Open Access and Open Minds: A Comprehensive Overview of Open Educational Resource Initiatives in Higher Education

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Abstract

The rising cost of textbooks has created significant financial barriers for college students, leading to the emergence of the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement. OER, which includes freely accessible and openly licensed materials, has the potential to address issues of educational equity, affordability, and quality in higher education. Institutional OER programs promote collaboration among various stakeholders and increase access to affordable resources for students. Faculty engagement is crucial in integrating OER into courses, while libraries provide repositories of materials and guidance on copyright. Grant funding incentivizes the adoption and creation of OER, including discipline-specific materials. State-level initiatives and government policies also play a key role in facilitating OER adoption. However, various obstacles, such as faculty resistance and concerns about quality, must be addressed for OER initiatives to succeed. In this paper, a thorough examination of OER initiatives will be presented, covering both institutional and state levels. Additionally, it will delineate potential obstacles hindering the widespread adoption of these resources. Moreover, substantial evidence showcasing the positive impact of OER usage for both students and faculty will be presented. Overall, OER has the potential to make quality learning resources universally accessible, foster innovation, and create a culture of collaboration in education.

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Introduction

Rising cost of textbooks as a barrier to higher education

The increasing price of textbooks, now spanning decades, has created significant financial obstacles for college students. Over the last half century, the cost of textbooks and course material has escalated at a rate three times higher than the rate of inflation (Xie, 2023). Bureau of Labor Statistics data indicate that this trend has continued in recent years with textbook costs rising 7% since 2020, outpacing increases in tuition and fees, as well as housing (BLS, 2023). Illustrating this financial hardship, the National Center for Education Statistics (2023) reported that the average cost of college textbooks and materials for the 2021-22 academic year was $1,326 per student. More than $3 billion of financial aid is spent on textbooks alone each year (Xie, 2023).

Students are feeling the impact. The U.S. PIRG Education Fund conducted a nationwide survey of nearly 4,000 students across 83 college campuses in 2019. It found that 90% worried that forgoing a textbook for a course would negatively impact their grade. To cover the inflated cost of textbooks, a quarter of the surveyed students reported working extra hours, while 11% reported having to skip meals. As many as 19% decided which classes to take based on the cost of the assigned materials. Despite these sacrifices, fully two thirds were still unable to afford at least some of their required course material. Notably, studies have found that these financial barriers are even more prominent for historically underserved populations, including minority, low-income, first-generation, and food-insecure students (Jenkins, et al., 2020, Nagel & Vitez, 2021). This data underscores how high textbook expenses not only undermine academic performance but also impact students' ability to meet their basic needs.

In previous years, research conducted by PIRG stated that 77% of college faculty said the price of books are rarely discussed in their meetings with publishers and only 38% of these publishers provided the textbook cost at their request (Zomer, 2007). Furthermore, only 63% of these faculty members reported knowing the price of the course material they assign. More recently, Bay View Analytics surveyed over 2,700 college professionals and found that 86% of administrators and 64% of faculty agreed that the cost of course materials is a serious problem for their students (Seaman & Seaman, 2022).

In recent years, there has been a surge in the adoption of e-textbooks and online access codes – a format initially perceived as a cost-saving alternative to print textbooks. However, reality has diverged from this perception. Eighty percent of the textbook industry is controlled by three publishers – McGraw Hill, Pearson, and Cengage – and predatory practices have persisted (Hanson, 2023). Because online codes are often needed to access homework assignments and other resources, this model eliminates students' ability to share, borrow, buy used, or re-sell the course materials. This model forces each student to pay full price and ultimately increases student textbook expenses (Vitez, 2018).

The inequitable access to textbooks impacts the quality of education some students receive because having the necessary course materials has a direct and positive impact on student success. This is why movements are underway to revolutionize education through the widespread promotion of open educational resources.

Open Educational Resources

Open educational resources (OER) are freely accessible and openly licensed educational materials (UNESCO, n.d.). An open license allows the material to be freely used, distributed, and

modified with proper credit. They are easily accessible in digital formats, allowing broad availability to individuals with internet access, especially those facing financial limitations or restricted access to traditional educational resources. OER encompasses a wide range of materials, including textbooks, lecture notes, multimedia content, assessments, and more. The concept of OER has gained significant traction in the past two decades, driven by the increasing availability of digital technologies, the rising cost of traditional textbooks, and the recognition of the benefits of open access to education (Fischer, Hilton III, Robinson, & Wiley, 2015; Seaman & Seaman, 2022).

