CONSUMPTRIX: LEARNING CONTENT CONSUMERS—FACULTY AND STUDENTS

Consumption of course materials is a complicated mix of faculty control of content choice and student management of purchase, obtaining otherwise, or foregoing the content. Students (and faculty) still prefer print, but potential cost savings and a better learning experience can and is fueling the transition to digital content—especially adaptive learning courseware and platform-based products. OERs, low-cost and tradition-buck ing entrants, and federal/state intervention are motivating an evolution of historic consumption and business models. The primary concern may be what happens to learning and academic success if more and more students choose not to obtain learning materials at all.

Key Points

1. Advocates of instructor autonomy argue that it encourages intellectual diversity, leverages instructor expertise, places decisions with those best able to judge student needs, and reduces the risk of political intrusion on curricular decisions. Yet it limits the ability to achieve economies of scale (volume purchases) and discourages large-scale assessment of course material effectiveness. Some also suggest it lies at the heart of rising prices by separating textbook choice and payment.

2. The risk of breaking the link between faculty learning content adoption and assignment and student study/reading behavior has far-reaching implications for the learning content ecosystem.

3. Digital course materials that provide a better learning experience and a significant cost advantage could overcome today’s students’ apparent preference for print.

4. Publishers have begun marketing and white labeling entire online courses.

5. As affordability and success pressures build and new learning products and business models emerge, colleges and universities are likely to experiment with strategies that shift adoption away from autonomous faculty and toward academic leadership and high-volume sales.

6. Students, for their part, have also enjoyed an expanding range of acquisition options. However, students increasingly are avoiding acquisition altogether.

7. Select key trends include: Widespread reliance on adjunct/part-time faculty and the related centralizing of course materials decision making; growing resentment about the rising cost of textbooks; declining student time spent reading and low utilization of required learning content; rising availability and sophistication of digital content, including adaptive learning platforms; and growing student use of contemporary retail shopping techniques, use of free web sources, pirating of content, or avoiding acquisition altogether.
Mapping the Learning Content Ecosystem

SCORECARD

CONSUMPRIX: Learning Content Consumers—Faculty and Students

Supplier Power
- Power of publishers may be waning
- Publishers’ steady, core business of print textbooks is in trouble
- Traditional, print textbooks are becoming easier to replace with other materials
- OER competition and low-cost publishing start-ups are driving an evolution of the traditional consumption process

Buyer Power
- Buyer bargaining power is on the rise
- Better cost information and more purchase options improve buyer position
- More no-cost content and online educational resources (formal and informal) provide alternatives to the traditional textbook

New Entrants
- New breed of low-cost publishers and other sources keen to offer something “radically different”
- “Edupreneurs” strive to make content available that bypasses long-established higher education practices
- Federal and state governments may play increasingly invasive roles through regulation and cost subsidy

Rivalry Level*: 2

Competition centers around control of consumption; between campus entities, and between consumers and supplier in emerging business models.

Substitutes
- Software platforms and next-generation digital products may eliminate some alternative consumer options
- Changes that affect control over assignment and use:
  - Institutional licensing agreements
  - Self-sourcing and other student cost avoidance strategies
  - Student marketplaces and social commerce/sharing sites

*Rivalry is an indication of competition in the segment from 1-lowest to 5-highest; both among current players and between them and new entrants.
Introduction

Faculty have traditionally been the bridge between the content creators (publishers) and the college store and its ultimate customer, the student. This complicated but historically harmonious arrangement is under pressure thanks to changes in course materials, student behavior, and the faculty's makeup and role in adopting learning content.

While most of the criticism about high textbook prices has been directed at publishers, faculty have attracted a share of the blame. "Analogous to the market for prescription drugs where prices have risen rapidly," economist James Koch wrote in an influential 2006 report, "in the market for textbooks the separation of textbook choice and textbook payment profoundly influences pricing...[S]tudents end up being coerced to pay for someone else's choices." 104

Koch went on to argue that faculty lacked price awareness and that textbook prices tend to be inelastic because students feel they have no choice but to buy what is assigned. However, even in 2006 Koch noticed a drop in the number of textbooks being purchased. In the years since, the textbook cost controversy has developed political traction and the marketplace increasingly suggests that students are pursuing cost-saving alternatives. What's more, the proportion of faculty who enjoy adoption autonomy may be declining, bringing other adopter models into play.

