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INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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So, You Want to Bring OER to Your Institution: Lessons Learned From the Texas Consortium

What Is OER?

Open Educational Resources (OER) are teaching and learning materials that can be freely downloaded, edited, and shared to better serve students. OER differ from copyrighted materials in that they live in the public domain and can be quickly updated or otherwise modified to suit specific educational needs without the requirement of obtaining permission from the author. Most OER have a Creative Commons license that describes the parameters the author has set for its use. These licenses range from CC-BY (i.e., users must acknowledge the original author, but can share and adapt the material for any purpose) to CC-ND (i.e., users can only use the original work without modifying it in any way). OER can be graphics, videos, and activities; assessments; entire curriculum and courses; and complete degrees and certificates.

There are many online sources for OER, including Creative Commons, Lumen Learning, Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT), OER Commons, and OpenStax. Colleges and universities such as Carnegie Mellon, Harvard, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology also have their own OER repositories, as does the Washington State's Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

OER are easier to make available on the first day of class and can eliminate the need for students to buy traditional textbooks. They can quickly be updated in response to current research and world events. For example, OER political science materials can immediately be updated after an election. They can also be easily modified to adjust for teaching and learning needs, and content can be rearranged 'behind the scenes' to not confuse students, as can happen when skipping around static textbook chapters. Like traditional textbooks and materials, OER are often authored and peer-reviewed by content experts. Additionally, also like traditional learning materials, OER may require users to modify materials before adopting them for their courses.

The Texas Consortium Grant

In 2016, Alamo Colleges, Austin Community College District, El Paso Community College, and San Jacinto College partnered to receive a three-year OER Degree Initiative Grant from Achieving the Dream. The grant's goal is to "lay the groundwork for nationwide adoption of OER degrees and to support the creation of new OER degree programs." Thirty-eight colleges across 13 states received an OER Degree Initiative grant, with the understanding that developed courses will be housed in the Lumen Learning repository for wider dissemination.

The Texas Consortium Colleges agreed to each develop specific courses and to share those courses with the other consortium schools so, when combined, students would have the ability to earn an associate's degree comprised exclusively of OER courses. The first set of grant-derived courses were developed in the fall of 2016 and offered during the spring 2017 semester.

Early results suggest that student success rates in OER course sections were either comparable to or significantly greater than success rates in non-OER sections. Qualitative results suggest students and faculty were generally happy with the OER format and interested in using OER in other courses. The adoption of OER materials saved Texas Consortium College students over $562,000 during the spring 2017 semester.

Lessons Learned

The Texas Consortium Colleges learned several lessons in their first year as they rolled out their OER degrees on an accelerated timeline. The Texas Consortium Colleges promised to develop a total of 26 courses under the Achieving the Dream grant, courses that largely support general studies degrees. Sharing the work across colleges was efficient, effective, and essential. Faculty at one college took the lead on course development, while the faculty at the other colleges served as reviewers and piloted course materials. This arrangement promoted discussion at the discipline level across the colleges and engagement at the discipline level within colleges around quality standards for course materials.

The challenge of OER is that they need continued refinement, refreshing, and tweaking. Each Texas Consortium College discovered that OER developed elsewhere must be refined to meet their own institutional, discipline, and faculty expectations. The aggressive timeline established by the colleges did not factor in sufficient time for early reviews, continued development, and additional input prior to finalizing course materials. However, the beauty of OER is that they are endlessly adaptable and can be refined to meet individual department standards.

Maintaining OER requires institutional support. Without the support of the institution, OER can quickly become outdated and irrelevant. Developing, revising, and updating OER course materials require faculty and

librarians to work together to constantly curate content. Faculty and staff need to ensure that their college's technology infrastructure can support the increased use of online course materials. It is also paramount that the college's registration system allows students to search for OER sections. Developing sustainability plans, including possible course fees, must be given adequate thought and attention. New faculty who want to teach with OER require training to learn about Creative Commons licensing, revising and rearranging OER within their college's learning management system, and crafting coursework to reflect open pedagogy.

The work of the Texas Consortium Colleges is engaging and energizing and has led to new relationships through which we share our frustrations and successes. Remembering ***why*** you (or your institution) adopted OER—to support students by making high-quality, free (or low-cost), adaptable instructional materials available on the first day of the class—can help maintain the focus and momentum in the face of inevitable challenges. We have yet to hear about an institution that explores OER and later decides it's not a good fit for them or their students. Colleges that decide to pursue OER are prone to stay the course because of feedback such as the following:

From Students:

- *It was easier for me to do my homework and be prepared for class compared to using a traditional textbook. I like that you don't have to worry about losing your book because you can print out the pages you need.*
- *I think OER is a good idea since material is always available.*
- *It was really nice to not use a textbook. We were able to get the material needed through the LMS and it was a lot easier and affordable.*

From Faculty:

- *Classes went very well. It was great to have the book on the first day of class and students were pleasantly surprised they did not have to purchase a book.*
- *Students stated that they liked the book and they liked the idea that you could also print individual pages of OER materials.*
- *OER was easy to use and I have been an advocate for other faculty to use it in their classes.*
- *As I began working, I discovered a wide range of quality work that was open for CC-BY use. This availability precluded the need for ground-up creation and made adaptation possible and preferable.*
- *OER has opened up a world of free, available, and shifting sources for students.*

How to Get Started

While support from grants and consortiums foster the growth of OER courses, financial support is not always necessary. Any faculty member interested in changing their course materials can implement open educational resources, and there isn't one correct approach when starting the process. When considering if OER are right for you and your students, perhaps begin by asking them how much they paid for your course materials, followed by recalling the number of times students have told you they couldn't buy books until they receive their next paycheck or financial aid check. If your students struggle to afford course materials, then OER may be an attractive alternative to consider. Talk to your students and get their opinions about current course materials and how those materials can be improved. Consider the impact on student access, collaboration, engagement, and success if you were to choose quality OER for your course.

Once you have evaluated your classroom needs and are ready to begin searching for OER, talk to your college's librarian who should be able to help you find openly licensed course materials. Type "OER LibGuides" into the search feature of your browser and observe the results. Using your college's LibGuide, you should be able to find OER sources and complete OER courses. Also be sure to connect with the instructional designer on your campus who can help demystify OER options, especially if an OER course is offered through a third party such as Lumen Learning. Understand that OER may not be appropriately rigorous or even available for all courses. Be prepared to invest a lot of time doing research if you choose to curate some of your own resources.

We encourage you to explore the world and work of OER, keeping in mind the benefits to your students and your faculty. Students have materials available on the first day of class, therefore supporting their learning, persistence, and success, and faculty have greater control over course materials they use to support their curriculum and instruction.

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