

Solving & Promoting Textbook Affordability

A Case Study Series of Best Practices for Developing and Promoting Affordable Learning

How a Solo Librarian Advocates for Affordable Textbooks: Midland University

Established in 1883 and affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Midland University is a private liberal-arts college in Fremont, Nebraska, which offers 30 majors, 5 graduate programs, and several certificate and endorsement programs. For the fourth consecutive year, it posted record enrollment numbers, with more than 1,600 students from 39 states and 17 countries enrolled for the fall 2021 semester; about 60% of the 1,140 undergraduates reside on the 35-acre main campus. Enrollment also grew to 340 students at Midland's Center for Graduate and Professional Studies in Omaha.

"We're a pretty small school," says Laura Hinman, director of Midland's Luther Library. Aside from a student library assistant who works about six hours a week, Hinman is in a unique position as a solo librarian. When she was hired in July 2019, building trust and communication with the teaching staff was her main concern because the library-faculty relationship and several important library-related resources had fallen by the wayside. (Hinman details her initial outreach efforts in a presentation at Nebraska's Big Talk from Small Libraries 2021 online conference: <https://bit.ly/3waJzHx>.)

Educating the Educators about OER

Early in 2021 Hinman's outreach focused on educating the faculty about open educational resources (OER) and other affordable textbook options. She later shared her presentation, "The Pros and Cons of Implementing OER at a Small Liberal Arts University," (<https://bit.ly/3G0dpSx>) on the Nebraska Library Commission's weekly NCompass Live webinar (<https://bit.ly/3l8csxF>). Hinman structured her talk to the faculty from the freshman point of view, breaking down for her audience what textbooks a typical first-year student would buy and highlighting their cost-saving workarounds (from buying older editions to using interlibrary loan to access class materials, a practice she has tried to discourage).

"No matter what option students chose, they're always spending a large amount of money," comments Hinman. According to a new student survey she conducted this past spring, 22% of Midland's students spent over \$500 for textbooks. The library director has always been a big proponent of OER materials because college, especially at a private university, is expensive. She wanted to drive home to Midland's faculty that giving their students a break on textbook costs could help them better succeed

The Highlights

The Challenge:

At this small, private college, educating faculty on OER materials became priority number one.

The Solution:

The library's director began a promotional campaign that included presentations, one-on-one faculty collaborations, liaison work, and leveraging the school's LMS.

The Results:

Faculty are heartened by the stronger relationships with the library and the director is receiving increasing requests for appropriate materials.

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in school. “I found comparable textbooks on OER sites to show them, ‘hey, this is out here for you and it’s free.’” Among the OER sources she covered in her presentation were OpenStax, Open Textbook Library, and OER Commons, as well as alternative options like Cengage and Perlego textbook subscriptions.

Partnering with Faculty

As a result of her presentation, faculty members who had never heard of OER reached out to Hinman for assistance in finding appropriate materials. “Our anatomy and physiology professor who probably has the most expensive book told me that he is going to adopt an OER textbook for next year.” She showed him a couple of options to replace the current textbook, and he found some open access journal articles to supplement the OER replacement.

“We’re working as a tag team,” explains Hinman, “making sure that the material will be easily accessible to students when the time comes.”

Other instructors already using OER were happy to learn from Hinman’s discussion that they did not have to create their classroom materials from scratch. “The most daunting challenge for most is trying to find a reputable and comparable book and building their course from scratch using that book,” notes Hinman. The school’s learning management system is Canvas, and one of the OER sources she highlighted offers textbook cartridges that can be downloaded into Canvas and tailored to create a syllabus, class modules, and quizzes for an instructor’s particular course.

Hinman also recently met with members of the school’s sciences departments after they expressed interest in applying supplemental classroom activities. She showed them how OER Commons offered simulations, labs, and other interactive activities they could do without spending thousands of dollars.

Next Steps

Serving an adjunct-heavy teaching staff, the library

director hopes to give her OER presentation annually. She also wants to connect with faculty members on the academic council and at department meetings. “Going forward, I want to be able to meet more often about this subject and advocate more for open source, especially with our adjuncts who may need that extra guidance in finding good books for their students.” She will also survey the faculty this summer to get their perspective and will share her findings from both surveys before the start of fall semester to discuss how she and faculty can work together to make OER materials available in more classes.

What the student survey revealed (with the bulk of the responses coming from sophomores at 37.6%) is that over 29% of Midland students either used Closed Reserve (only for three hours at a time in the library), borrowed or took photos of their peers’ textbooks, or downloaded a free

copy, often in violation of copyright. Hinman’s dream would be to get rid of the Closed Reserve (whose 240 items include not only textbooks but DVDs used for classes, and test prep books), and because Midland is a 1:1 campus, have the students download OER textbooks to their iPads.

When asked if they would rather use open-source books, 100% of the respondents agreed it would be much better financially to have free and open course materials. Some expressed frustration at having to buy textbooks that were either never or only sometimes used in the course. “I am going to show the faculty the raw data and explain to them that this is

the reality,” states Hinman. “The biggest key for me is making sure our faculty and adjuncts know that I can assist them to make [OER] an easier transition.”

In the three years Hinman has been at Midland, consistent communication has been her most vital tool. She continues to promote OER through her biweekly library newsletter as well as linking to her presentation in her email signoff and discussing the library’s resources at new faculty orientation. “I’m just kind of leading the way and reassuring faculty because in the end their students are going to like it and they will have more class participation.”

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