Column: Innovation in Libraries

Shining the Light: Building Equity into OER Creation

Heather Blicher, *Community College Consortium for OER at OEGlobal and Open Oregon*

ABSTRACT

Open educational resources (OER) gained traction in education with a focus on affordability and access to ensure students avoid undue hardship due to the high cost of textbooks. Now we must push beyond affordability and access to include equity. Equity ensures that content does not include unintentionally biased content, a lack of culturally relevant content, underrepresentation, exaggerated negative associations, and limited positive associations. Open Oregon Educational Resources centers equity in the Targeted Pathways project by including grant-funded equity consultants as a part of the leadership team. The DEI-focused roles of the equity consultants ensure inclusive and accurate content design to promote the value of differences between people. This article includes background on the Targeted Pathways project and explains how equity consultants challenge authors and leadership team members to engage differently by reflecting on personal agency and positionality, including equity strategies used to ensure the content developed will provide a student experience that it is inclusive and respectful of all individuals.

KEYWORDS

equity, equity lens, content design, instructional design, librarianship, open educational resources, OER, open practices, quality education

Open Oregon Educational Resources is a statewide program that supports textbook affordability for Oregon's public higher education institutions, including community colleges and universities. The program facilitates widespread adoption of open, low-cost, and high-quality materials through training and consultation, grants, and faculty incentives, tracking student savings, cost, and impact research (Open Oregon Educational Resources, n.d.). In 2021, as a part of these efforts, the program was awarded Governor's Emergency Education Relief funding to develop openly licensed, targeted pathway materials with an equity lens for Human Development and Family Studies and Sociology courses. Eventually, Criminal Justice courses were added with a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (Hofer, 2021, 2022). This multi-year project is referred to as the Targeted Pathways project. What makes this project distinct is the addition of grant-funded equity consultants to serve on the leadership team. The equity consultants ensure leadership builds considerations of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into the development process and prioritizes DEI throughout each phase of the project.

Background

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation defines Open Educational Resources (OER) as "high quality teaching, learning, and research resources that are free for others to use and re-purpose (2015, p. i, para. 1). OER gained traction in education with a focus on affordability and access to ensure students avoid undue hardship because of the high cost of commercial textbooks and other associated costs like instructor materials and homework platforms. By adopting, adapting, and creating OER, instructors not only have autonomy over their courses, but they have assurances that students will have the content or textbook on the first day of class. This resolves issues students encounter like waiting for financial aid to be released and having to choose between life expenses and buying a textbook. In a blog post on equity and OER, Quill West (n.d.) writes,

> As important as access is to students and to institutions, it is a starting place for leveraging other benefits of OER, and I hope that our conversations about [open education] go beyond access, because saving money on materials doesn't address bigger issues in student persistence and completion. (n.p.)

As OER and those enacting open practices in the movement evolved in their experiences, there was a collective realization that implicit and explicit bias and discrimination exist not only in the criminal justice system, healthcare, and many other aspects of society, but also in education (Blicher, 2023). Jenkins et al. discuss the impact OER has on student access, performance, and time-to-graduation rates in completing their higher education goals by the course materials they are presented, whether commercial or OER (2020, p. 1, para. 1).

In the Open Education Week keynote for Open Oregon Educational Resources, "Towards Openness that Promotes Social Justice," Maha Bali (2022) describes *Open at the Margins:*

Critical Perspectives on Open Education as removing the dominant perspective and it "challenges academic gatekeeping with a non-peer reviewed process" (50:24). Generally speaking, commercial textbook authors and editors tend to write from a Western perspective (Blicher, 2023). In *Open at the Margins,* the editors seek to amplify the voices of those in "the margins" by curating a volume that centers author diversity, topic diversity, and informal pieces rather than peer-reviewed pieces (Bali et al., 2020, Introduction). In "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Open Research and Education," Robertson (2020) shares a series of questions she asks upon entering a social situation. These questions highlight important aspects along the continuum of inequity. Robertson asks:

> Who is in the room?
>
> Who is at the table?
>
> Who speaks a lot?
>
> Who has social capital?
>
> Who feels welcome?
>
> Whose ideas are respected and centered by default?
>
> (Slides and speaking notes section, para. 4)

And also:

> Who is missing?
>
> Who isn't even in the room?
>
> Who does not have a seat at the table?
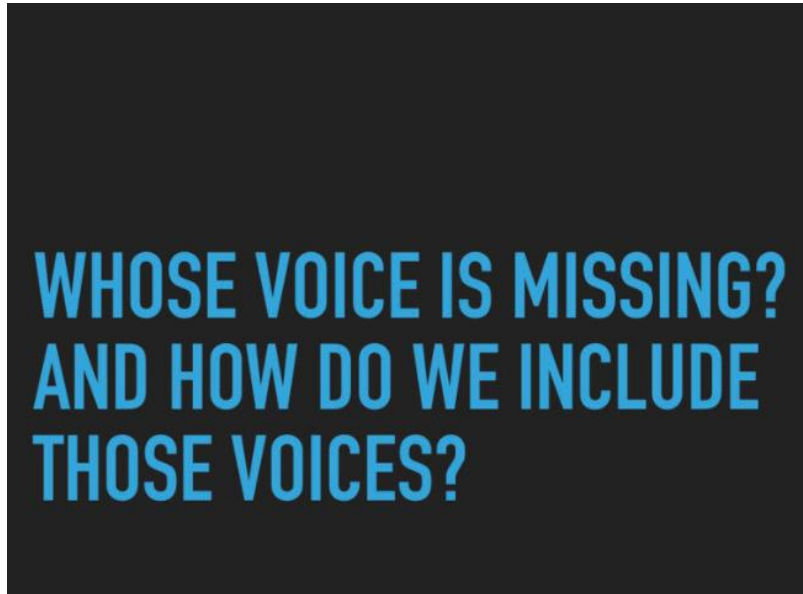>
> Who is sitting on the margins?
>
> Who does not feel welcome?
>
> Who has to fight to have their viewpoints respected?
>
> (Slides and speaking notes section, para. 5)

Figure 1

Tara Robertson asks, "Whose voices are missing? And how do we include those voices?"

These questions are all too familiar to marginalized groups of people. I am reminded of a professional committee experience where the women of the room contributed to the discussion with an idea, only to have the men consistently ignore or not acknowledge it until a man said the same thing and was congratulated and given credit for it. At the time, an article had come out in *The Washington Post* discussing how,

> [F]emale staffers adopted a meeting strategy they called "amplification": When a woman made a key point, other women would repeat it, giving credit to its author. This forced the men in the room to recognize the contribution — and denied them the chance to claim the idea as their own. (Eilperin, 2016, para. 2)

The women in my committee adopted this strategy. While it did not make as big an impact as it did within the White House, it did lessen the frustration experienced as we echoed each other's contributions in support of each other at meetings. Now imagine asking these questions in regard to OER creation. How do we amplify these voices and echo their contributions in support? For the Targeted Pathways project, the answer was to center the work with an equity lens.

An Equity Lens

Ida B. Wells (2014), a Black journalist, activist, and researcher in the late 19th and early 20th centuries wrote, "The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them" (Wells, p. 12). In relation to the Targeted Pathways project, Wells' words are all the more relevant as the equity lens is at the core of the work. In the anchor module of *Doing the Work: Diversity,*

Equity, and Inclusion in Open Educational Resources, a DEI toolkit developed in Pressbooks by the Targeted Pathways leadership team, the equity consultants write, "Leading with an equity lens in curriculum design means shining a light on underrepresented perspectives, centering them, and diving deeper into the histories of systemic oppression that lead to social injustices and disparities we live with today" (Blicher & Scott, 1.1 So what is an equity lens? n.d.). Equity consultants have the potential to challenge the Targeted Pathways authors and leadership team members to engage differently by reflecting on personal agency and positionality. By intentionally engaging differently based on reflections of personal agency, the instructors address the limitations of learning materials that overlook the diverse lived experiences of marginalized groups in our society based on race, gender, ethnicity, body size, and ability. This can include unintentionally biased content, a lack of culturally relevant content, underrepresentation, exaggerated negative associations, and limited positive associations. The DEI-focused roles of the equity consultants push beyond affordability to ensure inclusive content design to promote the value of differences between people and to leverage this as a strength, similar to the inclusive design principle of culturally responsive teaching.