OER initiatives have emerged at various levels, from grassroots efforts by individual educators to institutional collaborations and government-funded projects. Many colleges and universities have embraced OER as a means to reduce students' financial burdens, foster innovation in teaching and learning, and support the broader goals of open education (Fischer, Hilton III, Robinson, & Wiley, 2015).

By leveraging the power of open licensing, accessibility, adaptability, and collaboration, OER has the potential to address issues of educational equity, affordability, and quality. OER possesses the ability to transform education by making quality learning resources available to all, promoting pedagogical innovation, and fostering a culture of knowledge sharing and collaboration in academia. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview and comparison of programs promoting the use of open educational resources.

OER Initiatives

Institutional level

OER programs at the institutional level have gained significant attention and momentum as colleges recognize the transformative potential of such resources. These programs are designed to promote the development, adoption, and utilization of openly licensed educational materials that align with the institution's curriculum. The previously cited survey of college personnel shows that the amount students spend on textbooks is a major concern for both faculty and administrators (Seaman & Seaman, 2022). By adopting OER, colleges can significantly reduce or eliminate the costs associated with traditional textbooks, providing students with free or low-cost alternatives. This approach helps alleviate existing financial burdens, making education more accessible and inclusive.

The role of faculty and staff

Institutional OER programs often involve collaboration among various stakeholders, including faculty members, instructional designers, librarians, and administrators. Faculty members play a critical role in identifying, evaluating, and integrating OER into their courses. They may adapt existing OER materials or create new ones that align with their teaching goals and meet the specific needs of their students. Collaborative efforts among faculty members within the institution can lead to the sharing and improvement of OER, fostering a culture of openness and knowledge exchange.

Libraries and instructional support services are essential components of institutional OER programs. Libraries can curate and maintain repositories of OER materials, making them easily accessible to faculty and students. They also provide guidance and support in navigating

copyright, licensing, and attribution requirements associated with OER. Instructional support services, such as instructional designers and technologists, assist faculty in effectively integrating OER into their practices, ensuring a seamless transition and optimizing the learning experience.

Faculty training and support

Institutional OER programs provide training, support, and professional development opportunities to faculty members, enabling them to effectively find, evaluate, and integrate open educational resources. Workshops, seminars, webinars, and peer-to-peer collaborations are commonly offered to enhance faculty members' understanding of OER, copyright implications, open licensing, and effective instructional strategies. These initiatives help build a community of practice within the institution, fostering ongoing dialogue and continuous improvement in OER integration. By offering such resources, institutional OER programs empower faculty members to make informed decisions and successfully utilize OER in their courses.

Grants and funding

Grant funding has emerged as a powerful tool in promoting the adoption and development of open educational resources (OER) within colleges and universities. Recognizing the potential of OER to enhance affordability, access, and student success, institutions have increasingly turned to grant money as a means to incentivize OER initiatives. These grants provide vital financial support to faculty, administrators, and institutions, encouraging them to explore, create, and share openly licensed educational resources.

By providing resources to facilitate the transition from proprietary textbooks to freely accessible OER materials, grants enable colleges to significantly reduce textbook costs for students, thus making education more affordable and accessible. Grant programs often prioritize

initiatives targeting high-impact courses with large enrollments, ensuring that a substantial number of students can benefit from OER adoption.

In addition to supporting the adoption of existing OER, grant funding also plays a crucial role in encouraging the development of new OER materials. By incentivizing faculty members to create, adapt, and share openly licensed resources aligned with their course objectives and pedagogical approaches, grants empower educators to actively participate in OER development. This fosters a sense of ownership and promotes the creation of high-quality, discipline-specific resources that cater to the unique needs of their students.

State level

Statewide OER programs are broader approaches to promoting the adoption and utilization of OER across higher education institutions. A few notable examples of such programs are California's Affordable Course Material Initiative (ACMI), Maryland Open Source Textbook (M.O.S.T.), and New Jersey's Open Educational Resource Repository (OpenNJ). Beyond the fundamental functions typically found in institutional-level OER programs, these programs encourage collaboration among faculty members across various campuses, fostering a culture that prioritizes sharing resources and best practices.