Content Consumers: History, Mission, and Value Proposition

Since 1915, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has promoted academic freedom in research and teaching, including strong claims for instructor autonomy in the assignment of course materials. The AAUP advises that where a faculty member is a sole instructor, she or he has "the right, under principles of academic freedom, to determine the texts (and other materials) the students will be required to read." In courses with multiple instructors, choice of materials should be "based on a consensus of the appropriate teaching faculty." 105

---

Among all faculty, mixed-mode adoption dominates: only 18% exclusively assign print, and only 6% exclusively digital.

---

Advocates of instructor autonomy argue that it encourages intellectual diversity, leverages the expertise for which the instructor was hired, leaves decisions in the hands of those best able to judge student needs, and reduces the risk of political intrusion on curricular decisions. Yet it clearly has other implications that have created pushback from some administrators and reformers. It limits the ability to achieve economies of scale or to purchase in volume and discourages large-scale assessment of course materials effectiveness. Instructor autonomy also preserves the "separation of textbook choice and textbook payment" that Koch saw at the heart of rising prices. This separation also contributes to what some refer to as the "chapter tax" which is the result of a faculty member's assignment of a textbook while requiring students to read only a portion of that book.

Instructor autonomy remains high in the non-profit higher education sector, especially at four-year institutions. Alternative approaches are emerging, however, driven by the changing nature of the instructional staff, new course material formats, and students who are less content to remain a captive audience.

---

What do instructors assign? The print textbook remains the monarch of educational content, adopted by about eight out of 10 faculty in our fall 2014 survey (Figure 14). Digital materials tend to be supplemental, but a quarter of faculty assigned digital or e-textbooks. This figure varies dramatically by discipline, ranging from a low of 15% in education to a high of 48% in mathematics. Among all faculty, mixed-mode adoption dominates: only 18% exclusively assign print, and only 6% exclusively digital.

Figure 14 – Course Materials Formats Faculty Most Often Assign | Source: NACS, 2014

Students confronting these assignments have their own ideas about autonomy. While they remain highly motivated to earn good grades, many try to do so with minimum effort and cost. Studies going back to the 1970s have consistently found that only 20-30% of students will have done assigned reading by its due date.\(^\text{106}\) Noncompliance has held steady, moreover, even as assignment lengths declined. Average weekly study time dropped from 40 hours (including class time) in 1961 to 13 hours in 2003, while the proportion of “A” grades rose.\(^\text{107}\) Add the rising cost of textbooks to this mix, and one is likely to concede that it is rational for financially challenged students to regard expensive required course materials as inessential. The risk of breaking the link between student study behaviors and faculty learning content adoptions is worrisome. Moreover, it is likely that students who are already at risk from other factors are also those who are most at risk of breaking with faculty choices and reading assignments.

The risk of breaking the link between student study behaviors and faculty learning content adoptions is worrisome.

NACS’ Student Watch™ data collected in fall 2014 suggests that many students do so. Only about a third say they use assigned course materials 80% or more of the time, and only 57% say they use them more than half of the time (Figure 15). Similarly, just more than half find their course materials “very” or “extremely” useful, though heavier users do so at higher rates. And as we shall see, a growing number of students are choosing not to acquire some required materials.


If students are willing to push the envelope of course material use, they remain conservative about formats. Only 9% of NACS’ Student Watch™ study respondents prefer strictly digital formats, versus 56% who prefer print textbooks with or without a bundled digital component. Many of these students say they find print textbooks easier to study from.

Still, many trends point toward a digital future. About a quarter of students say that their preferred format “depends on the course.” The percentage of students purchasing digital course materials rose slightly from 18% in 2013 to 21% in 2014. Two-thirds say that when they are studying at home, digital course content improves learning, and a similar number agree that instructor use of digital course materials can improve student learning.

Students, as we know, are primed for digital consumption. Nine out of 10 own a laptop, 84% own a smartphone, and more than one-third (35%) own a tablet device. Half used a smartphone in fall 2014 to complete coursework, and a quarter used a tablet (two-thirds among tablet owners). Digital course materials that provide a significant cost advantage and a better learning experience could overcome today’s students’ apparent preference for print.

