

University Senate Libraries and Digital Resources Committee

Annual Report 2024-25

August 4, 2025

The Committee shall review and recommend University policies relating to the University's libraries, information resources, and academic computing programs. The Committee shall attend to all aspects of the University's storage, accessing and retrieval of information whether in analog or in digital form, and to all aspects of information services that support the academic work of the University, in consultation with other Senate committees (e.g., the Education Committee and the Committee on Information and Communications Technology). University Senate by-Laws, Sec. 4.k.xi

The 2024-2025 academic year was first and foremost a period of rebuilding for the University Senate's Libraries and Digital Resources Committee. As of September 2024, the committee had not met for more than eighteen months, necessitating considerable work to reconstitute the committee, its membership, and an active agenda. Over the summer, Sen. Katherine Brooks and Sen. Jeffrey Wayno, both of whom represent the Columbia University Libraries (CUL), worked with the University Senate office to staff the committee and plan an active meeting schedule. At the first meeting of the 2024-2025 term, they were elected by their committee colleagues as co-chairs of the committee for the coming year. Filling the seventeen committee seats (6 tenured faculty; 2 tenure-track or off-track faculty; 3 students; 2 librarians; 2 administrators; 1 research officer; 1 alumnus) proved difficult, but the committee co-chairs are particularly grateful to our fellow senators who volunteered to serve on this committee, and indeed to several non-senator members for agreeing to provide the committee with their time, wisdom, and expertise around the University.

At the start of the academic year, Sens. Brooks and Wayno, co-chairs of the committee, decided to focus the committee's attention on the issue of textbook affordability and availability. The rationale for this decision was simple: if Columbia's libraries are to provide ample and systematic support for student learning across the University, its staff must understand 1) how students are accessing required and recommended course materials, and 2) what barriers prevent them from doing so. The committee's members quickly realized the complexity of this issue, which in turn meant that most of the committee's work this year consisted of gathering and processing information from students, faculty, librarians, and administrators from around the University.

The committee began its investigation into textbook affordability and availability by inviting Will Vanti, Science and Engineering Librarian, to present on his work leading the Provost's Advisory Committee on the Libraries (PACL) Textbook Cost Data Working Group. In 2023, this working group analyzed course textbook data pulled from Courseworks. To focus its efforts, the group looked at data from 1) the top 20 enrolled courses and 2) the top 20 courses in terms of projected textbook costs. In these course subsets, the Libraries provided access to all except one required text through the library catalog, CLIO. In the top enrolled courses, about 50 percent of the required titles were available electronically. Will Vanti usefully noted some of the ongoing challenges of using and interpreting the textbook dataset. One of the largest challenges is that the Courseworks textbook data is incomplete. Instructors must manually enter their required text lists in Courseworks and, unfortunately, not all instructors comply.

The committee also heard from Jeremiah Mercurio, Head of the Humanities and History unit within CUL. Mercurio provided a useful update on the FLI (First-generation or Low-income) Library, a physical collection housed in Butler Library, which provides access to course texts across all disciplines taught at Columbia. The committee learned that the FLI library is well-used and well-funded. Mercurio's presentation combined with Vanti's provided the committee with an excellent sense of where things stand with the issue of textbook availability.

To interrogate how the University thinks about student textbook costs, Sens. Brooks and Wayno met with the heads of the two main financial aid offices for undergraduate education at the University: Michael Hall, Executive Director of Financial or Columbia College (CC) and the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science (SEAS); and Michael Gratale, Senior Associate Dean of Enrollment Management and Chief Technology Officer for the School of General Studies (GS). Michael Hall then made a brief presentation to the committee and answered questions about how Columbia handles textbook costs as part of its financial aid packages for undergraduate students. The committee learned that textbook costs are included in CC, SEAS and GS financial aid packages and are calculated using a national textbook cost dataset.

The committee then sought information about how instructional staff communicate textbook requirements to their students. Sens. Brooks and Wayno corresponded with Weiping Wu (Vice Provost for Academic Programs) to learn more about how Columbia manages compliance with the [Higher Education Opportunity Act \(HEOA\)](#), which requires instructors to post their text lists online before course registration. Significant discussion ensued about how to improve compliance with this important requirement. These conversations involved Barry Kane (Associate Vice President and Registrar of the University) and Maneesha Aggarwal (Associate Vice President for Academic, Emerging Technologies & Research Services, CUIT) as well as several administrators and staff members who manage Courseworks, the online instructional tool that Columbia has used for many years, and which serves as a platform for communicating information to students about their classes.

Finally, the committee invited students from the Student Advisory Committee on the Libraries to provide specific feedback about how students acquire and use course materials. This conversation in turn surfaced ongoing needs for more engagement between the University Libraries and the undergraduate community in particular. Although CUL's staff regularly partners with the first-year Undergraduate Writing Program to provide a general introduction to the library and its resources, students still felt they had difficulty finding necessary course materials.

As the committee's work wound down for the end of the academic year, Sens. Brooks and Wayno agreed to focus their immediate efforts on improving communication with instructors about the HEOA textbook requirement. They will work with the Office of the University Registrar and the Courseworks development team to implement a series of small changes which may help to address some of the challenges highlighted by the committee's work this year. The committee will continue to examine this important topic next year in the hope of making further advances based on the substantial amount of data collected this year.

Respectfully submitted,

Sens. Katherine Brooks and Jeffrey Wayno

Co-Chairs, Libraries and Digital Resources Committee

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