California's Affordable Course Materials Initiative (ACMI) has successfully implemented system-wide collaboration among campus libraries, faculty members, and stakeholders across the University of California system (Affordable Course Materials Initiative, n.d.). This groundbreaking initiative aims to enhance accessibility to affordable course materials and establish sustainable models for affordability. By pooling resources, sharing experiences, and exchanging successful strategies, ACMI has achieved a significant impact that extends beyond

individual campuses. Strong partnerships with campus libraries have enabled the creation of repositories of affordable materials, ensuring students have access to a wide range of learning materials without excessive costs. ACMI's comprehensive and coordinated approach harnesses the collective power of the University of California system.

Another example is the Maryland Open Source Textbook (M.O.S.T.) Initiative, led by the William E. Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation, which established a partnership with the Maryland Association of Community Colleges, MarylandOnline, and the Maryland Independent College and University Association. The program establishes a network of faculty advocates, enabling educators to connect, collaborate, and exchange ideas related to OER implementation (Maryland Open Source Textbook Initiative, n.d.). This community-driven approach empowers faculty across multiple institutions to lend their expertise to promote the collective growth and enhancement of open educational resources in Maryland.

Expanding even further is the OpenNJ initiative. Like M.O.S.T, OpenNJ focuses on creating awareness, providing resources, and fostering collaboration among educators and institutions on a statewide level (Open NJ). However, instead of focusing exclusively on postsecondary education, OpenNJ engages educators, administrators, librarians, and other stakeholders across all educational institutions in New Jersey, including K-12 schools. As a curated repository, OpenNJ gathers and promotes New Jersey-specific OER aligned with state standards. This allows educators to easily integrate high-quality OER, enhancing instructional practices and fostering innovative learning approaches.

By facilitating the adoption of OER, these statewide programs contribute to the broader open education movement, empowering educators to customize resources, address student needs,

and enhance student success. These collaborations have laid the foundation for the development of sustainable models that promote affordable course materials on a systemic level.

The role of government

Government policies play a crucial role in promoting the adoption and utilization of OER in education. According to SPARC, a nonprofit organization that supports open education, 30 states have implemented policies to encourage the widespread use of OER (SPARC, 2020). One common approach is the establishment of OER grant programs. As previously discussed, grant funding supports the development and adoption of OER materials by faculty members and educational institutions. It provides financial incentives and resources to encourage educators to explore OER options, create new OER materials, and integrate them into their courses.

Furthermore, some states have created policies that require or encourage educational institutions to implement OER policies or guidelines. In 2019, New Jersey passed a law that requires institutions of higher education to develop an open textbook plan. Within 180 days of the effective date of this bill, institutions of higher education have to submit a plan to the state Secretary of Higher Education to expand the use of open textbooks and commercial digital learning materials in order to achieve savings for students enrolled in the institution (State of New Jersey, 2019). By formalizing the inclusion of OER in curricula, states promote the use of cost-effective resources and encourage faculty members to consider OER as viable alternatives to traditional textbooks.

A federal bill proposed in both houses of Congress in March 2023, The Affordable College Textbook Act, would direct the U.S. Department of Education to create grants for OER initiatives at the state and institutional levels. The Affordable College Textbook Act would

combat the rising costs of textbooks through the promotion of OER. Under the proposal, the U.S. Department of Education would create grants for OER initiatives at state and institutional levels (118th Congress, 2023). This bill would build upon the existing federal Open Textbook Pilot, under which $47 million has been appropriated and which has saved students an estimated $250 million since its creation in 2018 (SPARC*, 2023).

Through grant programs and institutional policies, state governments can facilitate the creation and sharing of OER through the establishment of statewide OER repositories or platforms, similar to the statewide systems discussed. States may invest in the development and maintenance of these platforms, ensuring that educators have convenient access to high-quality OER resources that align with state curriculum standards. By fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing, these repositories promote the growth of OER communities and facilitate the continuous improvement of the educational resources they house.

Overall, state government policies on the promotion of OER demonstrate a commitment to enhancing educational access, affordability, and quality. By providing financial support, encouraging institutional adoption, and facilitating the sharing of materials, states encourage stakeholders to embrace the broader movement of open education.

Obstacles

Awareness and knowledge

Campaigns are commonly employed to enhance awareness of both commercial resources and OER. However, commercial publishers typically utilize outreach efforts by their sales representatives and promote their materials on their websites. OER materials lack the same commercial structure, as they are predominantly created and released by non-profit, non-commercial, or government organizations. Consequently, the promotion of OER for higher

education often relies on community members who champion them through departmental, institutional, or system-wide initiatives.

