

# California to provide some textbooks digitally to college students

By Megan Garber, Atlantic

Last week, California took a big step forward in open-source education. Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law a proposal to create a website that will allow students to download popular textbooks for free.

The legislation contains two bills: One, a proposal for the state to fund 50 open-source digital textbooks, targeted to lower-division courses, which will be produced by California's universities. Students will be able to download these books for free or to pay \$20 for hard copies. The other bill is a proposal to establish a California Digital Open Source Library to host those books.

On the textbook side, California will ask the California Open Education Resources Council, comprised of school faculty, to develop the list of targeted courses and create and oversee the approval process. The council will create a list of 50 lower-division courses in the public postsecondary segments "for which high-quality, affordable, digital open source textbooks and related materials would be developed or acquired" by the University of California, California State University and California Community College systems. The council will then solicit bids to produce these textbooks in 2013. (The first free books are set to be available for the 2013-14 school year.)

And the bill makes clear that the council has the option to use "existing high-quality digital open source textbooks and related materials" if those materials fit the requirements."

The main idea here, politically and socially, is to lighten the burden – a little bit – for students who have been hit with tuition increases at California's public schools in recent years.

"Many students are paying more than \$1,000 every year on their textbooks, sometimes having to choose between buying the books they need or paying for food and other living expenses," said Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, the author of the bills, in a statement.

The new law will also be something of a technological experiment – and an intriguing one, at that. For one thing, it makes a point of extending its impact beyond California's borders. Any digital textbooks created under the council's auspices, the new legislation says, must be placed under a Creative Commons license – which will allow faculty at universities in other states to make use of the textbooks for their own students. And the textbooks, furthermore, must be encoded in XML (or another "appropriate successor format") to facilitate their re-use.

So can government successfully step in to encourage the development textbooks that are both open-source and high-quality? Can Sacramento be its own kind of digital disruptor?

As Ars Technica's Timothy Lee noted, "It seems unlikely that having the government issue an RFP would be a good way to develop, say, an open-source operating system."

Which is very true. Then again, much of our assumptions about education – that it should take place in classrooms, that it should rely on expensive textbooks – is a matter of institutional inertia as much as anything else. Sometimes, change needs to come from the top down rather than vice versa. And California, for all its financial problems, is full of universities whose faculty and staff have expertise in both curriculum-writing and digital technology. So there's a good

chance that this 50-book initiative is the start of a broader overhaul that will find bulky, expensive textbooks replaced by versions that are both digital and free.