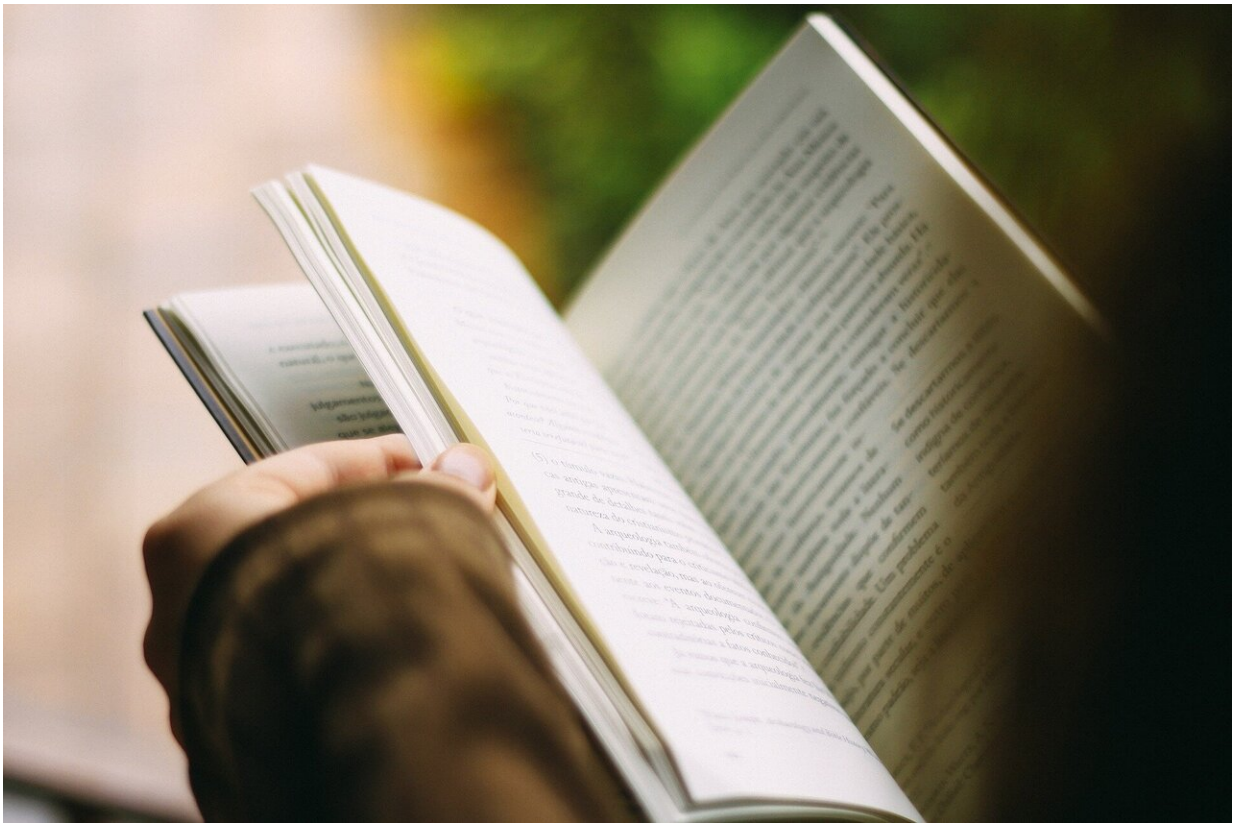# Textbooks could be free if universities rewarded professors for writing them

November 6 2019, by James M. Skidmore

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Some [student organizationshave endorsed the social media campaign](#) #textbookbroke to draw attention to the burdens placed on students by the [high cost of learning materials](#).

A solution to this problem exists: open educational resources. These are textbooks and other teaching materials produced by academics or instructors and distributed free of charge. Such resources could be a greater part of higher education. Why aren't they?

This was a question posed to me by eCampusOntario. This organization, funded by the provincial government, supports online and technology-enabled learning in publicly supported colleges and universities.

eCampusOntario commissioned me to produce a report on how institutions of higher learning could support the implementation of open educational resources. I worked with the centre for a year as an Open Education Fellow, one of six who were selected because of our own involvement in producing open educational resources at our colleges and universities.