When it comes to awareness, administrators tend to be more informed about OER initiatives compared to faculty members. According to the previously cited Bay View Analytics survey of 2,759 faculty members in U.S. higher education, approximately 43% of administrators are aware of departmental, institutional, or system-wide initiatives for OER, whereas only 27% of faculty members are aware (Seaman & Seaman). This difference in awareness is not surprising as administrators often initiate such efforts and serve as the primary target audience for new resources, given their influence over multiple faculty members and courses. This is why awareness programs are vital for driving the widespread adoption of open educational resources.

Funding

Securing adequate funding remains a formidable barrier to the widespread adoption of OER. The process of developing and curating OER requires a substantial investment of time and effort from academics, editors, and instructional technologists, so there must be compensation to incentivize this work. In the traditional model of academic publishing, this compensation comes in the form of fees or royalties accrued from sales. Because it is meant to be freely accessible to users, OER does not generate sales revenue. The funding must come from other sources, whether it is locally through college budgets or grants funded by federal or state government, non-profits, or other organizations.

This absence of direct financial motivation inhibits the creation of OER content. By providing essential financial resources, initiatives like the previously mentioned Affordable College Textbook Act play a pivotal role in the proliferation of OER materials. This unparalleled

level of federal support, in combination with institutional and statewide support, has the potential to catalyze the widespread adoption of OER.

Faculty perceptions

One of the primary concerns expressed by faculty when selecting OER is the reliability of the sources. According to a survey of 237 educators in the U.S., three-quarters of the respondents identified source reliability as their main concern (Pitt, 2017). However, an overwhelming 95% of those faculty members indicated that they would trust OER materials recommended by their peers or colleagues, underscoring the significance of peer recommendations in assessing reputable resources.

Another common preconception among faculty members is that incorporating OER into their classrooms would increase the time required for class preparation. This concern from faculty underscores the critical importance of fostering collaboration and institutional support to ensure the success and sustainability of OER initiatives. Support staff like librarians and instructional technologists can assist with curation and integration of materials. A recent survey of a sample of grant programs revealed that 57% receive limited to no institutional support beyond the program's staff (Xie, 2023) Nonetheless, in a study of 150 college professors that use OER, 82% reported spending the same amount of time or even less time preparing for class (Jung, Bauer, & Heaps, 2017).

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Outcomes

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Cost savings

The use of OER clearly reduces textbook costs and has the potential to eliminate them completely (Fischer, Hilton III, Robinson, & Wiley, 2015). Research has found that OER incentive programs can save each student up to$ 200 per course (Colvard, Watson, & Park,

2018). A study conducted by the Student Public Interest Research Groups (Student PIRG) found that every dollar invested in OER grants, students saved up to $20, which is a substantial return on the investment (Xie, 2023). Furthermore, faculty members who switch to OER tend to continue doing so, therefore future data is anticipated to demonstrate an even greater return on OER investments. Even one-time grants had a lasting impact, resulting in ongoing savings for students. Though data is still being collected for many, a small selection of grant programs initiated during the pandemic have already resulted in more than $2.5 million in savings for students (Xie, 2023). In addition, OpenStax, a Rice University open resource initiative which published its first textbook in 2012, alone has generated $1.2 billion in savings for students (Xie, 2022).

Learning outcomes

Numerous studies have shown that the use of open and affordable course materials positively impacts student learning outcomes, including grades, enrollment intensity, withdrawal rates, and student satisfaction. In 2011-2012 case study of 1,060 Houston Community College students who took an introductory psychology course, those who used OER had better overall course grades, lower withdrawal rates, and higher scores on their final exams (Hilton & Laman, 2012). In a pilot study of 991 students at Virginia State University School of Business in 2012, data showed that course pass rates increased by 20% when OER was implemented (Feldstein, et al., 2012) A broader study of over 21,000 students at the University of Georgia saw an average course grade increase over 53% (Colvard, Watson, & Park, 2018). Furthermore, this study found that part-time students, who often lack financial support for textbooks, demonstrated a 29% decrease in drop, fail, or withdrawal rates. The finding from these studies conducted amongst a range of students, diverse institutions, and various disciplines, demonstrated the ability OER has

to create a more inclusive and effective learning environment across various educational contexts.

