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Open Pathways to Student Success: Academic Library Partnerships for Open Educational Resource and Affordable Course Content Creation and Adoption

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the current state of open educational resources (OER) including notable library-lead and multi-institutional programs. The potential for OER and affordable course material creation and adoption programs to impact student retention and persistence is examined. Potential additional partnerships and future directions for library-lead programs are discussed as well as the framework necessary for assessing the impact of library-lead OER initiatives.

Media coverage of the beginning of each academic year can be somewhat familiar to even the casual observer of higher education and certainly to those who work in academe. In the late summer of each year, news stories and infographics often depict the frame of reference for incoming first-year students, predict fall collegiate sports performance, and analyze the rising cost of higher education. The cost of higher education has garnered much attention over the recent past, with each student-incurred cost undergoing thorough analysis. Notable among those cost factors is the rising price of course materials, in particular, the traditional textbook.

A 2015 analysis of Bureau of Labor Consumer Price Index (CPI) data found that textbook prices rose by 1041% from 1977 to 2015, over three times the rate of inflation (308%) over the same time period (Popken, 2015). An independent analysis of CPI data found that textbook price increases outpaced even the overall cost of college tuition during the same period. At an increase of 778% during this period, college tuition rose at more than double the rate of inflation, but did not approach the inflation of textbooks (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

As textbook prices are rising, average student expenditures on them is not. According to data gathered by the National Association of College Stores, average annual spending on required course materials has dropped from $701 in AY 2007–08 to $563 in AY 2014–15 (Hill, 2016). Although the textbook price and expenditure data vary, the overall trend is toward rising purchase prices and declining average expenditures. Many factors contribute to this trend, including efforts by bookstores and universities to contain costs. Physical textbook rentals, electronic textbooks, and semester-length licensing of textbooks by bookstores likely contribute to the decline in student expenditures. Students also take advantage of the textbook market online to save money. According to data gathered by the Florida Virtual Campus (2012), 78% of students surveyed reported purchasing textbooks from sources other than the campus bookstore.

There is some concern, however, that the reduction in student expenditures represents students who have simply decided not to purchase the required course materials for a variety of reasons. This suspicion is verified anecdotally by many faculty and by data gathered by the Florida Virtual Campus (2012) in an often-cited survey of over 20,000 students. A majority of student respondents (64%) reported having not purchased a textbook because of the high cost and 23% reporting doing so frequently. The same survey found that 56% of students did not receive financial aid to cover their textbook costs (Florida Virtual Campus, 2012).

The cost of and access to course materials has emerged as a student success issue. In addition to the fact that financial aid does not cover the cost of textbooks for many students, the data also suggest that the cost to students is weighted toward first year students. According to National Association of College Stores data for fall 2014, first-year students spent on average 20% more than upper division students on textbooks (Hill, 2016). Even for those first year students who are able to cover their textbook costs with financial aid, due to the timing of financial aid releases, many do not start their courses with the materials on the

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first day. This is a particular issue for first-generation students, who often do not have the support system to navigate the start of their first semester (Caufield, 2015).

The net result is that rising textbook and course material costs are most noticeable among low-income, first-generation, and first-year students, all of whom represent the most vulnerable from a student success perspective (Tinto, 2006). Initiatives to contain textbook and course material cost, ensure access, and facilitate pedagogical innovation through enhanced course materials are therefore student success initiatives. In many institutions, these strategic directions are supported through open educational resource (OER) and affordable course content initiatives. Libraries can and often do play significant leadership roles in their institutional OER programs. For those libraries seeking to support student success, OER programs represent a focused way of doing so and should be designed with student success as a primary goal.

DEFINING OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Definitions of OER vary, with many institutions creating a local framework that meets the objectives of their OER or affordable course content initiatives. UNESCO is commonly cited and defines OER as:

> any type of educational materials that are in the public domain or introduced with an open license. The nature of these open materials means that anyone can legally and freely copy, use, adapt and reshare them. OERs range from textbooks to curricula, syllabi, lecture notes, assignments, tests, projects, audio, video and animation.
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> [(UNESCO, 2016)]

The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) is also commonly cited with the concept of open permissions explained "in terms of the "5R's": users are free to Retain, Reuse, Revise, Remix and Redistribute these educational materials" (SPARC, 2016).