In "How to Tame a Dragon: Scoping Diversity, Inclusion and Equity in the Context of an OER Project," Bossu et al. (2019) write,

> Diversity, inclusion, and equity are almost taken-for-granted concepts in the broader context of open education, and specifically in the context of Open Educational Resources (OER) initiatives, projects, and practices. How can an OER project, for example, be 'open' and not also embrace diversity, inclusion, and equity? (Introduction)

Adopting, adapting, and creating original OER can be a daunting task on its own. Asking authors to add another dimension to OER work can feel like a mighty lift. For some practitioners, it has become standard practice to ensure content meets accessibility standards. However, in Zhang et al. (2020), the authors find that OER is lacking in accessibility and that training for educators [is] a challenge but nonetheless a required measure to improve the impact of "functional diversity" and accessibility on the educational system (Conclusion, recommendations, and future directions, para.25). Consider the need to address accessibility and additional considerations of DEI beyond accessibility. Sara Ahmed (2013) writes that,

> Spaces are occupied by certain bodies who get so used to their occupation that they don't even notice it. They are comfortable, like a body that sinks into a chair that has received its shape over time. To question who appears is to become the cause of discomfort." (para. 11).
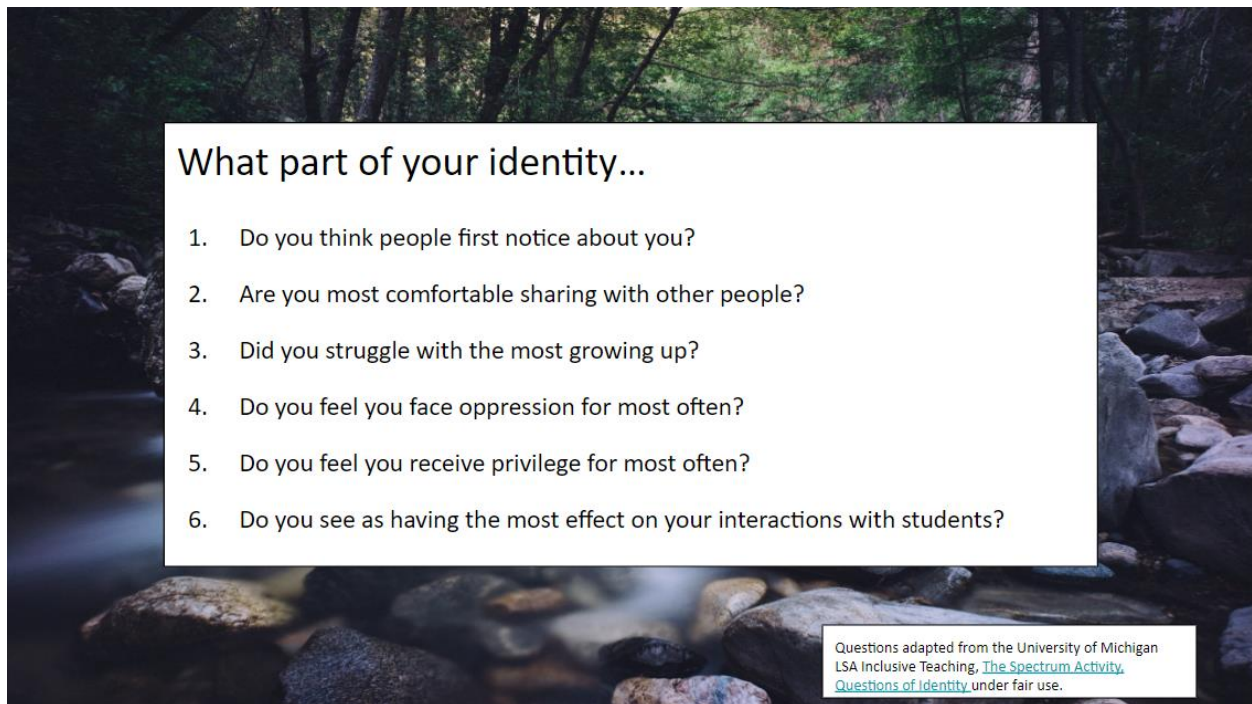
To question the status quo is daunting indeed. This is where equity consultants can have the biggest impact. DEI-focused roles bring education, accountability, and encouragement to author teams.

