Textbook prices rose 82% from 2002-2012\(^1\). Many texts assigned in EMU classes now cost over $250. The current course schedule shows texts where the new hardcover costs $350 and even short-term rental of a print or digital version costs $125-$150. The types (and costs) of course materials differ greatly across disciplines; but also across sections of the same course. For example, in one 200 level class offered Fall 2013 one instructor assigned a $14 trade book; while an instructor for another section assigned a $260 text.

A 2013 survey by the Public Interest Research Group shows that 65% of students decided not to purchase a text when the price was too high—and a majority of those students were "significantly concerned" that not purchasing the text would lead to poor academic performance.\(^2\)

**The reasons that standard textbooks have become so expensive are complex.**
A root cause is lack of competition because most of the textbook market belongs to just five publishers. Historically, some text publishers marketed to professors without disclosing prices. High costs caused students to prefer cheaper used copies, then technology made distribution of used copies far more efficient, and used copy sales now significantly undercut textbook publisher profits—giving publishers incentive to:

* raise prices further,
* frequently publish new editions,
* produce custom editions (with little resale value),
* bundle texts with web access codes,
* consider asking universities to automatically charge students a text fee when they sign up for a course.

The high costs of texts have also made textbooks an attractive target for pirates, who are able to produce high quality fake copies.\(^3\)

**Recent changes have helped a little.**
The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) now requires that publishers disclose text prices to faculty. Although the law requires that they sell components (such as access codes) separately, often separate codes are sold at a price higher than the combined cost of the code with a used text (and there are cases where the individual code price was higher than the price for the bundled text + code!)\(^4\)

The HEOA also requires that universities make required text information available to students at registration. At EMU this is accomplished through links to the bookstore in the online course schedule and in the my.emich system.

Programs where students can rent texts from the bookstore have become common. The 2013 PIRG survey showed slightly fewer students choosing not to purchase a text (from 70% in a previous survey to 65% in 2013). Rental programs likely explain the improved ability to obtain texts.\(^2\)
Does the library have a role in ameliorating this problem?
A taskforce of EMU Library faculty and staff started three experiments: 1) a grant-funded project to provide library e-book versions of some titles assigned in courses, 2) an experiment putting course assigned books in a high demand collection for two hour use in the library, 3) a seminar and online guide for faculty on finding alternatives to expensive texts.

A $4000 eFellows grant allowed the Library to purchase library e-book versions of 69 titles currently assigned in EMU courses.
Library e-books can be read by students using only an internet browser and my.emich login. Many of the titles purchased are multiple user titles, so the entire class can access the book at the same time. Some e-books were available for purchase only in versions which allow one user at a time.

There are advantages and disadvantages in using library e-books for course reading. E-books are superior to print reserve books, since e-books are available to students at home and when the library is closed—also e-books can’t be lost, stolen, or chewed up by a pet! Disadvantages include that publishers often “lock down” printing and downloading from library e-books: Often only a limited number of pages can be downloaded or printed and some library e-books can only be read online. Many students prefer a print book for studying; but some e-books facilitate study through features for highlighting and annotating e-books. Even with those limitations, we’ve heard from students who were very happy to use a library e-book for course reading when it was free to them.

When notified that a grant-funded library e-book was available for their course, many professors responded enthusiastically (see side bar).

Unfortunately, only a small percentage of books assigned in classes are available for purchase as library e-books. Most large textbook publishers don’t offer library e-book editions. Many titles that can be purchased as library e-books are trade books that are less expensive to begin with (but we did purchase some titles in $100 - $250 range). Furthermore, the EMU Library doesn’t have a regular budget to purchase e-book versions of course readings. Library faculty will assess the value of this project over next year. Although library e-books can’t fully solve the textbook problem, where it’s possible to provide library e-books they can efficiently support many students.