**Disruption of Educational Content Consumption**

One challenge to the traditional faculty assign-students buy pattern is the growing use of contract, adjunct, and part-time instructors. In fall 2011, there were 1.5 million instructional faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions—approximately half full-time and half part-time.108 From 1975 to 2011, total enrollments grew by 88%, yet the number of tenured and tenure-track positions grew by only 23%. Contingent positions grew at five times that rate, accounting for nine out of 10 net new positions.109

Paid between $1,000-5,000 per course110 and often hired at the last minute, adjunct faculty do not have the same opportunities to craft courses as their more secure colleagues. Course design and materials assignments for adjunct-led courses are often carried out by permanent faculty or departmental committees, centralizing the adoption process. Among faculty surveyed by NACS in fall 2014, three-fourths of ladder faculty said that they select course materials for assignment in the courses they teach; only 37% of contract faculty did so (Figure 16). Contractors were almost five times as likely as ladder faculty to report that a campus or departmental committee selects materials for their courses.

---

A majority of faculty surveyed agreed that the use of contract faculty will drive greater standardization of general education course materials over the next five years. As contractors become more numerous and their assignment autonomy diverges from traditional norms, college stores can expect a reduction in the number of discrete learning content “assigners” on campus and higher stakes in winning or losing the orders of selection committees.

While growing use of contract faculty concentrates the adoption process, content selection at non-profit institutions is likely to remain the province of ladder rank faculty. Not so where course design is more likely to be centralized and syllabi and course materials standardized, such as:

- for-profit institutions;
- fully online (distance) programs; and
- the adult and continuing education programs run by many non-profits, including many professional M.A. programs.

Publishers have taken note, and have begun marketing and white labeling entire online courses. Such courses are typically developed with higher education partners and are sold as turnkey products to other institutions who add an institutionally branded template, an instructor, and a class full of students. Individual faculty members can modify such courses, within the limits of intellectual property agreements. Pearson’s CourseConnect product line, for example, includes more than 130 online courses. The Propero suite of self-paced online courses—developed with Ivy Tech College of Indiana—renders even the instructor unnecessary. Entrepreneurial units within traditional institutions, like Arizona State University, Indiana Wesleyan University, and Regis University, now co-develop courseware with publishers, use courseware developed elsewhere, or create and market courses for resale by other institutions.
In courses or programs like these, key decisions about syllabi and course materials are made by teams that include program administrators, instructional designers, testing and assessment specialists, and faculty subject matter experts. Similar changes in the locus of decision-making can be seen in other emerging publisher products and practices, including licensing of adaptive learning platforms and institutional licensing of textbooks and e-textbooks. Institutional licensing of learning content—while still counter cultural—is attracting mainstream interest. Such interest is likely to gain momentum as:

- Textbook affordability remains a hot issue;
- Commercial learning content becomes increasingly digital;
- Publishers exert more control over smaller learning objects and “chunks” of digital content;
- More attention is paid to the relationship of learning content to student outcomes;
- Lines begin to blur between textbooks and courseware; and
- Learning content becomes increasingly reliant on institutional investments in curation, instructional design, analytics, personalization, and assessment.

As affordability and success pressures build and new learning products and business models emerge, colleges and universities are likely to experiment with strategies that shift adoption away from autonomous faculty and toward academic leadership and high-volume adoptions/purchases. Student autonomy, too, is in the crosshairs with these strategies. Replacing store purchase with a non-negotiable materials fee, institutional licensing makes it impossible for students to avoid paying for materials. In many cases, these experiments and downstream changes in policy and practice that arise from them will meet with faculty skepticism or outright hostility.

Open educational resources (OER) are a potential disruptor of a very different kind, but they too bring new patterns of consumption. The OER movement’s goal of creating best-of-breed materials that can be used free of charge introduces radical price contrasts into the faculty member’s or the institution’s learning content adoption decisions. Should an instructor who prefers an expensive textbook but feels that an OER resource is “good enough” choose quality or price? This question is particularly salient in light of efforts by OER advocates and others to foster institutional and government policies that tip the decision scales in favor of the low-cost learning content.

