**Affordable Learning Georgia Textbook Transformation Grants**

**Final Report**

**Date:** May 20, 2015

**Grant Number:** 02

**Institution Name(s):** Middle Georgia State College

**Team Members (Name, Title, Department, Institutions if different, and email address for each):** Dr. Christopher N. Lawrence

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**Project Lead:** Dr. Julie A. Lester

**Course Name(s) and Course Numbers:** POLS 1101 - American Government

**Semester Project Began:** Fall 2014

**Semester of Implementation:** Spring 2015

**Average Number of Students Per Course Section:** 35

**Number of Course Sections Affected by Implementation:** 6

**Total Number of Students Affected by Implementation:** 210

**1. List of Resources Used in the Textbook Transformation**

*American Government* by Timothy O. Lenz and Mirya Holman

<http://florida.theorangegrove.org/og/items/2e74506d-6095-0531-a2fb-b04504b885bd/1/>

The textbook is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 license (CC-NC-ND).

Dr. Lester developed a glossary for the chapters we used in our classes (chapters 1-12 and 18 of *American Government*); it is available at <http://amgov.cnlawrence.com/#resources>.

Dr. Lawrence's sections also used open content slides he previously developed as part of a flipped classroom project, posted at: <http://amgov.cnlawrence.com/>

The glossary and the slides are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license (CC-BY).

**2. Narrative**

A. Describe the key outcomes, whether positive, negative, or interesting, of your project.

To recap, our project was designed to test whether adopting an open content textbook (*American Government* from the University Press of Florida) would lead to improved student learning, progression, and satisfaction in the introductory American government course (POLS 1101) at Middle Georgia State College. We examined 7 sections in Fall 2014 and 6 sections in Spring 2015; the fall sections used traditional, commercial texts while the spring sections used the open content textbook.

Unfortunately, we cannot report much, if any, of a direct transformative impact of this particular project. While the monetary costs to students of using the *American Government* text were somewhat lower than the use of a traditional textbook—at least among those students who did not opt to buy a printed textbook—there were few, if any, pedagogical benefits to be seen. The student experience was less positive with the open content book when compared to traditional textbooks, based on the qualitative and quantitative measures from our student survey, and the impacts on student performance were minimal at best and possibly even negative, whether we look at the at-risk students or the “mushy middle.”

Given the lack of an index or glossary in the *American Government* text, ironically the printed copy was probably of less use to students than the electronic copy, which at least could be searched in Adobe Reader. This drawback suggests that simply taking an online book and printing it will not add value for students.

Although the content of *American Government* appears to be reasonably well-written, informal feedback from students suggests that they find the organization of the textbook to be deeply confusing and its graphical design to be haphazard. These issues identified by students indicate that while the writing and scholarship supporting the textbook is sound the publisher should have invested more time and energy in the editing and design process to create a textbook that would be appealing to students and more effective in promoting student learning.

These problems also meant that we spent an inordinate amount of time re-explaining basic concepts that were not clearly laid out in the text or presented in a confusing way; for example, we both encountered the issue that the authors failed to make a clear distinction between a “conference committee” and a “joint committee” in Congress, which introduced problems on two fronts: first, that students were getting two different sources of information that contradicted each other on basic, factual matters, and second, that students would not necessarily know which source was correct: the professor or the textbook.

A more general concern was the lack of ancillary materials beyond the textbook. As experienced professors, we both had years of lectures, test and quiz items, instructor manuals, and other resources that we could draw upon in teaching using *American Government*. However, a new or less experienced instructor might well not have the supporting materials they need to teach a complete course. While at times it is fashionable to denigrate faculty for excessive reliance on materials provided by publishers, part-time faculty with limited preparation time or full-timers who have substantial other responsibilities (not to mention other courses) are likely to need supporting materials to use as a foundation for building their own approach to the course and to ensure alignment with the textbook that students are reading. Students have also come to expect ancillary study materials, such as sample quizzes and tests, flashcards for studying glossary terms, chapter outlines, visual aids, and simulations to help them to understand class materials. In the case of proprietary texts, the development of these resources is subsidized by the sales to students of the textbook (and, in some cases, access codes for on-line companion websites), but at least in the case of *American Government* these resources were never developed and the use of resources tied to other textbooks may be problematic, both from legal and pedagogical perspectives.

Another serious concern is the *sustainability* of open content resources, which can be compounded by licensing. *American Government*, for example, is licensed under a Creative Commons license—but the specific license used (CC-NC-ND) precludes both commercial redistribution (which is exclusive to the University Press of Florida) and the distribution of derivative works. The limitation on derivative works means that users must rely on, or hope that, the authors and publisher are willing to update the text in the event that mistakes are discovered or material becomes eclipsed by new events. While in some fields, like introductory mathematics, the odds of a new discovery that students need to know are quite slim, particularly in political science both the political figures in specific positions, such as the presidency, and the partisan control of legislative bodies change on a regular basis, while new laws and court decisions can, at times, radically change the state of political affairs in a particular area.

For example, the 2008 *D.C. v. Heller* decision recast the understanding of the Second Amendment to interpret it as a guarantee of an individual right, much as the other provisions of the Bill of Rights historically had been interpreted, rather than merely as a collective right of the citizenry or a right of the states to maintain organized militias. Similarly, the recent (and, likely upcoming) Supreme Court decisions on the rights of gays and lesbians within the past decade have altered the position of this minority group in American society. Textbooks need to change with the times, and the advantages of open content in this area can be squandered if the material is licensed in a way that the content ossifies. Although restrictive licensing does not preclude developing supplements—including a glossary, which one of the coauthors compiled for this project—students may not take advantage of supplemental material, and it is unclear whether the use of supplemental material would be an effective approach for correcting or updating material in printed textbooks.