Comments from instructors on library e-books available for course readings:

“Thank you! I have one student that I know will benefit from this immediately.” - S. Karlis, SWRK 279

“The availability of the e-book will relieve many students' financial burden (textbooks are expensive, including this one!” - X. Feng, ANTH 135

“That’s great news. Students have asked me about things like this. I have no plans to stop using this text and may even use it for other courses too. I'll be sure to share the link.” – J. Proulx, PHIL 100

“I just had a student approach me about forgetting his book in our classroom last week and we have been unable to find it. He wasn't sure what he was going to do for the rest of the term, because he didn't have the money to buy the book again. This is a perfect solution.” – A. Kurek, ACC 496W

“Great! This is excellent news. And so appropriate, I think, for Social Entrepreneurship - to have a textbook formatted to benefit more than one student and that is environmentally friendly.”
– E. Sikkenga, MGMT 617

“Many, many thanks for purchasing and making this valuable book available at no cost! This arrangement most certainly solves problems for the EMU future educators of my classes!”
– L. Zwiernikowski, MUSC 220
Could Print Reserves at the Library help?
The library has long offered faculty the opportunity to place books on reserve at the circulation desk. However, only a small fraction of faculty use reserves services. Most likely this is because faculty are so very busy at the start of the term.

Although by policy, the EMU Library does not systematically purchase course texts, instructors sometimes assign academic or trade books that are already in the library collection—also the library adds some donated copies of traditional texts to the collection. Typically the best case scenario for such a book is that one EMU student checks it out, often keeping it beyond the loan period for the entire semester. Not uncommonly, many of these books “disappear” from the collection—sometimes returning to the library via campus police when someone tries to sell them at the bookstore.

Now that textbook information is available via the course schedule on the EMU web site, is it feasible for the library to automatically put some course-assigned books on reserve? The library is trying a small scale experiment by placing a small number of print books used in undergraduate classes in a High Demand Reserves collection. High Demand Reserves books are not attached to a particular course or instructor, but can be found in the library catalog. (Instructors can still ask to have these placed on reserve for a particular course.) The High Demand Reserves books are made available to EMU students for two hour in-building use to facilitate sharing. Since the High Demand Reserves collection has only recently been created, we don’t yet have feedback on this experiment.

Could EMU Library faculty help instructors find alternatives to expensive texts?
During the Winter 2014 semester the Library partnered with the Faculty Development Center to offer a seminar on Innovative Digital Alternatives to traditional textbooks. Participating faculty explored possibilities such as:

* using open access textbooks or alternative textbook publishers,
* using library e-books or select chapters from library e-books,
* linking to electronic articles from the library,
* using OERs (open educational resources), and more.

Faculty participants were paired with subject librarians to collaborate on developing course materials.

Options for finding high quality (sometimes peer reviewed) open textbooks are expanding. One notable development is a collection of high quality college texts being produced with grant funds by Rice University’s OpenStax College project. Some EMU faculty members have reported success using less expensive texts produced by alternative textbook publishers such as Flatworld Knowledge. Alternative textbook publishers like Flatworld may offer students multiple options, such as a low priced electronic access text at $20, a PDF version at $30, or a paperback version at $40. Texts by these alternative publishers may be equal to or superior in quality to a traditional text: Some have won textbook author awards. In addition, multiple departments on campus have also chosen to use library e-books to support courses.

Explore alternatives with this online tool: Textbook Alternatives http://guides.emich.edu/alt-texts

Your subject librarian may be able to provide further assistance with:

* information on where to look for alternatives,
* help with determining what meets fair use criteria,
* best practices in linking to electronic materials,
* or support in providing DVDs for course use.

Let’s make a dent in the problem!
The problem with expensive texts is difficult to solve. Often an expensive traditional text still provides the best required reading for a course; but we can sometimes reduce expenses and increase likelihood of student success by seeking more affordable alternatives. Although none of the initiatives described here will fully solve the textbook problem, we are hopeful that these experiments may assist a large number of individual students.
References


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