OER advocates insist that they can and do match the quality of commercial products. The higher education system, district, and state-wide initiatives to assemble OER libraries signal that OERs enjoy some level of official sanction. Short of changing the policy environment, OER advocates know that messages of OER support influence student expectations, and faculty selectors may feel compelled to put a thumb on the affordability/OER side of the scale, even when academic policy frees them to assign whatever they like. OER content can be mixed with paid content—a process publishers can assist with, but that is not well known throughout faculty ranks.

Also disrupting consumption is the growing range of retail sources. One in five faculty members does not advise students where to acquire materials. While the vast majority of those who do offer advice refer them to the college store, online sources have become popular enough that the college store can no longer be considered the default choice. The 2014 NACS faculty survey indicates that half of those surveyed refer their students to Amazon as well as to the college store. Sizeable groups refer their students to other online retailers (17%) and directly to publishers (14%). And of course, websites and the library are important sources of faculty referral as well. There is anecdotal evidence that some faculty imbed links to course materials at Amazon (Figure 17).
Students, for their part, have also enjoyed an expanding range of acquisition options. Textbook rental has been growing rapidly, reaching 40% of students in fall 2014. Where students buy maps roughly to faculty referrals (Figure 18). Though in-store and online purchases through the college store dominate, 48% of responding students buy some materials through Amazon. Among renters, 28% of them rent through Amazon.

Figure 18 – Where Students Purchase Course Materials  |  Source: NACS' Student Watch™, 2014

As mentioned, students increasingly are avoiding acquisition altogether. Nearly three in 10 students report non-acquisition of at least one course material. The most common single reason offered for avoiding a purchase or rental is price (40% of avoiders). Students also avoid adopted learning content when they perceive that materials aren’t needed based on self-perception (34%), advice from the professor (33%), or advice from other students (23%). Many students make do by relying on notes or materials borrowed from a friend or the library. But one in eight acknowledges downloading content “for free” or from a peer-to-peer exchange—actions that likely involve piracy.111

---

111 This may be an undercount due to reluctance to confess. In a different study, one in five students acknowledged acquiring textbooks from a pirate website, and a similar number downloaded digital textbook content from other students. See Book Industry Study Group, Student Attitudes toward Content in Higher Education (Vol. 4, Report 2 of 2, July 2014). Available at: https://www.bisg.org/publications/student-attitudes-toward-content-higher-education.
Still more avoidance alternatives could arise. Online purchasing and the frequent resort to other students to buy, sell, or borrow materials could come together in the “sharing economy” represented by firms like Uber, Airbnb, and Zipcar. Its basic principle is to rent out privately owned assets during periods of disuse through real-time mobile apps that help users locate the asset and pay for its use. When imbedded in a dense community of users, sharing economy services can be so efficient that they become an alternative to ownership. It is not hard to imagine students taking their informal sharing among friends to greater scale in this way. In fact, colleges and universities looking for creative ways to lower the cost of a student’s education may use libraries, residence halls, and apps to aid and abet students who wish to make disused course materials available to other students.

Cost pressures, expanded purchase options, and a hacktivist conviction that “information wants to be free” go a long way toward explaining student restiveness with traditional buying behaviors as well as envisioning future behaviors. But an even larger disruption may be at work: higher education is experiencing the decline of deference toward teachers and institutions that has long been lamented by K-12 educators.

Many faculty and administrators insist that parents—and even third parties, including peers—are far more likely today than in previous generations to intervene on a student’s behalf to question decisions about grades, discipline, and student life issues. While it is hard to measure the “helicopter parent” phenomenon, many students acknowledge it as a reality.112 The practice puts a new spin on the old notion of in loco parentis, but it also suggests a wider loss of reflexive respect toward higher education. It is not a big leap for students to conclude that they needn’t buy a load of books just because they are listed on a syllabus.

