

Villanova Affordable Materials Project Faculty Listening Tour: Report and Recommendation

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Introduction

[The Affordable Materials Project](#) (AMP) is an organic University-wide collaboration devoted to addressing the high cost of course materials. AMP's existing e-book matching, and Open Educational Resources (OER) Faculty Adoption Grant have potentially saved students over \$1.9 million over six years and advance the University's strategic goals by reducing the overall cost of enrollment, while promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Since its inception in 2017, AMP has engaged with students and faculty to encourage cost savings strategies. AMP deems it critical to learn about issues that may impede faculty from using high-quality, low-cost resources and to ask faculty what services might enhance their ability to select, use and create affordable content. For these reasons AMP undertook a listening tour during the 2021-22 academic year (Bell & Johnson, 2019; Taliaferro, Randolph & Ramey, 2019; Rodriguez, 2019).

Methodology

The listening tour team included Linda Hauck, Business Librarian, Bernadette Mania, former Textbook Manager who has since left Follett, along with subject librarians Sarah Hughes, Alfred Fry, Sarah Wingo, Susan Turkel, and Merrill Stein. The listening tour targeted multi-section, high-enrollment introductory courses with relatively expensive textbooks and sometimes courseware. Subject librarians emailed department chairs asking them to invite course coordinators and faculty who regularly teach those courses to a listening session. The listening tour invitations emphasized that improving faculty services for discovering and adopting low-cost to no-cost textbooks was the goal.

We asked how textbooks are identified and chosen, used, and evaluated and what services might improve the course materials adoption process for faculty. (See Appendix A for the questions posed.)

We spoke with faculty in the M. Louise Fitzpatrick College of Nursing and six departments in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences: Biology, Chemistry, Communication, Romance Languages & Literature (since renamed), Mathematics and Statistics, and Psychological and Brain Sciences. The group reached out to additional schools and departments but in the end did not speak with them.

Multiple listening tour team members reviewed each recording and wrote notes paraphrasing key takeaways. In the following pages, we have distilled the themes that emerged from the listening tour.

Themes

COURSEWARE AND APPLICATIONS

- Some faculty say they need technological solutions beyond textbooks. Online systems like Cengage's WebAssign or Pearson's MyLab and others are desired for immediacy of feedback for students doing online exercises, ease of grading assessments, facilitation of student faculty communication and enhanced active learning through engagement with multimedia.
- Other faculty/departments decide to forego these systems because of their high cost or because they are bundled with less desirable materials.

- Some faculty requested assistance in identifying alternative educational technology to meet these needs.
- Some faculty that decided against access codes went to great lengths to create alternative online solutions and found that Blackboard was not sufficient to the task.
- Faculty report that some students delay purchasing access to these required online subscriptions.
- These required online subscriptions and apps are underreported to the bookstore and therefore may not be reflected in course cost estimates available to students at registration or for inclusion in reporting on the estimated cost of enrollment.
- Some faculty suggested that student access to necessary apps and digital materials might be covered by the University, academic departments, or other centralized funding sources.
- Some faculty referred to them as “free” presumably because they were bundled with the cost of a textbook.

SELECTION OF NEW COURSE MATERIALS

Awareness

- Faculty used various approaches to learning about new course materials, including conferences, colleagues, and sales representative outreach.
- None reported reaching out to the library or bookstore to find out about course materials.
- Faculty were aware of the possibility of using library-subscribed materials as a cost-savings measure, but those materials were not usually well-suited to introductory classes.
- When asked if they would be willing to review OER options, faculty were receptive but did not want to be bombarded with repeated communications or sales pitches. They were open to being contacted in a limited way, infrequently but regularly.

Criteria

- Faculty told us that quality was their primary concern in selecting course materials.
- Awareness of cost was also a consideration.
- Some faculty felt that online homework systems and courseware were essential to the material they would select. They wanted the most robust online systems available.
- Long-term access was not a primary concern for many faculty/departments. While course materials might be useful for studying for licensing and admission exams, faculty thought students had other materials available for those purposes.
- Some faculty had evaluated available OER and found them lacking, in terms of content or features.

VENDOR RELATIONS

- Faculty acknowledged that they negotiate directly with publishers and vendors for terms and pricing.
- They appreciated the services they received and their working relationships with textbook publisher representatives.
- Some faculty did not negotiate price or terms, and accepted the offer provided by the publisher.
- Faculty reported different levels of comfort with asking vendors for complimentary access codes.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR STUDENTS

- More than one faculty reported providing direct assistance to students out of their own personal funds or departmental funds.
- Faculty were aware that some students did not purchase course materials because of costs. In some cases, they did not know that a particular student had not purchased materials until late into the semester when the student's academic performance suffered.
- Faculty were sensitive to students' reluctance to disclose difficulty with affording course materials.
- Faculty did not routinely announce to students that they had access to complementary course codes from publishers. They more commonly told students to reach out about academic difficulties or challenges encountered obtaining necessary course materials without specifying how they might help.
- Faculty reported a desire to centrally fund certain software systems but found that it was not possible to reallocate funds in that way due to institutional policies. One department reported it was impossible to move funds around to sponsor student access to exam software.

FACULTY ROLE IN SOLVING AFFORDABILITY PROBLEM

- Some faculty felt that they were asked to shoulder the burden of making their courses more affordable without university support. They perceived the tuition increase as inconsistent with AMP goals.
- Some faculty tried to lessen costs for students by allowing use of older editions and/or not requiring students to use access codes.
- Faculty reported creating materials for their students. A few faculty expressed interest in getting University support for publishing open materials.

