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Guest Editorial - The Many Ways to Engage with Affordability: Academic Libraries and the Costs of Higher Education

Lydia Bello
Seattle University

Chris Granatino
Seattle University

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The many ways to engage with affordability: academic libraries and the costs of higher education

Students today face increasing financial burdens that affect their success. The cost of higher education is rising much faster than the rate of inflation. The average expected undergraduate tuition and fees increased over a range of 12 to 17 percent between the 2010/2011 and 2018/2019 academic years, based on the type of institution (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Aside from the long term impacts of cost of the tuition, the costs that make up these “associated fees” can have an immediate effect; in 2014, U.S. PRIG reported that 65% of students said that they decided to not purchase a textbook due to its cost, and 94% of those students were concerned that decision would hurt their grade (Senack, 2014). These concerns have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Many students are experiencing higher rates of financial instability and calls for a reduction in tuition and fees if education moves online are growing (Hesel, 2020).

These issues are urgent, and the solutions are complex and need to be addressed in different ways by many different parts of higher education. We are presented with an opportunity for academic libraries to step to the forefront: to embrace pioneering roles in working with students, faculty, and other campus stakeholders to advocate for solutions to benefit all. Libraries can find solutions not only within our tried and true practices, relying on consortia and collective purchasing power, but in new forays into Open Education Resources (OER) and institutional repositories. Libraries innovate, iterate, and assess and find new solutions by leveraging our unique role on campus to unite siloed partners. It is the aim of this issue to pull

together a variety of viewpoints, case studies, and examples of how libraries are responding to this rapidly evolving environment. Resources are at times scarce, as is expertise, and so we rely on our own instincts and the examples of our peers to forge a path forward.

The articles in this issue address the wide variety of ways in which libraries engage with and address affordability issues on their campuses. As we read through submissions for this special issue, we noticed a number of common themes. The first addresses infrastructure, including working within preexisting structures and building new ones. Another cluster focuses on collaboration, consortia, and care, as authors work with other stakeholders and ground their projects in the needs of their users rather than being prescriptive. And finally, authors explore the sustainability of affordability projects and investigate the impact of these initiatives on student success.

Infrastructure and Institutional Support

One of the key elements to successfully addressing affordability is understanding, working within the preexisting structures of higher education and building new infrastructures as necessary. The authors featured in this issue represent a range of campus sizes, from large research institutions to community colleges, and the technical and social infrastructure issues they discuss range from new publishing platforms to leveraging commonly used library tools. Santiago and Ray compare two examples of programmatic initiatives to support OER publishing in two large public research institutions, and the infrastructure needed to support authors in

publishing open educational works. Walsh explores the role of the library in OER at a community college, in both supporting creation, adoption, and advocacy with an eye to the particular needs and challenges at a community college. Sotak, Scott, and Griffin revisit a reserves program at a smaller library by creating a workflow to add books that support first- and second-year courses, and describe using a library-wide shared vision of social justice to reinvigorate the program.

Valentino and Hopkins describe a project to align OER adoption to their institution's General Education Framework (GEF), working within the framework of their larger institution, so students could select a path through the GEF that would result in no textbook costs. Raish, Mross, Nelson, Pritt, and Riehman-Murphy discuss the role of the library in the implementation of a variety of customized affordability initiatives across a multi-campus institution, brought together by an administrative mandate. Lastly, Lundy and Curran survey guides on the ubiquitous LibGuides platform to see how successfully institutions in the Orbis Cascade Alliance leverage this tool to support students seeking educational funding with the creation of funding research guides and recommend some best practices to leverage those guides.

Collaboration, Consortia and Care

Another cluster of papers in this issue surrounds the themes of collaboration, consortia, and care, explicitly discussing the human connection required to reduce educational costs. Sweet and Clarage outline initiatives developed by their consortium to support college affordability

beyond the negotiation of subscription packages, demonstrating the power of collaboration between institutions in this space. Petrich describes a program that both encouraged faculty interest and gathered information on stakeholder feedback through a set of user-centered workshops, feedback that can then be used to build a successful culture of OER adoption at that institution. Goodsett discusses engagement strategies for encouraging “early adopters” who contribute to affordability initiatives, specifically focusing on opportunities for encouragement when there is no funding available for grants and stipends. And McLure and Sinkinson draw upon theories of care to engage with students about learning and advocating for OER, centering the student experience by partnering with student government and engaging with a first-year writing course.

Impact and Sustainability

Several authors explored the impact of affordability ways that challenge assumptions about the role of the library and exploring how to extend programs past the first flush of a pilot. Cheney, Wimberley, and Ding use an analysis of syllabi to investigate explicit connections between library support and student success outcomes, drawing some interesting conclusions about the impact of course reserves on student success. Regarding sustainability, many affordability initiatives are in the early stages, and don’t yet address the issues of long-term planning. Hoover, Shirkey, and Barricella’s case study evaluates three different affordability initiatives at their institution by their sustainability, exploring the different levels of financial commitment necessary to run such programs.

Affordability in the context of a Global Pandemic

Between the call for proposals in the fall of 2019 and the finalization of this issue and this editorial in June 2020, higher education has been upended by a global pandemic that further exposed the challenges of being a student in higher education that these affordability initiatives are working to address. As of this writing, higher education is in a state of flux and while the future is unknown, it will inevitably come with profound financial ramifications for both students, campuses and, certainly, libraries.

With projections on student debt already stark (Chamie, 2017) it is likely that potential students will need to make increasingly critical decisions on how to pay for their education (Hesel, 2020), and libraries will need to make critical decisions about how to use their own resources to support their students. Our hope is that the articles in this issue will be a good starting point for library workers who are beginning to be engaged with affordability issues as well as being a source of new, inspiring, or reinforcing examples from established programs for those whose efforts are already well underway. Regardless of where you may be in the process of supporting affordable education at your own institution, the articles in this issue should give you much to think about.

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