



## THE NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES' ALT-TEXTBOOK PROJECT

### Open Education That Opens a Door to the Library

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**T**his chapter introduces the North Carolina State University (NCSU) Libraries' Alt-Textbook Project, a library-driven program designed to encourage NCSU faculty to consider open educational resources and other alternatives to expensive commercial textbooks. This chapter situates the Alt-Textbook project in the context of the larger open education movement as well as within library efforts to reduce textbook costs and enhance equitable access to diverse learning materials. It also describes how the project connects the libraries with campus stakeholders, demonstrates the value of library collections, services, and expertise, and sparks discussion about textbook affordability and open culture across the university.

#### BACKGROUND

The increase of textbook costs combined with the continual evolution of technologies that deliver course content has made the “textbook problem” ripe for systemic change. While course materials are a vital part of the higher education

system, cost increases well above the general rate of inflation have exacerbated dissatisfaction with standard textbook publishing and delivery models.<sup>1</sup> Though students can spend less than the College Board reports through e-books and rentals, the escalation of textbook prices well above the overall rate of inflation continues unabated. The Government Accountability Office estimates that from 2002 to 2013 prices increased by 82 percent, three times the rate of increase in overall consumer prices.<sup>2</sup> This rate of increase is driven by a variety of factors, but at its core it stems from a generally inelastic market where consumers (students) and providers (publisher/vendor/bookstore) are separated by an intermediary (instructor) who is not directly exposed to price unless the instructor is the author of the text. Though inelastic in structure, the significant rate of increase in costs has helped increase awareness and dissatisfaction among participants in the textbook market. From this crossroads of unsustainable costs, emerging delivery technologies, and growing dissatisfaction, the long-term evolution of systems for delivering course materials will be shaped by a complex mix of economic, political, pedagogical, and technological factors. This evolution will also be shaped by a diverse set of players that includes students, faculty, publishers, open educational resource providers, information technologists, and librarians.

The immediate problem facing academic libraries is what, if anything, we can or should do about the textbook problem. Even though libraries have a long record of providing access to course materials through reserve systems, both print and online, libraries, particularly in North America, have traditionally taken a hands-off approach to the textbook problem. No library has the funding or mandate to purchase textbooks at the scale needed to serve an entire institution of students. Since they neither select nor use textbooks, libraries have not been principal agents of change in the textbook market. That traditional stance on textbooks, however, is rapidly changing—and for good reason.

At the NCSU Libraries, our efforts to more directly address the textbook problem on behalf of students and faculty began with a resolution from students asking us to place one copy of every required textbook on print reserve. This commitment has evolved into a multimodal effort to provide short-term assistance to students while pursuing long-term systemic change in the market and within our university. The NCSU Libraries pursue a number of approaches to aid students and instructors in dealing with the various challenges associated with textbooks, including:

1. in partnership with the NCSU bookstores, purchasing at least one copy of every required textbook and offering them through print reserves;<sup>3</sup>

2. purchasing a site license in 2010 for *Physics Curriculum & Instruction*, an experimental physics textbook used by 1,300 NCSU students who take introductory physics courses each semester. This was provided as a free e-textbook or inexpensive print-on-demand textbook in 2010 for use in introductory courses, hosting its availability for all authorized NCSU users, and providing a print-on-demand option through the bookstores;<sup>4</sup>
3. developing a suite of advocacy materials about the textbook problem and potential market-moving solutions such as OERs; and
4. building on the excellent leadership of projects in the libraries at Temple University and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst which offer mini-grants to faculty members who adopt or create OERs to replace expensive assigned textbooks to develop an alternative textbook program.<sup>5</sup>

As hubs that connect stakeholders across higher education institutions, libraries have a natural connection to students and their growing dissatisfaction with textbook costs. Libraries also work closely with faculty across the life cycle of their research and teaching. Library service provision and engagement with pedagogical utilities such as electronic reserves and course management systems increased engagement with digital tools for delivering course materials. More libraries are leveraging the combination of student dissatisfaction, faculty interest in new teaching and learning approaches, established relationships with both students and faculty, and the burgeoning OER offerings to engage in the textbook conversation and offer solutions. OERs and alternative market-driven options such as Flat World Knowledge and OpenStax have created opportunities for libraries to come off the sidelines of the textbook problem and start participating in the development, promotion, and dissemination of alternatives.

