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June 13, 2019

The Honorable Roy Blunt  
Chairman  
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee  
on Labor, Health and Human Services,  
Education, and Related Agencies  
260 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Ranking Member  
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee  
on Labor, Health and Human Services,  
Education, and Related Agencies  
154 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Blunt and Ranking Member Murray:

On behalf of SPARC, a coalition including more than 200 academic and research libraries spanning nearly every state, thank you for providing \$5 million in both Fiscal Years (FY) 2018 and 2019 for the Open Textbooks Pilot at the Department of Education (ED) to expand the sustainable use of quality open textbooks in order to reduce the cost of college for students. Today, we write to ask that you build on this multi-year federal investment by providing \$10 million to support new Pilot grants in FY 2020 and include language in the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies (Labor-H) appropriations bill to ensure the program is implemented according to Congressional intent.

The cost of college textbooks is a significant but often overlooked barrier to affordable higher education across the country. College textbook prices rose 88% between 2006 and 2016, becoming a significant financial burden for students.<sup>1</sup> Recent studies say that the majority of students have skipped buying some of their required textbooks due to cost, potentially harming their grades.<sup>2</sup> While second hand materials and digital subscriptions have helped reduce sticker prices for some students, it does not go far enough to solve the problem for all students.

Open textbooks are an important strategy for effectively leveraging digital technology to expand equitable access to course materials and improve student success. Open textbooks are high-quality educational resources that are freely available to download, edit, and share to better serve all students. The content is developed by universities and professors and shared through publishing platforms, libraries or online repositories. In addition to being free of cost in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/college-tuition-and-fees-increase-63-percent-since-january-2006.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.openaccesstextbooks.org/pdf/2016\\_Florida\\_Student\\_Textbook\\_Survey.pdf](http://www.openaccesstextbooks.org/pdf/2016_Florida_Student_Textbook_Survey.pdf)

digital form, these resources carry an open license allowing professors to tailor textbooks to better suit their courses and local contexts. They can also be printed and bound for a significantly reduced cost, or converted to audiobooks and other accessible formats to aid students with disabilities.

Using open textbooks in place of traditional textbooks has been found to substantially reduce costs, with an average of more than \$100 saved per student per course.<sup>3</sup> Multiple peer-reviewed academic studies have also found that using open textbooks can lead to improved student outcomes. For example, a new study of students at the University of Georgia found that students who switched to open textbooks not only achieved higher grades overall, but that there were proportionately greater increases for students traditionally underserved by higher education, including Pell-eligible students, students of color, and part-time students.<sup>4</sup>

The Open Textbook Pilot supports projects to expand the creation and use of open textbooks at colleges and universities, which will bring immediate financial relief to students and advance educational practices that truly serve all learners. The three projects funded with the FY18 and FY19 are expected to save students at least \$30 million over five years, and the track record of similar grants at the state level suggests that savings often far exceed projections, since the material is freely available for anyone to use. Therefore, we strongly support increasing the funding level to \$10 million in FY 2020.

In addition to providing an appropriation for the Open Textbook Pilot, we also urge you to include strong language in the FY 2020 Labor-H appropriations bill to ensure that the program is implemented according to Congressional intent. ED did not follow the recommendations in House Report 115-952 to issue a new competition and make at least 20 awards with the FY 2019 Open Textbook Pilot appropriation, instead funding two proposals from the first competition. While these two projects are poised to have a significant positive impact for students, it is important to ensure that FY 2020 funds go as far as possible for students by ensuring a fresh slate of proposals and a wider range of funded projects. Therefore, we recommend putting the force of law behind the requirements to hold a new competition and to make a greater number of awards.

**Recommended FY 2020 Bill Language:**

*Of the amounts appropriated to the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, \$10,000,000 shall be reserved for additional competitive grants pursuant to the Open Textbooks Pilot funded by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-141). With the funds provided, the Secretary shall award, through a new competitive process, not less than 20 new grants consisting of individual grants between \$100,000 and \$1,000,000.*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://studentpirgs.org/sites/student/files/reports/The%20Billion%20Dollar%20Solution.pdf>

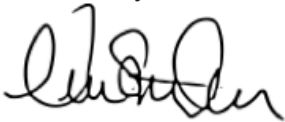
<sup>4</sup> <http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/pdf/IJTLHE3386.pdf>

**Recommended FY 2020 Report Language:**

*New grants funded by the Open Textbooks Pilot shall be awarded to an institution of higher education, as defined by 20 U.S.C. 1001, group of institutions of higher education, or a State on a competitive basis and for the purpose of creating new open textbooks for use by students in courses, especially those with high enrollments, that are part of a degree granting program and expanding the use of open textbooks in such courses. The Committee recommends that the application deadline for the notice inviting grant applications for fiscal year 2020 be not less than 60 days from the date the notice is published. Allowable uses of grant funds by institutions shall include professional development for any faculty and staff members at institutions of higher education, including the search for and review of open textbooks; the creation or adaptation of open textbooks; development or improvement of tools and informational resources that support the use of open textbooks, including accessible instructional materials for students with disabilities; and research evaluating the efficacy of the use of open textbooks for achieving savings for students and the impact on instruction and student learning outcomes. The Secretary shall require that any open textbooks created with Pilot funds shall be released to the public under a non-exclusive, royalty-free, perpetual, and irrevocable license to exercise any of the rights under copyright conditioned only on the requirement that attribution be given as directed by the copyright owner. Further, any tools, technologies, or other resources that are created, developed, or improved wholly or in part with Pilot funds for use with any open textbook must be similarly licensed.*

Thank you for considering our request to provide \$10 million for the Open Textbook Pilot in FY 2020 and to include strong bill and report language that ensures the program's success. We are thankful that you answered the call of students across the country to support this program in FY 2018 and FY 2019, and those same students are counting on you to renew and strengthen this investment in FY 2020 to make textbooks more affordable across the country.

Sincerely,



Nicole Allen  
Director of Open Education