

## Equitable, Affordable Access to Digital Course Materials for University Students: Issues and Solutions

### Libraries and Equitable Access to Course Materials

Equitable access to high quality educational resources is essential for student academic success. The cost of textbooks and other course materials can present major financial hurdles for students.<sup>1</sup> With textbooks costing students between \$800-\$1,000 per year, some are forced to make difficult financial choices between life necessities and their education.<sup>2</sup>

Academic libraries help level the playing field by providing the information resources students need to support academic success and learning. Libraries provide access to a broad range of course materials through print and electronic reserve collections, print textbook collections, customized digital course readings, electronic and print books, and Open Educational Resources (OER).

### Libraries and the E-textbook/E-book Market

Education and research in Canada are publicly supported and, as such, the market for educational materials should be based on fair and equitable access. Libraries encounter the following barriers in this regard:

- For the majority of required course textbooks, publishers do not allow libraries to purchase electronic editions. The University of Guelph has found that approximately 85% of assigned textbooks can only be acquired by the library in physical formats.<sup>3</sup>
- Publishers increasingly offer titles solely through highly restricted access models geared towards extracting the maximum amount of money from students. E-textbooks are rented to students, with access limited to the semester in which they are registered for the class. Libraries are either given no purchasing options for such e-textbooks or are quoted prices that are in the tens of thousands of dollars for access by one user, or a handful of users, at a time. For example, a print textbook required for a 3rd year psychology course costs \$200 CAD, while the e-book version is priced at \$1,500 CAD for one year of access only, with a 3-user limit. Publishers often add an additional, recurring fee for platform access, while also charging a per-title cost for each title, both of which must be paid annually to retain access.
- Many e-books are only available to libraries in bundles, the cost of which is frequently prohibitive, running into tens of thousands of dollars. It is not justifiable to pay for an entire bundle of e-books when only one book title is required for student use.
- Publishers often lock e-books into platforms that use digital rights management (DRM) to control the number of users and prevent normal online reading activities (like downloading or printing). Limits create complications for reasonable use, particularly when texts are being used in instruction and by students studying in a variety of locations with a range of connectivity realities.

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<sup>1</sup> Educational Materials Beyond Textbooks: Learning in the 21st Century, January 2019, CASA-ACAE <https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/casaacae/pages/2887/attachments/original/1547493199/Educational-Materials.pdf?1547493199>

<sup>2</sup> "Budgeting for student life," Financial Consumer Agency of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/financial-consumer-agency/services/budget-student-life.html>, and Fixing The Broken Textbook Market, 2nd ed. June 2020, <https://studentpirgs.org/2020/06/08/fixing-the-broken-textbook-market>

<sup>3</sup> Commercial Textbooks Present Challenges in a Virtual Environment: <https://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/news/commercial-textbooks-present-challenges-virtual-environment>

- Core textbooks and e-books that have been available to libraries in the past can disappear from publisher lists without notice, leaving instructors and librarians unaware when a book being used in a course is suddenly unavailable.

## **Solutions**

To better support student academic success and provide equitable access, libraries are working to overcome these challenges through a variety of means. Efforts include working with instructors to identify alternative course materials through the libraries' existing collections; working with instructors, publishers, and vendors to identify alternative course materials that have better access and pricing models; and, advocating and developing support for the creation, adoption, and use of openly licensed, high-quality educational resources (OER), which allow for re-use and modification by instructors.<sup>4</sup>

More needs to be done. Online learning necessitates digital access models that foster an accessible, affordable, and inclusive environment for students. Among the measures we endorse are:

- Allowing sales of all published e-textbooks and e-books to libraries under a licensing model that allows for access at a cost that fairly reflects content and use.
- Making the pricing and availability of e-textbooks and e-books stable and transparent.
- Offering license options that enable reasonable, equitable access to educational content without the use of DRM.

## **Conclusion**

The accelerated shift to online learning for hundreds of thousands of post-secondary students necessitated by COVID-19 has added urgency to the need to resolve long-standing student access issues. Libraries want to ensure all students—regardless of where they are located, what they are studying, and their financial means—have access to the educational resources they need to earn their degrees.<sup>5</sup> We would welcome the opportunity to work with all other stakeholders involved in academic publishing to develop solutions that will better serve our common community of users.

## ***About CARL***

CARL is the voice of Canada's research libraries. Our members include Canada's 29 largest university libraries and two federal institutions. CARL enhances its members' capacity to advance research and higher education; promotes effective and sustainable knowledge creation, dissemination, and preservation; and advocates for public policy that enables broad access to scholarly information. CARL's two federal member institutions contribute to Canada's research enterprise and collaborate in coordinated efforts with the academic library community, but do not engage in CARL's federal advocacy.

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<sup>4</sup> The Time is Now for Open Educational Resources <https://www.carl-abrc.ca/news/the-time-is-now-for-oer/>

<sup>5</sup> CARL Statement on Optimal Equitable Access to Post-Secondary Learning Resources During COVID-19 <https://www.carl-abrc.ca/news/statement-on-optimal-equitable-access-to-learning-resources/>