While academic libraries do not exert central authority or market power to drive solutions, they do have both physical centrality on campuses and important visibility and goodwill. Furthermore, strategies are available for librarians to move the needle on problems of affordability and access by piloting new approaches to incubate change. The rising number of incentive and grant programs for incubating alternatives to traditional textbooks points to libraries as engines that drive change by providing educational resource solutions to their students and faculty that enable both cost savings and innovative approaches to teaching and learning.<sup>6</sup> At the NCSU Libraries, we aimed to create a program that promoted both effective learning and cost-effectiveness by leveraging and highlighting library expertise.

## THE NCSU LIBRARIES' ALT-TEXTBOOK PROJECT

### “Free and Better”: Developing the Alt-Textbook Project

Recognizing the financial pressures facing our students and the opportunity for the libraries to address them through collaborating with faculty to seed innovation, in 2013 the NCSU Libraries began developing our Alt-Textbook program. We took inspiration from alt-textbook programs hosted at the Temple University Libraries and University of Massachusetts at Amherst Libraries. Like these programs, NCSU's Alt-Textbook project provides small grants of between \$500 and \$2,000 to individual instructors who are willing to replace an existing commercial textbook with an open educational resource.

In order to develop the project, we needed to locate two resources: model documents to guide our development of content for publicizing, managing, and awarding the grants, and the actual funds to be provided for awards. For the model documents, we looked to Temple and UMass-Amherst. Fortunately, those libraries welcomed us to the OER community and offered a host of useful resources and insights. For funding, we explored several options, including grants. A \$15,000 award from the North Carolina State University Foundation provided the financial resources for a pilot program. Figure 6.1 is a press release announcing the grant, figure 6.2 is a call for proposals, and figure 6.3 is our rubric for evaluating proposals.

#### NCSU News Release

NCSU Libraries offering grants to help faculty develop free or low-cost open textbook alternatives

**Media Contact:** David Hiscoe, 919-513-3425

**Date:** August xx, 2014

#### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

(Raleigh, N.C.)—In the latest of several initiatives designed to help students reduce the expense of textbooks as part of their university educations and make it easier for faculty to explore and create new resources for their teaching, the NCSU Libraries is inviting North Carolina State University faculty to apply for grants to adopt, adapt, or create free or low-cost open alternatives to today's expensive textbooks. Ranging between \$500 and \$2,000, the competitive *Alt-Textbook* grants will be awarded to help faculty pursue innovative uses of technology and information re-

sources that can replace pricey traditional textbooks. Larger grants may be available for larger-scale or especially high-impact projects.

Textbook costs have outpaced inflation by 300% over the last 30 years. These runaway prices have become a major strain on students, with textbooks averaging \$1,200 a year and 7 out of 10 students admitting on a recent Public Interest Research Group survey that they have not purchased a required text because of its cost.

Grants are available to develop textbook alternatives for the Spring 2015 and Fall 2015 semesters. Possible approaches include:

- creating a new open textbook or collection of materials
- adopting an existing open textbook
- assembling a collection of open resources into new course materials
- licensing an e-textbook, video, or other media content for classroom use or e-reserves
- using subscribed library resources

As faculty work on their proposals, NCSU librarians are available to collaborate and to share expertise in copyright, licensing, open access, course management software and tools, electronic reserves, subject-matter content, and multimedia resources.