COURSE RESERVES

- Faculty were not clear on how reserves work, including how to place materials on reserve and how long materials stay on reserve.
- They were not in the habit of telling students that they could use course reserves and were not aware of the terms involved in student use of reserves (e.g., possible loan periods, use confined to library).
- Faculty who used print materials in their courses were receptive to the possibility of using library reserves for their course materials.

MISCELLANEOUS

- Faculty reported difficulty in onboarding new faculty/adjuncts in terms of access to Villanova systems including Blackboard, the library, and bookstore ordering. The timing of gaining access to systems has inhibited new hires from selecting high-quality, affordable materials.
- Faculty reported informal, ad hoc assessment of student perception of the value of textbooks and course materials.
- The interviewers noted that faculty sometimes underestimated the cost of course materials.
- Interviewers also noted that faculty sometimes rationalized the per-semester costs of materials because some books were used for several terms; however, not all students take all courses in a sequence.

Recommendations & Next Steps

Numerous recommendations for strategies to improve access to more affordable course materials were offered by the faculty, librarians and bookstore textbook manager which are listed in Appendix B. Almost all of them implicate buy-in and allocation of resources from multiple stakeholders across campus. The listening tour participants that offered recommendations were not equipped to evaluate the potential efficacy of their suggestions or prioritize them. Nor does the Affordable Materials Project have the authority to carry them out.

As a next step, the Affordable Materials Project proposes that the University convene a task force to address course materials challenges. Representatives from the following stakeholders' groups should be on the task force:

- Students (grad/undergrad)
- Faculty (multiple schools)
- Falvey Library
- VITAL
- Instructional designers
- UNIT
- Auxiliary Services
- CASA (Center for Access, Success, and Achievement)
- Academic Advising
- Financial Aid

The task force should be charged with the following goals to be completed in about six months after charge:

- Conduct a comprehensive external and internal environmental scan of the textbook landscape and how it impacts Villanova community members.
- Propose actionable short- and long-term strategies for addressing issues caused by exorbitant prices of textbooks and courseware.
- Formulate a charge for an ongoing, resourced Affordable Materials Project reporting to the Office of the Provost.

The members of the Affordable Materials Project believe these next steps will contribute to advancing Villanova's strategic plan goals to meet 100% of student financial need, promoting a culture of diversity, equity and inclusion, and advancing innovative teaching.

References

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Appendix A

Questions for Listening Tour

1. What do you like best about your current textbook and what are the concerns you have about your textbook?
 - a. How is the textbook utilized in class?
 - b. Do faculty model how to use the textbook and its features in class?

2. What are the most important features/characteristics of the current course materials selected?
 - a. Is affordability an important feature?
 - b. How important are interactive exercises and assessments (courseware)?
 - c. Do you look for ancillaries such as PowerPoints or multimedia content?
 - d. Are format choices (digital, print, rental) significant?

3. What is the process and who participates in the textbook selection process?
 - a. What challenges do you face in selecting course materials/textbooks?
 - b. How do you find out about the latest textbook offerings in your field?
 - c. Have you taken advantage of Bookstore and Library assistance with finding course materials? How, why not?
 - d. What could the University offer you that could assist in the selection of course materials?
 - e. Are there any publisher provided services that are particularly helpful that the Bookstore or Library might offer?

4. What kind of feedback do you solicit from students on required materials such as through a course evaluation?
 - a. What have you learned from feedback?
 - b. Do you think students only need the course materials for the class, or would longer-term access be beneficial as a reference for other classes/exams/certifications?
 - c. Are you aware of students lacking access to course materials? Is this problematic?

5. Do you routinely put a copy of your textbook on reserve in the library? Why or why not?

6. What would you like us to know about the course materials selection process?

Appendix B

- Because affordable solutions will necessarily involve educational technology, UNIT should have representation on AMP.
- Faculty need a service to help them identify open access, low cost, and no-cost applications and courseware to fill their needs. Relying on textbook representatives and colleagues is not sufficient.
- Options for coordinating access to courseware and applications should be explored. This might involve centralized negotiation, targeted inclusive access, or a student bookstore credit. A coordinated approach could level the playing field, and bulk purchases might be at advantageous price/terms.
- A conversation with Financial Aid to ensure that their estimate for course costs is inclusive of all required courseware and apps that are underreported to the bookstore is advisable.
- Faculty would benefit from the dissemination of information about new OER publications.
- Departments might make contact with liaison librarians a routine part of course redesign efforts. Librarians can assist in searching for potential OER and other materials that are eligible for purchase as unlimited-access e-books which are free to students.
- Because faculty may not be positioned to know about all possible advantageous licensing terms, academic departments could involve the bookstore or another campus entity with expertise in negotiations for course materials.
- The University could appoint an advocate for affordability who would examine funds allocations policies and other institutional barriers to aid.
- Make all campus sources of assistance/aid for students transparent, easy, and absent of shame or value judgment.
- There should be consistent and campus-wide negotiations for access code aid from vendors.
- The University should invest in OER publishing platforms and services. There is an opportunity for VU faculty to get recognition in providing leadership in this area. Instructional designers should be brought into this process as well.
- Villanova should consider establishing a grant earmarked for faculty authoring of OER materials. Existing grant opportunities on campus are not sufficient for this purpose, as it takes longer than one summer to create robust OER.
- Course reserves could be revitalized by librarians engaging in outreach to faculty who assign print materials, allocating funds for purchasing books for reserves, reviewing, and potentially revising the reserve loan periods and fines with consideration of how these restrictions impact potential usage.
- We recommend that the onboarding process for new hires be streamlined in order to provide the earliest possible access to online systems. Without this their ability to select affordable materials is impeded.
- The University ought to regularly gather data on student opinions about course materials (including the role of cost).