**Competitive Dynamics**

**Key Trends**

- **Widespread institutional reliance on adjunct/part-time faculty**, especially for general education, and the related centralizing of course materials decision-making
- **Resentment about the rising cost of textbooks** among students, parents, legislators, and other higher education stakeholders
- **Declining student time spent reading and low utilization of required learning content**
- **Rising grades and activism by parents and proxies**, and possible declining deference to institutional authority
- **Emerging publisher products and business models** emphasizing institutional licensing over the prevailing faculty assigns-student buys paradigm
- **Low importance rating, by faculty survey respondents, of textbook supplements** which are widely believed to be major cost drivers of commercial textbooks
- **Rising availability and sophistication of digital content, including adaptive learning platforms**
- **Growing student use of contemporary retail shopping techniques** (including showroooming, online comparison shopping, purchasing in alternative modes and on non-U.S. commercial sites) and their use of free web sources, pirating content, or avoiding acquisition altogether

**Rivalry within the Sector**

Consumption of course materials is not exactly an industry with competing rivals, yet as our disruption analysis suggests, a contest is going on for control of it. The **longstanding tradition of faculty dominion over learning content assignment still dominates**, but “adjunctification,” increased accountability for student success and the college cost crisis may undermine that hallmark of academic freedom. For now, the academic leaders we interviewed are loathe to grab this “third rail.” Over time, administrators eager to cut costs, limit student avoidance, and introduce efficiencies may find the licensing of course materials (and even courses) more attractive than traditional faculty hegemony. Publishers will be eager to abet a process that locks in volume sales and predictable revenues that the end consumer cannot avoid.

The erosion of faculty control seems most likely to happen in general education courses and in programs that have a practitioner rather than an academic focus, especially in adult and online education. It is likely as well that such erosion will surface early in areas of instruction dominated by contract faculty; that is, where faculty governance is weakest. For the time being, however, faculty views on this subject suggest a nervous confidence. Overall, one-quarter of NACS fall 2014 faculty survey respondents believe that faculty input into course materials selection will diminish over the next five years. Contract faculty are considerably more likely (34%) to agree with this proposition than are ladder faculty (19%). More faculty (38%) expect institutional licensing of widely used course materials to be the norm in five years, but slightly more disagree (43%).

College stores facing dwindling student willingness to consume in traditional ways can console themselves that provosts and presidents face the same challenges.

Students are asserting themselves as empowered consumers and “netizens,” but also in more organized ways: student public interest groups are an important part of OER advocacy. Student behavior with course materials is part of a larger expansion in the range of educational choices represented by online education (which involves about a quarter of all students in a given semester), MOOCs, prior learning credits, and a wide range of non-academic online education and learning support services. College stores facing dwindling student willingness to consume in traditional ways can console themselves that provosts and presidents face the same challenges.

Bargaining Power of Suppliers

We have considered publishers as influencers on the consumption process, especially in the form of institutional licensing. But they are still primarily suppliers to consumers, and there are indications their power is waning. The popular characterization of the publishing industry as a cozy, greedy, and largely unchecked oligopoly faces the inconvenient fact that since 2007, publishers have had to absorb a remarkable decline in average student spending on course materials. This industry—along with booksellers—is on the spear tip of digital disruption and will sink or swim based on the acceptance of risky new products and practice. In a nutshell, the publishers’ steady, core business of print textbooks is in trouble.

Our faculty survey respondents assign print textbooks at rates far above any other format, yet close to one in three say textbooks are becoming easier to replace or cannot keep up with their fields, and only 14% expect the use of textbooks to grow. The Book Industry Study Group (BISG) reports declining faculty reliance on textbooks and precipitous drops in the rate of “core physical textbook” assignment in courses between 2011 and 2014. Faced with growing OER competition, low-cost publishing startups, and growing politicization of the cost issue, publishers cannot play hardball with higher education without re-inventing the consumption process. The only rational reason to enter the textbook and course materials marketplace would be to offer a radically different alternative.

Threat of New Entrants

Today, faculty, students, administrators, and publishers are the major parties influencing college learning content consumption. New players could influence the future. A cadre of “edupreneurs” is making educational content available that wholly bypasses long-established higher education practices. Many of these newcomers market directly to consumers. A student who finds a Khan Academy video, a Coursera lecture series, or an OER Commons textbook helpful in learning a topic may become confident that he or she can leave a required textbook on the shelf. Faculty looking to provide cheap alternatives to their students may draw the same conclusion.