“Academic libraries have always been a powerful way to reduce the financial burden of a university education by pooling key resources for everyone to use,” reminds Susan K. Nutter, Vice Provost and Director of the NCSU Libraries. “The *Alt-Textbook* grants offer an innovative way to leverage that advantage in the digital age while at the same time giving our faculty a powerful tool to tailor their course materials to the exact needs of their students.”

The NCSU Libraries will hold several information sessions about the project in September. Faculty can learn more about the project, review the call for proposals, sign up for information sessions, and download grant applications at the *Alt-Textbook* Project website.

The *Alt-Textbook* initiative builds on a successful partnership with the university's Physics Department that resulted in a free physics e-textbook that is now used by 1,300 NC State students each year.

Other NCSU Libraries initiatives to reduce costs for students include providing at least one copy of every required course book on reserve each semester, supplying online reserves to electronically disseminate materials within the bounds of copyright law, and Library Course Tools, an innovative use of the Libraries' website to present custom, course-related library content for every course at the university.

*Alt-Textbook* is supported by a grant from the NC State University Foundation.

Figure 6.1 | **Alt-Textbook Grants Press Release**

[Subject Line]  
 NCSU Libraries grants available for innovative open learning materials

[Body]  
 Interested in grant funding to explore new resources for your teaching? Excited about innovative educational resources like video and open/online materials? Want to reduce your students' debt load? The NCSU Libraries invites applications for a competitive grant program to adopt, adapt, or create free or low-cost alternatives to expensive textbooks.

Open Educational Resources (OERs) are freely accessible alternatives to traditional print textbooks. OERs empower faculty to innovate pedagogically, enhance access for NC State students to high-quality, tailored educational materials, and reduce the financial burden of expensive textbooks. The NCSU Libraries' Alt-Textbook program wants to fund your ideas for an OER or other textbook alternative in your class. Whether you're interested in opening up an existing textbook like the Libraries and Physics Department did for Physics 211 and 212 or designing a next-generation package of online resources and videos, the Alt-Textbook Project can fund your great idea with a grant of between \$500 and \$2,000 (larger grants may be available for larger-scale and impact projects).

You can read more about the NCSU Alt-Textbook project and review our call for proposals on the Alt-Textbook Project website or you can contact us with questions at: [wmcross@ncsu.edu](mailto:wmcross@ncsu.edu).

We look forward to hearing from you!

Figure 6.2 | Alt-Textbook Call for Proposals

### Alt-Textbook Rubric

I. Please rank the proposals on a scale from 1 - 5:

(1 = poor quality, 2 = low quality, 3 = solid quality,  
 4 = high quality, 5 = outstanding proposal)

**Cost Savings:** Does the proposal describe materials that will not require students to spend money or, if an existing textbook is being used, materials that significantly reduce the cost to students?

\_\_\_ Proposal one      \_\_\_ Proposal two

**Pedagogical Innovation:** Does the proposal describe materials that do something innovative, that a traditional print textbook could not?

\_\_\_ Proposal one      \_\_\_ Proposal two

**Impact:** Does the proposal describe materials that will benefit many students at NCSU and/or benefit students and instructors across the field at many institutions? Will the materials be sustainable over multiple courses and multiple semesters?

\_\_\_ Proposal one      \_\_\_ Proposal two

**Ability to Succeed:** Does the proposal describe materials that could reasonably be created or adopted for the 2016-17 academic year? Does it adequately describe logistics and identify resources within or beyond the Libraries that can help the instructor meet any challenges posed by the proposal such as technical needs, licensing, support, etc.

