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Back to the Future: The Changing Paradigm for College Textbooks and Libraries

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The debate over electronic textbooks and ever-increasing costs for traditional textbooks continues to rage. Part of these Web-era dilemmas ironically involves the willingness to face contradictions from the university's past.

Reliance on textbooks is the rub. It can be understood as a legacy of the post-WWII GI bill. Schools needed industrial-strength solutions to handle the unprecedented waves of new students. Publishers stepped to the fore to offer a commoditized solution, albeit with the best of intentions. They would work with a select group of faculty to produce a wide variety of textbooks, they would entice other instructors with free review copies, and students would incur reasonable shipping and costs.

Yet, an escalating cycle of problems also ensued. Used book sales and campus bookstores arose to offer schools a ready flow of income. Those creations undermined the publishers' profit potential and growing sense of entitlement. By the end of the 90s, publisher redress resulted in the ever more rapid introduction of "new" editions and an inflationary nightmare for students.

Student upset after Y2K led to congressional investigations and, ultimately, the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act. HEOA mandated that "... students have access to affordable course materials by decreasing costs to students and enhancing transparency and disclosure with respect to the selection, purchase, sale, and use of course materials."

And, the Web's long tail entered the scene. In the early 21st century, viable electronic alternatives appeared with pricing differentials. The Web also brought forth a new player: the online university with its asynchronous classrooms. Since these schools typically lack traditional, interactive lectures, they lend a higher premium to assigned readings.

The American Public University System went even further. Under the mantle of its original American Military University (AMU) brand, the school pioneered the underwriting of undergraduate course materials. Instead of a pass-through, textbook costs became part of a bottom-line equation and different type of entrepreneurial scrutiny. The response was led by the most traditional element of our university--the library. It questioned past university models and promoted an innovative three-part growth and diversification strategy--one with broad implications for all of higher education.

Electronic Textbooks: Given the evolving state of electronic textbooks and a largely military student clientele, we initially relied on print and mail shipments. In 2006, we transitioned to electronic bookstore operations. What was expected to be a simple electronic conversion process quickly proved to be more complex. We were thrust into incomplete technologies and the paranoid world of textbook publishers. Research revealed the reasonableness of negotiating for a 65 percent discount off print price. Although publisher finance departments squirm, that level was justified by the elimination of used book sales,

warehousing, and production costs. Short-term rentals at roughly the same price seemed illogical and were dismissed as options.

Operations themselves are still unfolding. The issues of a unified reading experience and digital rights management remain. Attention also increasingly turns to the immense savings from open-access textbooks, which have been growing in both availability and quality.

Online Library: The second prong focused on the academic library. The library would be a proactive element in seeding course materials. In our analysis, the university was already paying vast sums of money to capitalize information resources. Why not use them? Research established that much of the barriers drew from a 19th-century research trope, which gave birth to the modern university. It didn't make sense, however, to continue the divorce from the classroom for a teaching institution in the Information Age. Indeed, how could one pretend to teach advanced courses in any discipline without redress to the field's scholarly journals, articles, resources, and databases? And, to what degree do such classes even require a textbook?

Our solution was further enhanced by recruiting subject-specialist librarians. They would work in partnerships with faculty--especially as the school explored new programs. Who better to help maintain currency and quality, while uncovering treasures on the Open Web and within the library's own licensed scholarly literature?

University Press: The third, and final, element places us within the small, but growing ranks of those re-engineering financially challenged universities. Our same logic persevered with the historical roots to the same 19th-century research orientation as the library. Again, why not orient presses toward direct classroom services? Why should students pay external publishers for anthologies of materials already freely available on the Web? What's more, why should a university or program be forced to buy back the writings of their own faculty?

The reply concentrates on niche programs. We look to programs where the faculty is strongest, external course literature weakest, and student demand makes economic sense. Our new AMU ePress then engages faculty as authors and editors along with accompanying librarians for added Web research. Their collective task is to produce the highest-quality electronic textbooks for internal consumption, coupled with flexible, print-on-demand options for students.

That is a brief overview of a dynamic electronic bookstore, online library, and e-press "mashup." While still unfolding, results to-date have been encouraging. Quality and currency are enhanced. Textbook inflation has been stalled with annual savings now totaling in the millions. Equally important, such proactive initiatives proffer a fundamental redefinition of university course materials and herald new pedagogies for the Web Age.

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