Student Advocacy & Power: Moving Fast & Driving Meaningful Change at UT Austin

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About UT Austin

Institutional Context

THE UNIVERSITY

- Public, land-grant, R1 institution
- >3,000 teaching faculty
- 18 colleges & schools
- >300 degree programs
- >12,000 courses

THE STUDENTS

- >50,000 undergraduate & graduate students
- >34,000 students receive financial aid
- >10,000 students receive Pell grants
WHY do UT student leaders invest in OER initiatives?
What UT students say

“One of my intro business classes requires me to purchase a textbook, a course packet with articles, a subscription to a Cengage platform that must be purchased (not optional), and then also the printing cost incurred with printing slides per class. All in all, these NON optional classes add up, and make me wonder if every business class going forward will require this financial commitment.”

“I don't understand why I paid so much for tuition yet I am denied of essential materials such as textbooks”

“I dropped a class because the price of the two textbooks made it no longer worth it to take the class. I was really excited to learn, but couldn't justify spending so much on the reading for a class not required for my degree plan.”

“I'm in a class now that required me to purchase several brand new materials with no option for a used book, so it was really expensive. Students don't receive scholarships until the 12th class day of the semester if they're from the university, so we have to come out of pocket to pay for books when we should have the funding.”
Collecting data to assess student needs

How often does cost prevent you from accessing required course materials?
3,910 responses

During your academic career, has the cost of required course materials caused you to:
4,178 responses

Would you want an instructor’s commitment to using free or low-cost course materials (as opposed to paid textbooks) to be considered as part of the tenure and promotion process?
1,032 responses
HOW have UT student leaders invested in OER initiatives?
How did this work get started on our campus?

- Spring 2019: Senate of College Councils contacts the campus OER Working Group to solicit for feedback on draft legislation in support of OER
- Fall 2019: Natural Sciences Council follows up about the creation of a possible award for faculty who use / create OER
- State legislation around the same time led to greater conversations amongst faculty and administration about OER and course material affordability
Evolving approaches to OER advocacy

- Fall of 2020: Discussions begin about limiting spending cap for classes.
- Spring of 2021: Focus shifts to rewarding positive practices and increasing awareness rather than attempting to shut down negative practices.
- Fall of 2021: After successful negotiations in the Spring, efforts are made to systematically motivate faculty towards greater accessibility.
- Spring of 2022: Mechanisms are put in place to continue our advocacy after graduating.
Legislation

- **S.R. 1808**: A Resolution in Support of UT Libraries’ Advocacy for Open Education Resources (2019)
- **S.R. 1911**: In Support of the Creation of a University-Wide OER Faculty Award Program (2020)
- **S.R. 2103**: A Resolution in Support of Requiring That Low-Cost Course Status Be Displayed on the University’s Course Schedule (2021)
- **S.R. 2201**: A Resolution to Introduce an Accessibility Statement as a Required Component of the Faculty Promotional Dossier (2022)
Engaging campus & college administration

**Establish Student Need**
Collect data (qualitative and/or quantitative) about how course material costs burden students. Establish the value students place in affordable course materials.

**Generate Specific Asks**
Approach efforts with specific, actionable policy changes that meet the needs of your students. Ex: Course Catalog Designations, Tenure and Promotion Consideration, Faculty Grants, etc.

**Recognize Existing Work**
Ensure that work currently being done by faculty relating to your specific asks is recognized. Emphasize that students place value on these changes.

**Translate Asks to Actions**
Once student need, student value, and faculty support are established present a thorough platform to administration with direct asks. Emphasize the role of student voices and student needs in this stage. Engage publicly (legislation/statements) and privately. Repeat cycle with further improvements after implementation.

**Engage Faculty Stakeholders**
Connect with departmental/university faculty leadership to gain their support for initiatives. Use student data and faculty recognitions as leverage to advance conversations.
The role of the library in supporting student advocacy

- Reinforce student proposals to administration by sharing supporting data or reviewing drafts
  - Example: textbook costs & financial aid statistics
- Share examples of what peer institutions are doing
  - Example: OER / low-cost materials markings in course schedules
- Seek ways to meaningfully involve students & incorporate their input into initiatives
  - Invite student representation on campus [OER Working Group](#)
  - Include student leader in reviews of [Open Education Fellows](#) applications (or other awards programs)
- Ask how you can help!
Affordable Education Champions Program

UT Libraries + Senate of College Councils partnered to pilot faculty recognition program together in Spring 2021

- Students nominate any instructor assigning free or low-cost resources
- Committee of student leaders & library staff select 5 faculty from the nominee list to officially recognize as Affordable Education Champions
- Evaluation criteria weighted most on student stories about faculty impact on their finances, academic success & general well-being
- Affordable Education Champions are featured on social media, email & UTL website; letters of recognition shared to Deans + Department Chairs
“By not requiring us to purchase an [expensive] textbook, I was able to utilize that money towards groceries for our apartment, which my family and I were stressing about.”

“Because this is a class for my major, having class materials that I didn't have to pay for made me feel particularly welcomed into the Department..., knowing that there are no real economic barriers to get started with my major.”

“I had this class last spring when everything was changed by the pandemic. I will never forget how committed this professor was to ensuring that his students did not have to pay for the textbook. His resources were entirely free and accessible to students. The textbook was also a simplified version of the longer, more complicated textbook, which I found to be extremely helpful, as well.”

“This was my only class with no additional fees for textbooks or materials! In a college... where almost every class is accompanied by hundreds of dollars in fees, it was so refreshing and helpful to have a class where I didn't have to worry about paying for additional materials.”
Affordable Education Champions Program

**BENEFITS**

- Provides instructors with meaningful feedback they don’t often hear directly from students
- Letters of recognition can be included in promotion dossiers
- No budget! + limited time required to implement
- Easy to promote nominations through social media
- Promotes awareness of OER / course materials affordability issues

**CHALLENGES**

- Scheduling nomination committee with many different schedules to make decisions
- Tight turnarounds for coordinator sometimes required if tying campaign to other events (like Open Education Week)
Sustaining the work

LEVERAGING STUDENT/STAFF COLLABORATIONS

- Student leaders often have greater turnover than staff members
- Student/staff collaborations provide two-way accountability to ensure continuity

FORMALIZING PROCESSES AND STRUCTURES

- Create guides for future leaders and leave meticulous documentation about existing work and background
- Leave future student leaders with a clear understanding of work and prior execution for them to replicate, and ideally improve upon going forward
- Identify specific individuals to lead efforts forward and ensure they are up to date

WORKING ACROSS VARIOUS GROUPS

- Spread responsibilities across different student leadership groups
- Involvement across multiple groups provides another layer of accountability to ensure work continues
Q&A
Resources

- Affordable Education Champions
  - Nomination Form