\_\_\_ Proposal one      \_\_\_ Proposal two

II. Please rank all proposals based on their priority for funding and what level of funding is appropriate:

\$500 = a small pilot project

\$1,000 = a large, innovative, or high-impact project

\$2,000 = an outstanding project that will serve many students or significantly advance pedagogy

Group A: These proposals should definitely be funded:

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Group B: These proposals should be funded if resources are available, in rank order:

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Group C: These proposals need more work before we are comfortable funding them:

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Figure 6.3 | Alt-Textbook Proposal Evaluation Rubric

The cost savings created by an alt-textbook program were one major focus for our program. We were deeply concerned that more than half of college students cannot afford their assigned textbooks and that more than one in ten fail a course for this reason.<sup>7</sup> As a STEM-focused, public land-grant institution, we were also alarmed that many students report being unable to pursue majors in “expensive” subjects like science and engineering, particularly first-generation students and those from underrepresented populations, students whom these fields can least afford to lose.<sup>8</sup> To address these concerns, we designed our Alt-Textbook program to attract instructors using expensive textbooks in hopes of supporting them in transitioning to free alternatives.

The NCSU Libraries also understood our Alt-Textbook project as an opportunity to leverage technology and library expertise to facilitate teaching and learning. OERs can be both “free and better” than closed textbooks because they are available to all students and they leverage digital resources.<sup>9</sup> Scholars have compared the move from print to digital OERs to the transition from rotary telephones to smartphones: not only are the new tools more effective for their original purpose, but they enable new practices to develop. In the same way, we designed the program to solicit projects based on course readings, but also projects that used multimedia resources, collaborative digital discussion spaces, and other methods and that enable new types of teaching and learning.

We also believe that the library is “uniquely positioned to work with faculty on curricular change” as a fertile space for collaboration with campus partners, and due to the unique types of expertise available in libraries that can complement an instructor’s deep subject-based knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Library expertise in instructional design, digital resources and literacy, and copyright can help instructors create OERs that transcend the sorts of textbooks that leave many feeling like “hired hands” rather than partners with their students in learning.<sup>11</sup>

In order to meet our objectives of addressing equity issues and advancing teaching and learning, the NCSU Libraries gathered a committee of librarians that represented diverse types of expertise. We highlighted expertise in a variety of areas including instructional design, digital literacy, collections, digital tools and development, copyright and fair use analysis, electronic resources and course reserves, scholarly communication and publishing, and OERs, as well as diverse subject specialties. This committee worked collaboratively to develop outreach materials, present workshops on open education, and, most significantly, serve as liaisons to the faculty awardees. As applications arrive, the Alt-Textbook team considers potential issues or roadblocks that each may

face if they were to be developed. Some may require extra assistance with web hosting or making materials available via course reserves, while others may not have enough information to specify which digital tool or platform would be best to use.

This liaison relationship is at the heart of the Alt-Textbook project. Based on the subject area of the grant and any potential issues identified, each grant awardee is assigned a library liaison from the Alt-Textbook project team. The liaison answers questions, tracks progress, and acts as a point of contact that connects awardees with the libraries’ services and resources. This team-based approach gives all library staff a stake in the project and spotlights library services and expertise. Librarians across the institution reported new interest in services like electronic reserves, an example of instructional support very familiar to librarians but novel for several instructors, as well as consultations and library instruction.

Similarly, our funding model was designed to both reduce costs for students and galvanize better practice. Unlike OER projects where the library disburses funds primarily intended as a “carrot” to incentivize better behavior by using existing material, our intention was to use funds to empower instructors to redesign or create new materials. In the first two rounds, instructors have requested and used funds to do everything from hiring graduate student assistants for content development and web design to paying to make resources available with fewer restrictions.

### **“Your Materials to Support Your Teaching”: Launching the Project**

These two principles—collaborative action and support for innovation—were the hallmarks of the Alt-Textbook project as we launched the first round in 2014. We publicized the program widely in partnership with individual departments and colleges, our subject specialists, and the Office of Faculty Development. Our outreach included informational e-mails, a press release, an art box on our web page, coverage in our campus newspaper, and a series of information sessions in the libraries and as part of existing event series with our campus partners.