The common understanding of OER is the open nature of the resources. Although many advocates for open education do not waiver from this requirement, localized definitions often include expanded access to licensed or purchased content as part of the strategy to reduce cost and increase access to course materials. Localized definitions or approaches can be seen as supporting affordable course content adoption and use with OER as one strategy to do so. The obvious benefit to OER adoption over increased access to licensed content is the long-term and universal access to the resources, particularly for those institutions for which OER creation or adaptation is supported as part of the local initiative. For many institution; however, reducing costs and ensuring access to required course content are the objectives for their OER or affordable course content programs, so all suitable resources are employed to those ends. As a result, even resources or programmatic initiatives that maintain, but reduce the fee to students for course material access are often considered to be components of OER and affordable course content initiatives.

CURRENT STATE OF OER

The overall use of and acceptance of OER among faculty is on the rise. Due to the availability of very high quality resources through national consortia, early concerns regarding the ability of OER to meet student learning needs and use expectations are less prevalent (Bell, 2015). The media coverage and increasing institutional focus on access and affordability overall and specifically with regard to textbooks and traditional materials have made alternatives more appealing to some faculty as well. Technological advances have made a difference as well as OER now includes interactive multimedia and modular learning, rather than simply online textbooks with open licensing (Shank, 2013).

High profile and high quality projects have had the biggest impact on OER adoption and creation. Perhaps the most common resource type is the referatory. These include resources like the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) of the California State University System and the OER Commons. Both systems maintain metadata for open resources that are housed elsewhere. Their inclusion in MERLOT and OER Commons make them more discoverable and enhance their potential impact. MERLOT is particularly noteworthy as contributed materials are reviewed for their suitability for inclusion. OER Commons uses a review system, but it is more of a quality indicator with many resources not reviewed (Shank, 2013). The benefit to the referatory model is version control. Since the resources are maintained locally, they can be fixed, updated, or expanded as the content demands without having to update several copies. This, of course, also makes them potentially less stable.

In addition to these referatory programs, which can include open resources of any type, open textbook programs in particular have seen an increase in quality, content, and adoption-enhancing features. Two programs in particular, Openstax at Rice University and the Open Textbook Library, a project of the University of Minnesota lead Open Textbook Network (OTN), offer the best examples of the progress that open textbooks have made. Both programs provide repositories of openly-licensed textbooks. Unlike the referatory programs, these repositories do host the resources that are made discoverable. Both are notable for the coverage of their texts, their easy integration into modern learning management systems, and quality assurance in the form of faculty peer reviews. They differ in the source of their content. Openstax texts are created through philanthropic support to authors for creation and sustainability (Openstax, 2016). The texts in the Open Textbook Library are author submitted. Like Openstax, they must be openly licensed, but they can originate outside of a grant cycle, therefore sustainability may be more of an issue. The Open Textbook Library also requires that the text be in use at multiple institutions of higher education or affiliated with a higher education institution (Open Textbook Library, 2016).

One result of the MOOC movement has been an increase in open courses and courseware available for adoption and adaptation. Perhaps the most prominent example is the OpenCourseWare program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); however, the OpenCourseWare program at Johns Hopkins University is noteworthy as well. Both offer full courses and open-licensed content in topics related to the public interest in their local expertise. For MIT, the goal is ambitious, with core materials from the majority of courses made available (Massachusetts Inst. of Technology, 2016). The Johns Hopkins University program is more selective, but just as openly licensed (Johns Hopkins U., 2016). The end result is an increase of readily available courses and materials for adaptation or adoption by local faculty.

In addition to these nationally-recognized programs and institutional contributions, consortial programs in support of OER and affordable alternatives are emerging as well. The OTN is one example in which multiple institutions contribute to the consortium with the goal of supporting the Open Textbook Library and the ongoing professional development and community of practice. The Unizin consortium in particular is a promising project that comprises over a dozen large institutions. Unizin is developing an instructional ecosystem using vendor-created and consortially-developed solutions. The vision is that member institutions will share course-related infrastructure with the goal of affecting the development of educational technology, and encouraging the cross-institutional sharing and development of open and affordable course content (Unizin, 2016).

Over the last decade, open and affordable course content initiatives and resources have developed at all levels to meet local, consortial, and international needs. It is anticipated that these programs will continue to evolve and enhance access and affordability of course materials and student success as a result.