

Dear TRUFA,

We are writing as a group of concerned faculty members regarding the recent announcement of the adoption of VitalSource as an automatic textbook billing program at TRU. As faculty, we do not feel that we were appropriately consulted on this decision, and we are wondering about how the consultation process involved TRUFA, if at all. Our concerns with this tool, as well as the marketing of it and the process by which it will be implemented, are itemized below.

- The information provided to this point does not offer specifics. How do we know students will save money under this program? We know that institutional assumptions about textbook costs are often not reflective of student experience. For example, when VitalSource's Equitable Access program was introduced at UC Davis, students were charged \$200 per semester, a $\frac{1}{3}$ increase over US national average textbook fees¹; indeed, 8 out of 10 textbook publishers saw increased profits under the UC Davis scheme². At a campus like TRU, with good OER adoption, we need assurance that students will pay less overall and that private, for-profit companies are not the beneficiaries. Further, what assurances can administration offer that OER development will still be supported? How will the adoption of VitalSource impact TRU's commitment to Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) pathways in general studies and the Associate of Science credential?
- The UC Davis faculty note that "assurances of academic freedom are weak." The same is true of what we know so far about TRU's deal with VitalSource. At other institutions, we hear reports of faculty being pressured to select texts already available in the VitalSource offerings. What assurances do we have that this will not occur at TRU?
- More information is needed about the opt-out provision. How will this be communicated to students? Students at UC Davis report that email alerts about the opt-out period went immediately to their junk email boxes. Further, if faculty opt-out by choosing other materials, is there any assurance that this won't result in additional costs to students? The experience at UC Davis suggests not, but we look for assurance that the TRU agreement is different. It would need to be to protect academic freedom.
- Given the changes faculty have already survived in the last eleven months, more detail is needed about the impact on instructional faculty.
- The provided FAQ suggests that integration with Moodle will look like existing textbook integrations, but this document seems to have little to do with TRU's contexts: TRU does not currently have any of those integrations in order to protect student privacy. What will integration look like, and how will student privacy be protected? Likewise, how will faculty intellectual property be protected from such an integration?
- The VitalSource Bookshelf app has very mixed reviews online, including complaints of texts being inaccessible. How has the app been piloted and tested at TRU, and what has faculty and student response been, and what is the support plan for this tool?

¹ https://pdfhost.io/v/XTecUhZPv_Academic_Senate_Response_Equitable_Access4620pdf.pdf

² <https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/the-edge/2019-06-18>

- The U.S. PIRG Education Fund has strongly condemned³ the use of automatic textbook billing in universities, and raises some specific issues that we need information about at TRU too. For example, is our agreement subject to a minimum use quota, and will prices increase if students opt-out in large numbers? And what will the cost to students look like in the future, given that U.S. PIRG uncovered only one university that has successfully negotiated a cap on price increases?
- As faculty, we are increasingly aware of agreements being signed by universities that contain non-disparagement language in an attempt to silence critique from within the community. We would like the union to be aware of this issue, and we look for confirmation from TRU that no such language appears in our contract with VitalSource.
- We are aware that some students, particularly those in remote communities, have limited or unreliable internet access, and many students are sharing devices with family members or roommates. How will those students access their texts? This decision to adopt VitalSource as the sole option for students will further marginalize these already disadvantaged learners. Furthermore, a recent study of OER usage by TRU students undertaken by Steve Earle shows that students preferred to download and print online resources rather than use them solely online. If the VitalSource agreement only allows for 20% of a text to be printed, how will we be accommodating these learners?

In addition to these substantive concerns, we are troubled with the non-consultative tone of the announcement dated 2 February 2021, as well as the language linking the VitalSource service to “openness” and “equity.” “Equitable Access” is an established term⁴ for the movement to erase the digital divide among students. The research available on automatic textbook billing does not support the claims of equity made in the announcement, and programs like this are threats to the OER movement. It is troubling to see the provided FAQ that is clearly written by VitalSource and doesn’t reflect the details of implementation at TRU.

The language of surveillance in the letter is also of concern; are faculty being asked to monitor student course material use? And was this functionality shared with TRUSU when they were consulted about VitalSource?

Thank you for your consideration of these concerns. If TRUFA has answers to any of the questions above, we would be grateful to hear them. If not, we respectfully ask that TRUFA ask these questions of administration. We also seek greater campus consultation on this topic. We look forward to TRUFA’s response.

Sincerely,

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³ https://uspirg.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/Automatic-Textbook-Billing/USPIRG_Textbook-Automatic-Billing_Feb2020.pdf

⁴ <https://www.iste.org/standards/essential-conditions/equitable-access>

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