Our outreach was successful, generating a diverse set of proposals from fourteen faculty members from the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and professional programs. The majority of departments were represented, with

the College of Education offering the largest number of proposals. We also received proposals from our Chancellor's Faculty Excellence Program "Cluster Hires"—faculty members recruited to NCSU to work on interdisciplinary issues such as data-driven science and the digital transformation of education.<sup>12</sup>

We brought together a campus-wide committee to review the grant proposals. This campus committee included librarians, faculty members, administrators, and an undergraduate student. The campus committee evaluated all applications thoroughly and announced nine winners for the first round. The awardees' disciplines ranged from biotechnology to statistics, from counseling to foreign languages. Each awardee was assigned a liaison from the Alt-Textbook committee based on anticipated needs. For example, instructors planning to use openly licensed materials or rely on fair use for video clips were matched with the libraries' Copyright and Digital Scholarship Center. Those developing digital tools or using code-sharing repositories like GitHub were matched with a representative from the Digital Library Initiatives Department. Those leveraging the university's student-facing content management system (Moodle) worked with Access and Delivery Services staff.

After the committee evaluates the grants, faculty awardees are invited to an Alt-Textbook orientation. This offers the libraries another opportunity to raise awareness about our collections, liaisons, and established services like electronic reserves and licensed videos. Orientation provides faculty and Alt-Textbook liaisons the opportunity to meet face-to-face to discuss plans for their OER, develop time lines, address questions or concerns moving forward, and to set up further consultation. Awardees expressed appreciation for the orientation, and several specifically mentioned the value of discovering library services they had not been aware of previously.

Awardees also began to form a community of practice around the Alt-Textbook project. In addition to regular discussion with their library liaisons and consultations with other librarians, they also requested that the libraries host regular gatherings for them to discuss their projects as well as larger questions about instructional design and pedagogy. These optional meetings were fruitful both as a venue for awardees to consider logistical issues, such as managing funds and working with graduate students, and to learn about new ways to approach teaching based on perspectives from beyond their disciplines. With a deeper understanding of the libraries' resources and services and the funds to put their plans into action, the instructors developed their resources using the same principles of collaborative action in service of innovative instruction that are at the heart of the Alt-Textbook project.

## Alt-Textbooks in Action

The creation, application, and evaluation of alt-textbook projects involved many parties. We in the libraries offered ourselves as resources and coordinated with other university partners invested in teaching and learning such as the Office of Faculty Development and Distance Education & Learning Technology Applications (DELTA) to provide support, but fundamentally the success of Alt-Textbooks requires instructors and learners.

We also considered a variety of approaches to the ownership and licensing of the alt-texts. Under NCSU's copyright policy, faculty own traditional non-directed works unless they make "exceptional use of university resources."<sup>13</sup> In the early rounds, we made the decision not to assert any claims to institutional ownership of the projects, beyond a standard nonexclusive license to use them. As a result, we are free to post the projects on the libraries' site and use them in other campus and promotional contexts, but faculty retain the right to the works they created.

We also took a balanced approach to openly licensing the final alt-texts. In our general introduction to open education we explained the value of fully open materials in the "5 R" (retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute) sense of the term.<sup>14</sup> We also described the way that a Creative Commons license is traditionally used to create the legal framework for this open sharing. In order to provide flexibility for faculty experimenting with a variety of approaches to course design, however, we permitted openness to take a variety of forms. This understanding of openness as a spectrum gave our faculty members space to experiment and incorporate fair use in a more robust manner.

As a result, all projects have a public face that is open in the most complete sense so that others around the world can benefit from the project. But in some cases that meant a flexible approach where readings and syllabi were listed, rather than the full text of all materials. This compromise approach made the early rounds more attractive for faculty and permitted a richer and more experimental approach for instructors just dipping their toes into OER creation. In later rounds, however, we have strengthened our commitment to openness in the fullest sense. As the project's reputation has grown on campus, and our own expertise in the libraries has grown, we are better positioned to support projects that are innovative but also truly open to the world.

