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June 25, 2020

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 appropriating a total of \$17 million (\$5 million in both Fiscal Years (FY) 2018 and 2019, and \$7 million in FY 2020) for the Open Textbooks Pilot at the Department of Education (ED). This program provides grants to higher education institutions with the goal of saving students money through the expanded use of open textbooks, which are available free in a digital format and can be printed at a low cost. Today, we write to ask that you build on this multi-year federal investment by providing \$70 million to support new Open Textbook Pilot grants in FY 2021, recognizing both the program's demonstrated impact and the urgent need for flexible, digital educational resources intensified by the COVID-19 crisis.

The cost of college textbooks is a significant but often overlooked barrier to affordable higher education across the country. Over the last two decades, the cost of textbooks has far outpaced inflation, home prices, medical care, wages, and—at times—even the cost of tuition and fees, rising 184% since 1998 at nearly three times the rate of inflation.¹ Recent studies say that the majority of students have skipped buying some of their required textbooks due to cost, potentially harming their grades.² While commercial publishers have claimed that short-term digital subscriptions and rental options have helped reduce sticker prices, recent data shows that the problem has still not improved for all students.³

¹ <http://www.aei.org/publication/chart-of-the-day-or-century/>

² <https://dlss.flvc.org/colleges-and-universities/research/textbooks>

³ <https://studentpirgs.org/2020/06/08/fixing-the-broken-textbook-market/>

COVID-19 has only exacerbated challenges that students face while trying to afford and access their textbooks. As campuses began to close their doors in March, students were suddenly cut off from classmates, libraries, and high speed internet connections that many relied upon to access learning materials. SPARC heard numerous reports of our member libraries scrambling to find a solution for course reserves when students could not enter the library, and students who shared or borrowed textbooks had no way to do their readings. Even though many textbook publishers ultimately offered temporary online access to texts, this did little for students without high speed internet or digital devices, and will not solve the problem in the long term. It is not enough for the textbook model to "return to normal" once COVID-19 is no longer a threat. Higher education can and must do better, and the Open Textbook Pilot presents the perfect opportunity to enact change.

The Open Textbook Pilot seeks to ensure all students have access to learning materials by providing grants for the creation and use of open textbooks at higher education institutions. 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 digital form, these resources carry an open copyright license allowing unrestricted, barrier free sharing and adaptation—making them significantly more flexible and easy to use in times of disruption. Moreover, open content offers substantially greater flexibility to create print copies at a low cost, make adaptations for students with disabilities, and allow students to retain the material for future studies.

Using open textbooks in place of traditional textbooks has been found to substantially reduce costs and expand access, with an average of more than \$100 saved per student per course.⁴ 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 also found that there were proportionately greater increases for students traditionally underserved by higher education, including Pell-eligible students, students of color, and part-time students.⁵ As COVID-19 amplifies the structural inequities that exist in higher education, open textbooks offer critical savings, flexibility and a level playing field that can help more students succeed.

As higher education adjusts to the COVID-19 reality, we urge Congress to renew and substantially increase funding for the Open Textbook Pilot to \$70 million in FY 2021. The Open Textbook Pilot has a proven track record for supporting projects that build flexible digital course materials that save students millions. That relief will mean more to students now than ever, and the expanded use of open textbooks will also help make teaching and learning more resilient to unforeseen disruptions in the future. The three Open Textbook Pilot projects funded with the FY

⁴ <https://studentpirgs.org/sites/student/files/reports/The%20Billion%20Dollar%20Solution.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/pdf/IJTLHE3386.pdf>

2018 and FY 2019 are expected to save students at least \$30 million over five years—a return on investment of more than three-to-one—and the track record of similar grants at the state level suggests that savings often far exceed initial projections. For example, investments in Georgia⁶ and North Dakota⁷ have achieved savings more than ten-to-one.

Thank you for considering our request to increase funding for the Open Textbook Pilot to \$70 million in FY 2021. We are thankful that you answered the call of students across the country to support this program in the past three fiscal years. These same students are counting on you to renew and strengthen this investment to help ease the burden of textbook affordability and increase access to higher education in the time of COVID-19.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicole Starr Allen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "N" and "S".

Nicole Starr Allen
Director of Open Education

⁶ <https://www.affordablelearninggeorgia.org/about/reports>

⁷ <https://www.nd.gov/auditor/2018-north-dakota-university-system-open-educational-resources>