Publishers' bottom line ahead of students?

My own university estimates that first-year students can expect to pay between $2,290 and $4,100 for books and supplies.

In some programs of study, students don't buy just textbooks anymore. Many publishers provide digital materials. If the instructor adopts the digital products too, students may be required to purchase a code to gain access to digitally locked material.

When books come with digital content, this may mean students can't share textbooks, buy a used copy, find comprehensive materials at the library or resell the book. In some cases, the publisher may also supply tests and quizzes, and students pay to submit work for grading.

Many instructors and students say these publishing practices put the publishers' bottom line ahead of students' welfare.

Studies have shown that students will forego courses with high textbook costs or will make up the [cost by spending less on food](#) or [reducing the number of trips home on weekends](#).

Students [who have access to their textbooks from day one of term are likely to do better](#) in their courses, and this results in fewer students dropping out. Recent research reviewing studies involving about 100,000 students and educators finds that there are no differences in [effectiveness between open and commercial textbooks, and students' withdrawal rate in courses with open textbooks was significantly lower](#) than in courses with commercial textbooks.

When teachers write the book

Educators who develop open resources decide that instead of relying on commercial books or resources, they'll create or write their own.

They make these free and accessible through Creative Commons licensing. The creator retains copyright while permitting others to [copy, distribute and make some uses of the work](#). For example, users may be granted rights to [reuse, revise, remix, retain (make, own and control copies) and redistribute](#) materials. Some people create these resources on their own platforms; many others use Pressbooks, a WordPress solution that allows for online publishing in book-like format.

Some groups, like OpenStax or [eCampusOntario, have created online libraries](#) to house and even market these resources. Although the move to open educational resources is relatively young, such libraries of open textbooks now house standard and introductory courses in every discipline.

Thanks to the development of online software, it has become relatively straightforward for someone with expertise and dedication in a particular

field to write or curate and develop high-quality materials. Pressbooks allows you to publish the material online and offers multiple formats for printing hard copies; eLink.io lets you package together resources; hypothes.is enables personal and crowd annotating.

Down with financial stress

The benefits of open educational resources go beyond helping students stock up on Kraft dinner. Developing or adapting open educational resources fosters collaboration among instructors, between instructors and students, and among academic services on campuses: libraries, teaching centres, bookstores, IT departments.

In our report, my co-author Myrto Provida and I argued that fostering open educational resources [increases instructors' investment in their teaching and helps to raise their institution's reputation for offering student-centred education](link).

Some institutions—[the University of British Columbia](link) and [Kwantlen Polytechnic University](link) in B.C., [Tidewater Community College in the United States](link), and [TU Delft in the Netherlands](link)—point to their involvement in open education with pride.

Still, it surprises me that these resources haven't taken higher education by storm. Some subjects do lend themselves better to open educational resources than others. I teach literature, so in my courses you can't get around having to buy the novel.

Offering incentives

In our study, we discovered that some colleges and universities across North America had provided incentives to encourage educators to create

or adapt open educational resources. These were usually small grants and course releases that would give staff the time and resources needed to produce open textbooks.

But uptake of open educational resources is still relatively small. Even with incentives, many educators are reluctant to become involved. Faculty members who want to pursue the academic study and development of open resources are often discouraged not to. There's a long-standing bias in universities that this work isn't serious enough.

Modern universities are often not the disruptors they pretend to be, especially pertaining to career advancement. Faculty members won't engage with creating open resources because colleges and universities by and large don't make this part of the criteria on which they judge performance, promotion and tenure.

Mention in tenure policies

We only found two institutions in Canada, the University of British Columbia and the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, where explicit mention of open education had been made in performance and tenure policies.

We recommended that Ontario's colleges and universities recognize creating open resources in policies governing tenure and promotion. Doing so would change the culture of these institutions and be a more effective incentive than course buy-outs or small grants. It would communicate clearly that institutions of higher education take seriously the responsibility to tailor knowledge to students and to reduce barriers.

Producing quality educational materials takes time and resources. But if doing so is an integral part of people's job descriptions, they will do it, and do it well.