Collaboration

Engaging stakeholders beyond the university systems, such as publishers, educational technology providers, and student organizations, has yielded fruitful results. Establishing an OER committee with diverse members proves valuable in engaging stakeholders and expanding the program's reach. Departments such as learning centers, student governments, academic departments, deans, and academic affairs are particularly effective in marketing the programs (Xie, 2023). Librarians are also extremely valuable in promoting and championing the use of OER on their campuses (Braddlee, 2019). The newly developed role of open education or OER Librarians have proven valuable in supporting discovery, cataloging, information literacy, and advocacy (Larson, 2020).

Furthermore, successful collaborations have been formed with external entities and systemic programs. Initiatives, like OpenNJ and M.O.S.T., that pool and share resources enable the exploration and implementation of innovative solutions with OER. Moreover, the openness of these resources encourages the exchange of best practices, collective improvement of educational materials, and the formation of communities of practice.

Adaptability

One of the defining characteristics of OER is their release under open licenses, such as Creative Commons licenses. These licenses go beyond traditional copyright restrictions, granting users permissions to retain, reuse, revise, and redistribute the materials without encountering cost or legal barriers. With OER, educators have the freedom to modify, customize, and adapt the resources to suit their specific instructional needs, pedagogical approaches, and the diverse

learning styles of their students (Belikov & Bodily, 2016). This adaptability allows educators to tailor the content, structure, and format of the materials to align with their curriculum goals, incorporate relevant examples and local contexts, and address specific learning objectives (UNESCO, n.d.). With the ability to update and enhance the resources regularly to reflect the latest research, industry practices, and emerging trends, OER also enables educators to keep pace with rapidly evolving advancements in their respective fields. Overall, the adaptability of OER serves as a benefit to both educators and learners.

Access

OER initiatives play a vital role in increasing access for both learners and educators (SPARC, 2020). By providing freely accessible and openly licensed educational materials, OER initiatives eliminate financial barriers that often hinder access to quality learning resources (Colvard, Watson, & Park, 2018). Learners facing financial limitations or restricted access to traditional educational resources can benefit greatly from the availability of OER in digital formats, which allows for broad accessibility, especially for those with internet access. This accessibility extends to diverse educational contexts and cultural perspectives, accommodating individual learning requirements. Through OER initiatives, the doors of education are opened wider, allowing learners and educators from all backgrounds to access high-quality learning resources, regardless of financial constraints or geographical limitations.

This accessibility is also vital in times of crisis. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic was a public health emergency that necessitated a rapid transition to remote education. As a result, there was a significant rise in the adoption of digital textbooks and OER (Seaman & Seaman). These new approaches in teaching, precipitated by the pandemic, not only spurred an increased awareness and usage of OER, but demonstrated its adaptability.

Conclusion

The rising cost of textbooks has created significant financial barriers for college students, with many unable to afford the necessary course materials. This has led to a growing recognition of the need for accessible and affordable educational resources, giving rise to the OER movement. The potential of OER to revolutionize education lies in its ability to make quality learning resources universally accessible, foster pedagogical innovation, and create a culture of collaboration in academia. OER initiatives at both the institutional and state levels have generated significant results, including substantial cost savings for students, improved learning outcomes, and the formation of collaborative communities of educators. Additionally, OER's adaptability allows educators to customize resources to suit their specific teaching objectives, creating a more personalized and effective learning experience.

Despite the numerous benefits of OER, there are obstacles that need to be overcome. Awareness and knowledge about OER among faculty members can vary, and misconceptions about reliability and time commitment persist. This hinders the widespread integration of OER. However, peer and other collaborations have been found to be the most beneficial in combatting these misconceptions while aiding in OER sourcing and development. Interestingly, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the major shift to remote learning, has served as a catalyst for the adoption of OER and digital resources, highlighting their importance in education. However, the success of OER innovation still relies increased funding, promotion, and adoption by stakeholders in the education field.

In conclusion, OER initiatives at various levels have demonstrated the transformative potential of OER in addressing the challenges of affordability, accessibility, and quality in higher education. Institutional and state-level initiatives play a crucial role in fostering collaboration,

providing support and resources, and establishing policies that incentivize OER adoption. By leveraging the power of open licensing, collaboration, and adaptability, OER programs can make quality learning resources universally available, foster innovation in teaching and learning, and cultivate a culture of collaboration in education. As the OER landscape continues to evolve, ongoing efforts to address obstacles will further solidify its role. With continued support, investment, and broadened collaborations, the OER movement has the potential to reshape the landscape of education, making it more inclusive, affordable, and learner-centered.

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