B. Describe lessons learned, including any things you would do differently next time.

When designing and beginning the initial implementation of the project, due to the compressed timeframe between receiving information about the grant opportunity and the application deadline, we spent less time than we ordinarily would have considering the alternative options available; normally, adopting a new primary text would be something we would spend weeks, if not months, considering before making a final decision. If we had it to do over again, we might have either supplemented or replaced the text with free and low-cost materials assembled as a virtual “course pack,” but we did not fully realize the shortcomings of the textbook we adopted until we had begun using it in the classroom. Also, had we had known this book was being used in POLS 1101 by eCore, we would have consulted with experienced eCore instructors about their experience using it, which might have given us more time to effectively prepare to successfully use it in the classroom.

**3. Quotes from Students**

"I liked that we had the option of a free textbook! It was very helpful since textbooks are typically very expensive."

"I like the fact it was free, but it was not perfect like a paid book, missing glossary, etc..."

"I found it helpful that the text was able to be printed/viewed online. It saved me money and was easy to read."

"The only thing I liked about this book was that it was free. I would have been very upset if I had to purchase such a poorly written book."

"This did not feel like a textbook. It felt like a very large, very involved blog post. It was poorly written, poorly edited, and overall a very unwieldy source of information. I would not pay money for this book, and am very happy I did not."

"I think that since Dr. Lester gave us the option of getting the book free online that more people probably actually read the textbook."

**4. Quantitative and Qualitative Measures**

The data collected for this project came in two forms: first, responses to a structured survey instrument administered to classes in Fall 2014 using a traditional, commercial textbook and administered again to classes in Spring 2015 using the *American Government* open content textbook, and second, aggregate data based on student performance in Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 sections.

Examining the student survey data indicates—somewhat surprisingly—that students were no more likely to obtain the open content textbook (which was available free) in Spring 2015 than they were to obtain commercial texts. While the retail prices of the commercial texts in use in Fall 2014 were relatively expensive (around $80-90), there were substantial quantities of used books available. Our bookstore's aggressive promotion of rental options in recent years (along with online rental services and a commercial textbook store located near the Macon campus that offers used and rented books) may have also led to students obtaining the commercial texts at lower costs than those in other courses. While the price of textbooks may be a major obstacle in some courses or disciplines, that does not appear to have been the case in this study.

The student survey data also reinforces our observations regarding the suitability of this particular textbook. Students in Spring 2015 were much less likely to agree that the textbook represented “high quality” or that it was “well-organized” or helpful in their coursework. While open content materials have great promise in general—and one of the authors has extensive experience authoring and curating open content, so the study team was certainly optimistic about the prospects of using open content in our courses—it is clear that the authors of the *American Government* book did not have the editorial support necessary to craft a high-quality textbook that could be used in other institutional settings.

Turning to the aggregate data, we generally find no substantial differences between student performance in Fall 2014 (using the traditional textbook) and Spring 2015 (using the open content textbook).

The final student grades were broadly similar: down 0.1 on a 4-point scale in Dr. Lester's classes, while virtually unchanged in Dr. Lawrence's sections. Student progression and completion does not appear to have been substantially affected either; however, a 6% decrease in the DFW rate (defined here as students earning a grade of “F” or withdrawing from the course, as MGA does not retain records of students who dropped during the 1-week drop/add period) was observed in Dr. Lawrence's sections, but no corresponding decrease was seen in Dr. Lester's courses.

**5. Sustainability Plan**

Given the experience with the textbook used in this project, neither Dr. Lawrence nor Dr. Lester plan to use the primary textbook again after the Summer 2015 term, as its shortcomings cannot be addressed without substantial revisions to the book that do not appear to be forthcoming and which we cannot complete ourselves due to the restrictive license of the textbook that does not permit the creation or distribution of derivative works. We plan to bring the issues with the *American Government* book to the attention of the Regents' Advisory Committee for Political Science in November 2015, with the recommendation that its use be discontinued in eCore and that the content lead(s) for POLS 1101 at the University of West Georgia investigate using alternative texts in the future.

Dr. Lawrence plans to continue using and revising the slides he developed over previous semesters in future terms. These will continue to be posted to a website he maintains. In addition, Dr. Lawrence is investigating distributing the slides via Github or another collaborative repository.

**6. Future Plans**

Our participation in this project has increased our awareness of new developments in open and free-to-students content for classroom use. It has also demonstrated the strong interest of students in lower-cost alternatives to traditional textbooks at our institution, particularly if quality can be maintained in the process.

In addition, both Dr. Lawrence and Dr. Lester have been solicited to work with OpenStax College as part of the development of another open content American government textbook, to be written in 2015, with commercial-quality support including an editorial and art team; given OpenStax's previous experience producing open content textbooks in other fields, we believe that this newly-developed book will be more sustainable and more pedagogically effective than the textbook we investigated in this study.

We presented preliminary findings of our research at two academic conferences in April 2015: the Midwest Political Science Association annual meeting in Chicago, Illinois, and the USG Teaching and Learning conference in Athens, Georgia.

We plan to present a revised version of the research paper at three political science conferences in the 2015-16 academic year: the Georgia Political Science Association meeting in November 2015, the Southern Political Science Association meeting in January 2016, and the American Political Science Association's Conference on Teaching and Learning in February 2016.

We plan to prepare our research paper for publication in a political science journal, most likely either the APSA-sponsored journal *PS: Political Science and Politics* or the *Journal of Political Science Education*, sponsored by the Political Science Education Section of APSA.

**7. Description of Photograph**

(left-right) Dr. Julie A. Lester, team lead and instructor of record; Dr. Christopher N. Lawrence, instructor of record.