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# Grant will help UI fund open-source textbook initiative

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URBANA – The University of Illinois will widen its foray into online, customizable textbooks with help from a federal grant.

The Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs has been awarded a $150,000 grant to establish an initiative that provides open-source textbook access for Illinois students.

The grant is for all three campuses to share, so the head of the project, Charles Evans, the director of university outreach and public service, says the money is only a beginning.

He credited Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Illinois, with pushing for the Department of Education grant. Last year, Durbin sought a $300,000 appropriation for the UI and Benedictine University in Lisle to create two open textbook programs.

Durbin also spoke at Parkland College in April of this year, calling for colleges to put textbook prices up front with other information about courses, so students can know beforehand how expensive their classes would be, and saying books were too expensive for many students.

The senator's proposal was for the open-source textbooks to be free; Evans said that the thinking now is the costs would be minimized, not free, with savings in delivery by having them on websites or sent to electronic-book readers like the Kindle.

Besides savings costs, the open-source textbook could be more precisely matched to individual programs at different colleges, Evans said.

There are still challenges for open-source books with issues like copyrights, which were examined by the Urbana Faculty/Student Senate in December.

But Evans said advantages seem to outweigh technical problems.

He hopes to have such a textbook available at the end of the one-year grant.

"The idea is faculty-intensive," Evans said.

It's too early to say what the textbook will be about, but Evans gave an example of how different units could work together, from academic departments to the University of Illinois Press.

For instance, at all three campuses there is research in sustainability, he noted.

In Urbana, there are groups in engineering, in Liberal Arts and Sciences, and in Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences. The Springfield campus has faculty expertise in environmental sustainability, and Chicago has sources in both engineering and liberal arts.

When the UI team would create such a textbook, other institutions could adapt it to their specific needs, Evans said.

When the textbook is online, he continued, a faculty member at Parkland College, where there's a focus on biofuels like ethanol and biomass, can add those examples, whether in a new chapter or in homework assignments.

At Malcolm X Community College in Chicago, he said, there's an emphasis on urban recycling that could be adapted seamlessly into that college's version.

"And students at each of those institutions will have a more affordable textbook," he said.

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