

The Affordable College Textbook Act

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Background: Higher education is essential to the future of our workforce, economy and citizenry, yet many college students today are unable to access their required course materials due to rapidly rising costs. Textbook prices jumped 82% between 2002 and 2012,¹ and the average student budget for books and supplies has grown to \$1,207 annually.² Even cost-cutting measures like renting and used books are becoming too expensive, and major publishers are using digital technology to further restrict, rather than improve, access for students. The result is that textbook costs have become simply unaffordable for too many students, and in some cases a barrier to academic success.

Congress took an initial step to address this issue in 2008 with provisions in the Higher Education Opportunity Act to improve textbook price transparency. But a recent GAO report (June 2013) concluded that while somewhat successful in helping students to achieve incremental savings, these changes did not solve the underlying problem and costs continue to rise.

The solution to skyrocketing textbook prices is to leverage today's technology to reduce costs and expand access. The most effective path forward is Open Educational Resources (OERs), which are free, online academic materials that are released under a license permitting everyone to use, adapt, and share the content. OER textbooks, or "open textbooks," are available online at no cost and in print at a low cost. Using these materials in place of expensive textbooks can dramatically reduce costs while enabling the full benefits of digital technology for students.

The Affordable College Textbook Act seeks to expand the use of open textbooks on college campuses, providing affordable alternatives to traditional textbooks and keeping prices lower. The bill:

- Creates a grant program to support pilot programs at colleges and universities to create and expand the use of open textbooks with priority for those programs that will achieve the highest savings for students.
- Ensures that any open textbooks or educational materials created using program funds will be freely and easily accessible to the public.
- Requires entities who receive funds to complete a report on the effectiveness of the program in achieving savings for students.
- Improves existing requirements for publishers to make all textbooks and other educational materials available for sale individually rather than as a bundle.
- Requires the Government Accountability Office to provide an updated report on the price trends of college textbooks to Congress by 2017.

Supporters: SPARC, U.S. PIRG, National Association of College Stores, National Association of Graduate and Professional Students, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, American Association of Community Colleges, Association of Community College Trustees, OUR TIME, Creative Commons, OpenCourseWare Consortium.

Why Open Textbooks?

- Open textbooks are the most effective way to reduce textbook costs. While the existing marketplace offers discounted options such as renting and used books, the savings are incremental and do not extend to every student. In contrast, using open textbooks reduces course material costs for students by 80% - and in some cases eliminates it entirely.³
- Open textbooks are easy to access in a variety of formats – a critical feature in the digital age that traditionally-published e-books have yet to offer.⁴ Students can freely access open textbooks anytime, anywhere, either online or by downloading to a laptop, tablet, or smartphone. Students can keep digital versions permanently, and also can print or purchase hardcopies, typically for \$20-40. Studies have found that students using open textbooks tend to have higher grades and lower course dropout rates, likely due to better access to the text.⁵
- Professors can tailor open textbooks to align with course needs. This includes mixing and matching chapters from multiple open texts, incorporating multimedia components, and adding current events and locally relevant perspectives. This flexibility is also beneficial beyond the college setting for parents, teachers, and self-learners.
- Supporting the creation and adoption of open textbooks produces a significant return on investment. Unlike traditional e-texts, which are typically "leased," once created open textbooks are free for everyone – so the savings grow over time. For example, a Washington state program saved students three times the project's cost in the first two years alone.⁶

Why the Affordable College Textbook Act?

The U.S. college textbook market remains dominated by traditional publishing firms that make it difficult for open textbooks to gain visibility – despite the potential benefits and growing international movement for OERs. While enough professors are using open textbooks to suggest marketplace demand for such materials, the current rate of adoption is too slow when so many students are struggling with textbook costs. Federal intervention is necessary to help open textbooks gain a foothold faster, which would provide much-needed financial relief and raise the bar for digital materials to ensure students receive the full benefits of today's technology.

The Affordable College Textbook Act seeks to proliferate the most successful open textbook efforts to date: local programs at colleges and universities that provide support for creating and adopting open textbooks and other OERs. By providing resources and incentives through a grant program, the bill would expand the impact of open textbooks to more campuses in more states, helping to stimulate the marketplace and to generate evidence for the most effective models.

¹ <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-13-368>

² <http://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/college-pricing-2013-full-report.pdf>

³ <http://www.studentpirgs.org/reports/cover-cover-solution>

⁴ <http://www.studentpirgs.org/reports/course-correction>

⁵ <http://www.eurodl.org/?p=current&article=533> & <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02680513.2012.716657>

⁶ <http://www.studentpirgs.org/resources/updated-cost-analysis-open-course-library>

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