113 See, for example, the national Student PIRGs textbook affordability site at: http://www.studentpirgs.org/campaigns/sp/make-textbooks-affordable.
Under these circumstances, the only rational reason to enter the textbook and course materials marketplace would be to offer a radically different alternative—and in classic disruptive fashion, a new breed of publishers is doing so. Self-publishing services like Amazon Kindle Direct and Leanpub allow authors to eliminate expensive editorial processes and distribute directly to readers, while still earning revenue off of much lower prices. Leanpub features suggested but optional prices, giving students the ability to set their own prices and reward authors—or not.

Coming from the opposite side of the consumption universe is another player: Uncle Sam and the state legislatures. In 2008, the Federal Government sent a shot across higher education’s bow with the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA). It requires institutions and publishers to publish learning content prices and “encourages” them to spread information to students about rental and other cost-savings options.

Though mild in its requirements and explicit in its promise not to “supersede the institutional authority or academic freedom of the instructors,” HEOA hints at the possibility of textbook assignment becoming a regulated activity. Several state textbook affordability bills have been passed, and a proposed federal Affordable College Textbook Act would provide federal funds to create and distribute OERs. Faculty and administrators thinking about course assignments could one day find a “big brother” at the table.

**Bargaining Power of Buyers**

On the whole, we believe that buyer bargaining power is on the rise. As we have seen, students and faculty alike have access to better cost information, more purchasing options, more free content, and more online educational resources, both formal and informal. Declining student spending suggests that Koch’s model of uncomprehending faculty and locked-in students has been breaking down since the time he suggested it.

Our surveyed faculty do not live up to the legend of price unawareness. Asked about what influences their selection of course materials, faculty cite quality (65%) and cost (60%) at similarly high rates that far exceed all other factors (Figure 19). Nine out of 10 agree that they are aware of the cost of the materials they teach, and two-thirds say that comparative information about course material cost would have a strong influence on their decisions. Cost awareness combined with a growing use of free web or OER materials may account for an observed rise in the proportion of courses that assign no formal materials, which rose from below 5% in 2010 to 11% in 2014.

---


115 This finding cannot be taken to the bank. Other recent and larger surveys such as that on OER continue to suggest that faculty are not deeply aware of the cost to students of the materials they require.

Nowhere is the power of buyers more evident than in the ongoing decline in per-student spending on course materials. Squeezed by high education costs overall and responsive to new rental and Internet options, student annual spending dropped from $701 in 2007-08 to about $563 in 2014-15. Indeed, rising textbook prices may reflect declining, not absolute, publisher power: dropping demand pushes publishers to raise prices to maintain revenue, only to further alienate consumers in a deadly spiral. While we know that average learning content expenditures per student are declining, we do not know precisely why. Are the more affluent students exercising their digital market power muscles and bargain shopping, or are financially struggling students desperately seeking solutions with their backs pressed against the wall? The evidence is strong that there is a bi-modality regarding the financial means of higher education’s students. How differences among students—like those reflected in Figure 20—play out in learning content consumer behavior is something that deserves further study.

Figure 20 – Two Faces of Student Work, Senior Year Students | Source: National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) at Four-Year NSSE Institutions, 2013

![Bar chart showing hours per week of work for different ranges of students.]

**Threat of Substitutes**

Beyond threat, digitization and an explosion of new educational content are ushering in a new era of substitutes for today’s course materials. The key question for content consumption will be how these changes affect control over assignment and use. For all of its problems, the faculty assigns-student buys paradigm connects the two parties with the most knowledge about educational needs and the most interest in a good outcome. Software platforms and institutional licenses that bureaucratize decision-making upwards raise the stakes of a bad decision, while student self-sourcing that democratizes it downward could further dilute a curriculum that some believe has already been slowly withering for decades.

Much about student buying behavior shows inventiveness and resistance in the face of a traditionally rigid market in which their role is to do as they are told. But we should not exaggerate their academic idealism or their mastery of all things digital. Some indications of the dangers of student self-sourcing may be found in studies of student information literacy and research practices. They confirm what many faculty bemoan: a tendency, faced with a vast universe of information sources, to follow paths of least resistance, and to struggle with assessing scholarly resources.117 Though it is on the rise—and is impossible to prevent—student self-sourcing can only go so far before institutions will be forced to adopt containment strategies. Institutional licensing and interactive/adaptive courseware may get a boost from this counter-response.