The stories of the creation, application, and evaluation of alt-texts that follow provide some examples of the diverse ways that instructors have worked with others, including their students, to try to ensure that alt-texts add value

to the academic experience. In all of these cases, the librarian liaisons offered assistance to the instructors and their students in identifying relevant open resources, but that was generally only the beginning of creating the alt-texts.

### Involving Students in the Creating of Alt-Texts

Instructors have engaged students with two approaches to creating alt-texts: advanced preparation and active learning. In the advanced preparation approach, instructors hire a graduate student or advanced undergraduate student to work with them in the development of an alt-text, typically during the semester prior to when the course is scheduled to be taught. This type of working with student(s) takes some of the burden off the instructor while creating an environment to discuss issues around the selection of relevant resources. For the student developer, it builds their resume and potentially inspires the next generation of instructors to consider developing or using new types of texts in their teaching. Regardless of the subsequent impact of the alt-text on the learners in the course, learning took place in crafting course materials with the advanced student and instructor as potential co-learners, depending on the nature of the work.

Another type of creative engagement occurs when part of the alt-text is created by the students taking the course under the direction of the instructor as part of the active learning in the course. In some cases, such as the development of chemistry laboratory videos by Maria Gallardo-Williams, the students in the course participated but were not graded on their participation.<sup>15</sup> The most integrated approach involves students in creation and evaluation, and much of the learning in the course is self-directed and active through these processes. An example of this is the student-driven biotechnology OER created through a project by Sabrina Robertson and Carlos Goller's (Biotechnology) BIT 410/510: Core Technologies in Molecular Biology students. In biotechnology, methodologies evolve rapidly, and traditional textbooks often become outdated even before making it to print. The BIT OER is a dynamic online educational platform for all things biotechnology-related.<sup>16</sup> The unique content on this site was created and evaluated by teams of students working together to provide an innovative, freely accessible educational resource for the local, national, and international biotechnology community.

### Evaluating the Use of Alt-Texts

Methods to evaluate traditional course materials have been used to measure the impact of alt-texts and perhaps provide information at a more granular level. For example, replacing a textbook with digital course reserve readings can reveal what information students have accessed or downloaded. An instructor using a traditional textbook might never know whether a student purchased or opened the required text, but a project using readings in a course reserves system offers the instructor information on whether students logged into the system and how many times certain readings were accessed or downloaded. In the NCSU Libraries reserves system, instructors can use the Statistics heading to see a link labeled Student Usage, which represents total views and total unique students who have accessed each item. Educational materials linked to Moodle or other learning management systems can provide similar statistics. Instructors have ensured the use of alt-texts through their design of activities during the course that requires learners to interact with the resource through homework, quizzes, exams, or papers. Some open textbooks and alt-text resources from large OER providers like OpenStax have built-in assessment components, and the NCSU Libraries project may explore this in the future.

A few instructors pursued research to compare the effectiveness of their alt-text resources with other strategies as part of their commitment to growing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.<sup>17</sup> Although significant research has been done on the efficacy of OERs in other contexts, it can be challenging to tease out the differences related to simply changing content and format apart from the complexity of changing the overall learner experience through the project design, greater involvement with and cocreation of the materials, and novelty for the instructor.<sup>18</sup> Class evaluations used at NCSU for lecture and laboratory courses ask the following question about course readings: "The course readings were valuable aids to learning" on a five-point Likert-type scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, with an additional choice of Not Applicable. At NCSU, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning, which coordinates the course evaluation process, also invites instructors, departments, and colleges to develop and add up to seven closed-ended questions and six additional open-ended questions which can be used to address special interests or instructional innovations. This is an avenue to potentially ask specific questions about the value of the material. Although cost savings are an important driver, students may not realize that they have saved money due to the use of

the alt-text unless it is for a large course where other sections or students from previous years have discussed the cost of the typical textbook.

