Instituting Open-Source Textbooks in Massachusetts: A Step Toward Solving Socioeconomic Disparities in College Classrooms

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THESIS
The cost of textbooks in the U.S. today creates an uneven dynamic in the classroom. To reduce socioeconomic disparity, Wheaton College should take steps to integrate open-source materials—the licensing of which makes them remixable, sharable, and free—into its curriculum.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT
The U.S. is home to one of the most expensive and inaccessible education systems in the world. Beyond the exorbitant price of entry, full participation is often blocked by the high costs of learning materials, risking an uneven dynamic in the classroom. The College Board estimates that college textbooks cost an additional $1,220-1,250\(^1\) per student annually after tuition.

Currently, five publishing houses control 80 percent of this multi-billion dollar textbook industry.\(^2\) In most industries, consumers control costs by choosing products based on individual spending capacity. In the textbook market, however, product choice belongs to professors. Because textbooks are integral to class participation, students are compelled to purchase them, regardless of their ability to pay.

Wheaton College students are not exempt from the negative effects of the textbook market. Roosevelt@Wheaton conducted a quantitative survey asking students about the cost burden of textbooks. The survey was shared with the Wheaton student body and yielded a random sample of 40 students from various academic disciplines. Results from the survey showed that 72.5 percent of respondents based their course selection on the price of the class’s textbooks. Considering that students and their families spend a large amount of money to pay for tuition, room and board, the additional textbook costs only further impede student access to higher education. A student’s inability to purchase textbooks affects their academic performance, leading to lower grades and limited capacity for academic achievement. The opportunity to choose their classes according to their interests, without any financial restraints, would give them all the necessary tools to thrive in the classroom.

Faculty members are aware of this cost barrier for students and go to great lengths to find alternatives to assigning expensive textbooks. However, planning courses is a lengthy process that requires considerable support from the administration. One alternative that professors have employed in recent years are open source materials, which are texts written by faculty established in their respective fields with a copyright license that makes them legally free to use, edit, and alter.

TALKING POINTS
- Introducing open-source materials in college courses will create a better and more equal starting point for all students by easing cost barriers in the classroom.
- Increasing class participation is imperative at a moment in history when education threatens to exacerbate socioeconomic imbalances.
- Engendering partnership among faculty, students, and administration in the open-sourcing process is essential to preserving the quality of course materials going forward.
**POLICY IDEA**
Integrating open-source materials will combat the uneven classroom dynamic to which proprietary textbooks are naturally conducive. We propose that Wheaton College establish a faculty-run, student mediated open-sourcing committee to review two to three courses per year that serve as staples in the Wheaton curriculum. The review process would involve resource gathering, student input, and faculty deliberation. The committee would ultimately offer retooled, zero-cost classes with course materials tailored to specific professors’ needs and teaching styles. Roosevelt@Wheaton’s end goal is to design a model that can be replicated on any college campus through extensive documentation, qualitative reflection, and the formalization of a streamlined process for the policy’s integration.

**POLICY ANALYSIS**
Open-source materials are the most viable and efficient option to maximize classroom equity at Wheaton. Over two-thirds of Wheaton students surveyed by Roosevelt@Wheaton indicated that the cost of textbooks presents a barrier within their education. Greater reliance on profit-motivated interests for academic participation will further tie academic success to wealth.

The best way to alleviate that connection is through circumventing private control over textbook proliferation (which is, by extension, private influence over student participation). Open-source textbooks will make classes—and by extension college—more accessible to students, helping to redefine higher education as a public good.

Though the good we seek to incorporate into our curriculum is free, its implementation has inherent logistical and timing difficulties. Many professors are willing to look into open-source solutions to classroom inequity, but concerns over quality assurance and time constraints stand in the way. Several Wheaton faculty have explained that support from the campus and administration, would make them more amenable to such measures. A faculty-run and student moderated committee devoted to selecting courses and integrating materials will both relieve the major time imposition of open-sourcing and create a mechanism for ensuring quality and course-specificity.

Each year this committee would review two or three courses for the following academic year. The committee would choose intro-level courses that primarily use textbook materials and draw large numbers of students. The committee would then locate alternative materials for evaluation by the committee. Students and faculty on the committee would bring the necessary perspectives to ensure the quality of materials chosen.

**NEXT STEPS**
The institutions likely to effect change at a policy-level are the Wheaton College faculty and administration. The breadth of this project is limited to Wheaton, therefore it's necessary to build a coalition capable of effectively lobbying administrative offices. Potential coalition partners could include:

- **The Student Government Association (SGA):** SGA allocates up to $10,000 of their yearly budget to finance a book-sharing program, which they're seeking to expand.

- **Madeleine Clark Wallace Library:** The affordability of textbooks has been a long-term project of the Library staff. Library leadership is, in partnership with SGA, conducting a strategic review of textbook access on campus.

- **Members of Faculty:** According to our research, several faculty members have shown interest in open-source. Additionally, Roosevelt@Wheaton's faculty advisors will be helpful in advocating with other faculty members for the legitimacy of this project.

**KEY FACTS**
- 72.5 percent of Wheaton students surveyed by Roosevelt@Wheaton said they believe they are not getting the most out of their education due to cost concerns.

- From 1977 to today, textbook prices have increased at roughly three times the rate of the consumer price index, a byproduct of minimal competition in the textbook market.³

- Eight professors across Wheaton’s three academic divisions interviewed by Roosevelt@Wheaton expressed interest in pursuing open-source material but had concerns about availability and quality control.
ENDNOTES

