

Inclusive Access/Automatic Billing and OER

What is “inclusive access”?

Inclusive access (IA), automatic billing, innovative pricing, or other various names are contracts between colleges/universities and publishing companies to bill students automatically for digital textbooks, homework systems and other online course materials when they enroll in a course.*

Oftentimes, publishers will offer discounts on materials knowing they can count on a large segment of a course to accept the charge, while a smaller segment can choose to ‘opt-out’ of the materials and find them elsewhere.

Does IA harm or help students?

On the one hand, IA grants students immediate access to course materials, such as digital textbooks and homework systems on the first day (or even before the first day) of class, so students don’t need to wait for financial aid, shop around the online marketplace for the best deal, or go without course materials.

However, students are often given a short window of time in which they must opt-in or opt-out of IA, and these options are not necessarily transparent. Students who fail to opt-in may lose access to needed resources and students who fail to opt-out or drop a course will often lose the money invested into digital access without retaining the materials.

Where does the ASCCC and OER community stand on IA?

Both the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) and the greater OER community have expressed concerns about the negative impact IA has on students. Regardless of whether such a program requires students to opt-out or opt-in, they offer a short-term resolution to the long-term problem of textbook accessibility and affordability. The adopted ASCCC position calls on the ASCCC to:

- provide guidance to local senates regarding the potential impact of inclusive access and questions to be asked about such programs if locally proposed;
- recognize the benefits and value of the used textbook market as a source of low-cost and lasting texts; and
- encourage faculty and colleges to carefully consider the impact of inclusive access and recognize that while such programs may address immediate student needs, they may not work in students’ long-term interest.

Resources

PIRG 2020 Report on Automatic Billing:

https://asccc-oeri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/USPIRG_Textbook-Automatic-Billing_Feb2020_v3.pdf

Giving Inclusive Access Another Look, Openstax:

<https://openstax.org/blog/giving-inclusive-access-second-look>

‘Inclusive Access’ Takes Off, Inside Higher Ed

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/07/inclusive-access-takes-model-college-textbook-sales>

“Requiring students to purchase access codes for a proprietary publisher platform to submit homework or other course materials is crucial for publishers to stay relevant in this shifting marketplace. These codes lock students into high cost textbooks without significantly increasing educational value. Instead, students continue to struggle to afford critical educational material and often lose access to the materials at a later date. This is a continuation of the broken textbook market, not a radical solution.”

-U.S. PIRG report on Automatic Billing

Nine questions to ask about IA programs:**

1. Does the inclusive access program enhance academic freedom by offering affordable content from a variety of sources including open educational resources (OER)?
2. Does the inclusive access program provide permanent access to core content after the subscription period ends?
3. Does the inclusive access program have data agreements that protect students and provide data sharing transparency with the participating school?
4. Does the inclusive access program capture student data for advertising or marketing purposes?
5. Does the inclusive access program include reasonably priced print options for the 10 percent of students who still need or prefer it to digital material?
6. Does the inclusive access program offer fair pricing for online homework or other courseware components if offered separately?
7. Does the inclusive access program keep OER content free, or does it charge for it?
8. Does the inclusive access program have a clearly stated and generous opt-out period?
9. Is the inclusive access program fee clearly delineated as part of the course listing alongside other similar fees such as lab fees and tuition?

Free the Textbook Campaign

OpenStax campaign to make inclusive access and textbook pricing more transparent to students. <https://tinyurl.com/Free-the-text>

*Adapted from, “Automatic Textbook Billing, an offer students can’t refuse?” U.S. PIRG Report, February 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/USPIRGCannotRefuse>

**Adapted from, “If inclusive access is on the horizon, ask yourself these nine questions,” Openstax, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/OS9Questions>

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