### Reflecting on the Utility of Alt-Texts

There are many viewpoints on the utility of alt-texts. While those of student and instructor in the context of the specific course come most readily to mind, taking the vantage point of the academic department, the university, the community of instructors who teach similar courses, or potential learners outside the university can tell powerful stories.

For instructors, whether tenure-track, teaching faculty pursuing promotion, or tenured, it is worth reflecting on the investment in developing an alt-text and measuring its local and potentially global impact. Reflection is one way to understand how the time spent developing the resource compared to the effort initially proposed in the grant, and to budget time effectively in future efforts. Having been awarded a grant for a teaching-related activity is an important item for annual activity reports or progress reports. The benefits of developing closer relationships with library staff carry over to other courses and projects. Instructors have parlayed the ideas and materials created with Alt-Textbook funds into inspiring other faculty in their departments to join in to pursue additional resources. For example, Gallardo-Williams, a grant recipient in 2014 for her nationally recognized Student-Made Audiovisuals Reinforcing Techniques (S.M.A.R.T.) lab videos, subsequently earned a grant from the Office of Faculty Development to purchase software for additional works that resulted in a paper that she coauthored with students in the *Journal of Chemical Education*.<sup>19</sup>

For the broader learning community, impact varies tremendously depending on how available and discoverable the alt-materials are and how many students take the course or study the subject. For example, projects housed entirely in the NCSU Libraries course reserves are limited to students enrolled in the specific course at NCSU. Alt-text materials housed on the open Web or on a faculty or NCSU website are discoverable by Google and other search engines, but someone has to be looking for them. Statistics about the numbers of visitors, downloads, or links has been tracked by adding Google Analytics or other tools to the site management. Placing alt-materials on the open Web in a known repository with a wide audience base garners the most traffic. The S.M.A.R.T. lab videos were uploaded to YouTube in addition to an NCSU server. Posting

to a public site may provide both a hosting solution and very compelling evidence about the number of views. For example, the YouTube-hosted video "Drying with Anhydrous Sodium Sulfate" posted in 2015 had 3,512 views as of July 26, 2016. The evaluative practices described above offer insight into the benefits of alt-texts for teaching and learning. Additionally, the libraries have seen significant benefits from the project.

### OPENING MANY DOORS TO THE LIBRARIES

The Alt-Textbook project encourages NCSU instructors to create digital, multimedia learning materials that reflect their individual voices and teaching styles. In addition to our well-known role of pooling resources to create efficient, university-wide access to scholarly content, the project spotlights the libraries' collections, services, and expertise in new specialty areas. It demonstrates how we contribute to our campus community's success in a variety of ways, making the work of libraries, and of librarians, more visible. The NCSU Libraries' strategic plan includes the Alt-Textbook project as an integral way that the libraries are enhancing student success, which is also a university strategic goal.<sup>20</sup>

Information sessions, the orientation, and the projects themselves provide a context for the libraries to introduce open culture more broadly to the university community. Instructors who attend the information sessions strengthen their awareness of librarians' expertise. They learn that librarians can consult with them on specific competency areas as they navigate building their own OERs regardless of whether they apply for or succeed with an Alt-Textbook award application. The Alt-Textbook initiative often attracts instructors looking to do innovative work, and librarian liaisons are able to develop relationships that can lead to further library collaboration. By shining a light on how the library can support teaching, learning, and research, we set a foundation for collaboration beyond the Alt-Textbook initiative. Individual projects have served as powerful case studies for cross-cutting libraries services like the Makerspace and the Copyright and Digital Scholarship Center. Past Alt-Textbook projects have led to faculty presenting at conferences or publishing articles, further disseminating this work.