---

Key Players

Amazon and Chegg have both become alternative forces in textbook consumption, with smaller players like Bookreenter.com and Valorebooks winning single-digit shares according to NACS data. Amazon’s aggressive moves to create a campus presence could improve its visibility and ability to service faculty and students alike.

As in other parts of the learning content ecosystem, the major publishers including Pearson, Cengage, McGraw-Hill, Elsevier, and Wiley are trying to hold on to the profit centers of the past while redesigning themselves for a digital future. Rich content consumption platforms like Cengage’s MindTap and McGraw-Hill Campus are high-stakes bids to re-establish a favorable market position in an age of content commodification. Less revolutionary but still potentially potent, institutional licensing seeks to turn content adoption into a conversation between power players rather than a campaign to herd 22 million faculty and student “cats.” These bold moves deserve watching.

College and university executives and faculty may well enter into a conflict over learning content adoption autonomy as bruising and long-lived as the one over online education. Institutionally licensed materials do not have much of a track record yet, but they promise to address problems that trustees, politicians, policy makers, and the public at large want to solve: high learning content costs, academic inefficiency, and lackluster student success. A substantial, high profile publisher deal with a noteworthy discount off the retail price, an analytics component, and an effective digital delivery option could be a compelling reason for a dean, provost, or president to take on faculty prerogatives, especially in high-enrollment introductory courses. And while tenure-line faculty are unlikely to surrender control without review and debate, the need for them to share their role in teaching, the realities of diminishing public support, and increasing impatience with college costs will make it ever harder to defend and sustain the notions described in AAUP policy statements regarding finite limitations to a professor’s right to select her/his own instructional materials. (See AAUP, Policies and Reports, 9th ed., pages 133-134.)

This said, the most important players to watch are the students. Master consumers and adept innovators, today’s students are exploring many different paths to liberate themselves from a learning content model that they believe contributes to their staggering debt load without assuring them of a diploma or competencies that count in the workforce. Expect students to be receptive to OERs, to be surprisingly reluctant to shift to digital materials without substantial cost benefits, and to explore a flourishing universe of educational materials online. And certainly watch for a 23-year-old recent graduate to put a ShareYourTextbooks app on student mobile devices everywhere.

Technologies and Innovations to Watch

Technologies and innovations to watch in this segment of the ecosystem include:

• Rental alternatives to textbook purchase
• Licensing of courses and content at the department, school, or institutional level
• Adaptive learning systems allied with student performance data capture and related analytics
• Government regulation or subsidy of course materials
• Extension of the “sharing economy” to course materials
• Backward integration into publishing by MOOCs and other scale-based educators
• Forward integration into teaching by publishers
• Student e-marketplaces and social commerce sites
• OER initiatives
• Student cost avoidance strategies, including rental, borrowing, non-use, and piracy
Critical Questions: Learning Content Consumers—Faculty and Students

1. What is the faculty make-up on your campus: tenure-track versus adjunct/part-time?

2. Where are the course material adoption decisions being made on your campus? Are there any trends that can be identified to suggest a shift in faculty authority in these decisions?

3. To what extent are digital, adaptive courseware products and platforms being used on your campus? Is there a trend of increased use?

4. To what extent are OERs being used on your campus? Is there evidence of a trend?

5. Are there discussions occurring on campus about content licensing/course fee models, course licensing, and/or use of MOOCs? Is the college store involved in (or leading) these discussions?

6. What is the level of course materials price sensitivity on your campus? Who are the vocal/active stakeholders? How are their concerns manifesting, and how is the campus store addressing their concerns?

7. What market share of adoptions does the store have? What percent of students are purchasing and using the required course materials and supplements (indicated by your sell-through, feedback from students, comments during Buyback, and other measures)?

8. What strategies and initiatives does the store have underway or planned to maximize course materials access and affordability for students?

9. In what ways is the campus store partnering with/serving faculty and students to maximize the ROI of learning content and course materials?

Further Readings

Allen, I. Elaine, and Jeff Seamen, Grade Level: Tracking Online Education in the United States, Available at: http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/gradelevel.pdf.


