

Why Open the Books?

Open the Books Coalition at Carnegie Mellon University

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Abstract

The Open the Books Coalition was formed in the fall of 2002 to put pressure on the Carnegie Mellon University administration to open its financial records to the view of students, faculty, and staff. We believe that as a fundamental principle, information should be shared with important stakeholders in our community unless there is a compelling exception. This document explains the reasons behind this campaign and the specific demands of the coalition.

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Chapter 1

The Case for Opening the Books

1.1 What does “open books” mean?

Very simply, an open books policy means that any interested member of the Carnegie Mellon community could gain access to portions of the actual budget of the University that are covered by the policy. Either by going to the school library, or by visiting a secure website. An “ask and we’ll give it to you” policy is not an open policy. This discourages active participation in the democratic process and makes it very easy for requests to be delayed or forgotten until they are no longer meaningful. An open policy means that information is published by default, and a very good reason must be given for information that is not published.

1.2 Why open the books?

1.2.1 Fundamental democratic principles

There is no principle more basic to a democratic society than the free flow of information. Founders of our country like James Madison, uneasy as they were about other aspects of democracy, put forth this as the most important right. Our University is not a democracy, and in fact isn’t a public institution like our government, but a private institution. However, one of the functions of a University is to prepare its members to be active citizens. Our University fails that mission when it does not include this basic protection of its members.

1.2.2 Right to information about our own funds

Not only are we important stakeholders in the Carnegie Mellon community, those of us who are students pay a significant fraction of the University’s overall

budget out of our pockets. We have a right to know how our own money is being spent.

1.2.3 Sharing information makes all stakeholders more satisfied

When information is kept hidden, students, faculty, and staff assume the worst about how the money is spent. Despite initial worries that the information would be used against them or that employees would not be able to understand the financial records, companies like Kasey Fine Furniture in Denver have found that open books involved employees in the decision making of the company in a positive way, and let employees understand why unpopular decisions like not having bonuses were made.¹ When the University of Oregon had a contract dispute with its faculty in 2000, they decided to open their financial books as a sign of good faith in the bargaining process. The positive result was that an amicable solution was found. With all stakeholders having equal information, the debate could focus on the key issues rather than mistrust of one party's claims.^{2a}

1.2.4 Easier administration

A policy that makes books open by default makes it easier for administrators as well as satisfying students, faculty, and staff. While the administration may claim that it wants to share information about its finances, every request that is made without a policy requires the valuable time of an administrator and will likely take more time as a result. As long as the University believes that students, faculty, and staff should be able to access the information, creating a single policy, publishing the information once, and sticking to it is easier than evaluating each request on a case by case basis.

¹Gruner, Stephanie. "Why Open the Books?" Inc Magazine, 1 Nov 1996.

²"Remarks by University President Dave Frohnmayer to the University Assembly." 31 May 2000.

Chapter 2

Demands of the coalition

2.1 The demands

2.1.1 Records must be made easily accessible

“Open” means that the information is easily accessible. A hard copy of the University’s budget should be made available in the library. In addition, a copy should be made available in a common digital format that is self-contained on the University’s site on the World Wide Web. The data should be in the most usable format, preferably a format that allows community members to create their own summary data. In addition, any summaries of information used in the Administration’s own decision making process should be made public in the same location unless falling under an exception below.

2.1.2 All non-confidential records should be available

By non-confidential, the Coalition means records that do not contain: sensitive information about an individual, information whose release would breach a contract, or information that must be kept private to comply with State or Federal laws or is classified for reasons of national security. No other exceptions should be made.

2.1.3 Summary data should be made available for all other records

In any case that falls under the exceptions given above, the University should make available summary information as a courtesy. This includes aggregate information about salaries across University departments, by race, gender, and other appropriate categories, as well as aggregate information about confidential contracts the University has made and their general impact on University finances.

Chapter 3

Appendices

3.1 Open the books success

3.2 Coalition members

- Progressive Student Alliance
- College Republicans
- Carnegie Mellon Women's Center
- People for Worker's Rights - United Students Against Sweatshops

Table 3.1: Schools with open budgets (still being compiled)

School Name	Year Opened	Size	Link
Penn State			http://www.budget.psu.edu/openbudget/
Clemson University			http://www.budget.clemson.edu/