The intended audience of the Alt-Textbook promotion is much broader than the instructors eligible to apply for the program. Hosting several information sessions each semester about the Alt-Textbook program has not only

promoted the program, but introduced the idea of OERs to the broader university community and all who visit the NCSU Libraries website. Seeing the announcements and facts about the textbook problem exposes audiences to both the Alt-Textbook grants and the possibilities that come with utilizing OERs regardless of whether they attend a session. They may spark ideas for administrators and course coordinators to discuss partnering with other instructors in their department or program to promote wider adoption of alt-texts across course sections which can lead to more savings. Inviting key stakeholders to participate on the selection committee is another avenue to creating broader awareness of OERs and what instructors need in order to develop them.

The Alt-Textbook project was further promoted by the libraries' External Relations staff and the Web Team. A Web presence<sup>21</sup> on the NCSU Libraries website was established, which provided a space to list the projects from the first year and to discuss the textbook problem. Branding was designed for the project to be used in press releases, social media, and the libraries' home page "art box" for promotional purposes.

The External Relations team further assisted in creating several GIFs and social media posts to promote the project on social media and on library and campus electronic signage.

The Alt-Textbook program also became an NCSU Libraries "Library Story."<sup>22</sup> Library Stories offers librarians and their partners, typically faculty and students, an opportunity to share examples of their innovative, collaborative projects.<sup>23</sup> Since much of the work taking place in librarianship is done "behind the curtain," librarian portraits and links to staff pages are highlighted in every Library Story to associate the library with those who work within. This helps to make what can sometimes feel like invisible work more visible. The Alt-Textbook Library Story was featured prominently on the libraries home page and shared through social media. Additionally, the program was featured in the NCSU student newspaper, and in *Library Journal*.<sup>24</sup>

Promoting the project through marketing and communications has helped not only to raise awareness of the program, but also to demonstrate to students our proactive attitude toward addressing textbook costs, and to make instructors aware of the expertise and opportunities that the libraries provide. By opening another door to the libraries and the expertise of the staff within, we have responded to the demand for affordable textbooks while reaffirming the central role of the library as a hub for collaboration and as an agent of change.

## CONCLUSION: AN ONGOING PROJECT

Open education gives libraries an opportunity to meet our mission by making resources available in the service of our patrons and the public good. Librarians around the world are answering this call. As we work to transform education, we should not miss a parallel opportunity to transform the way the academy understands libraries and librarianship. The success of our pilot Alt-Textbook project led to ongoing funding from the NCSU Libraries administration, which was impressed with the innovative work and the national attention.

Our second round, launched in 2015, included more projects supported by a new cohort of library liaisons. It also connected with new library programs and services, including work in our Makerspace on 3D printing of bone samples for a veterinary anatomy class and our visualization services for digital history projects, as well as deeper work with librarians who are now familiar with the power of open education. We attracted a libraries fellow to work on the project, expanding its reach and filling in gaps in support and sustainability from prior years. As of this writing, the program's third round is in development, and it promises to be even more impactful and exciting.

The reach of the project, however, extends far beyond the individual alt-texts. Through these efforts, the libraries have built new relationships with many innovative and dynamic faculty members and launched new projects built on those relationships. We have also developed a trusted relationship with our campus bookstore and university system press, and with a national set of libraries working in this area. The bookstore has been a critical partner in many of the libraries' efforts to address the textbook problem, including our textbook purchasing program and offering print-on-demand service for our Open Physics Textbook. With the Alt-Textbook project, the bookstore has continued to offer print-on-demand options for all digital works as well as sharing information about assigned alt-texts for students looking to acquire books for the semester. We are also working on larger data-sharing efforts to identify potential candidates for Alt-Textbook outreach, as well as general information for students about comparison shopping and textbook options. Similarly, the UNC Press has been an outstanding partner, supporting our work with their expertise and collaborating on grants and innovative projects around platforms and support for OER creation.

Overall, the project has sparked fruitful conversations about the value of open culture with many stakeholders—from undergraduates to state legislators—that years of advocacy around open access could not reach. By opening

our doors to open education, the NCSU Libraries has introduced ourselves and our work in a whole new way.

## Notes

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