Equity Strategy

During the Targeted Pathways initial virtual professional development, authors and instructors at community colleges and universities from all over Oregon met online to take part in orientation and training about the project. As the sole equity consultant at this point in the project, I facilitated self-reflective activities and discussions during the orientations. I achieved this by sharing prompts and asking participants to quietly reflect on the questions (as seen in Figure 2) for five minutes before discussing as a group and adding ideas to a Padlet activity with pre-planned questions. The Padlet activity was optional, and no one was forced to share.

Figure 2

A self-reflective activity to promote reflection and build community.

What part of your identity…

1. Do you think people first notice about you?
2. Are you most comfortable sharing with other people?
3. Did you struggle with the most growing up?
4. Do you feel you face oppression for most often?
5. Do you feel you receive privilege for most often?
6. Do you see as having the most effect on your interactions with students?

Questions adapted from the University of Michigan LSA Inclusive Teaching, The Spectrum Activity, Questions of Identity under fair use.

Bali (2022) paraphrases adrienne maree brown's (2017) writing from "Emergent Strategy," stating that in the process of centering social justice, to consider "less prep, more presence" and that it is "more important to be present in the moment with the people to see if you need to adapt…rather than overplan and then be disturbed when something else happens" (54:24). The self-reflective activities promoted thoughtful responses, conversations, and something I was not expecting—emotion. I was not prepared for strong emotional responses and when this occurred, I found that the community organically surrounded the individual with support, understanding, and kindness. This allowed me the time to shake myself out of a startled state and as Bali (2022) stated in her keynote, build more presence by encouraging

participants to address the emotion as a positive step in the work. This positive step allowed them to recognize personal truths and to respond in a way to move forward.

  While the feedback from the synchronous orientations was positive, they were difficult to schedule with so many calendars at play. In an attempt to overcome this challenge, an asynchronous course was also provided in a learning management system to guide authors in best practices in creating textbooks. In my capacity as the equity consultant, I created an equity-focused discussion board to post weekly questions, thoughts, and resources as a way to spark discussion. I also encouraged authors to post questions or thoughts there for the larger group to discuss together. While there was participation, it quickly became clear that the authors, much like our students, complete required activities and assignments and are less likely to interact with optional discussion boards.

        The equity consultants offered one-on-one and group consultations to the authors. Their progress within a particular manuscript and their comfort level with the project determined if the authors took advantage of these opportunities. The manuscripts were developed in Google Docs and the equity consultant could be easily tagged within the document and engage with the author by offering input, feedback, and encouragement to meet and discuss complex questions. This occurred during both the initial writing and revising processes.

        Equity consultants worked with leadership team members to organize a "word list" to be included in an inclusive language priorities document for authors. This is not an exhaustive list, but rather a list that includes any words related to the topics being written about within the project. The word list includes appropriate terminology and inappropriate or outdated terminology to avoid relating to race, culture, movements, etc. It also defines words and gives examples of their use to avoid confusion and support authors in their writing. We recognize that language is constantly evolving and acknowledge the complexity and nuance of terms, but it is a starting place to promote consistent use of terminology within the project.

        We sought out resources for inclusive language including the PFLAG *National Glossary* (PFLAG, n.d.), the *Racial Equity Tools Glossary* (Racial Equity Tools, 2023), and various articles to explore complicated scenarios. For example, the word "underrepresented" is listed with use examples from the OHSU Center for Diversity and Inclusion's *Inclusive Language Guide* (2020). One might assume the term is fairly direct in its meaning and use, but upon further research, I found this to be inaccurate. According to OHSU's guide, "The general phrase 'underrepresented' or 'members of underrepresented groups' is appropriate and is especially preferred when you can be specific and accurate. For example: Black students and/or transgender students are 'underrepresented in medicine' or 'underrepresented in dentistry'" (Underrepresented section). This example demonstrates the nuance needed when using some terms to avoid being vague.

I promoted the use of diverse and inclusive image repositories to authors. With so many wonderful image collections that focus on diversity and inclusivity with an emphasis on authenticity, the only challenge has been keeping up with new additions. Rather than focusing on the stereotypical images one might expect (for example, an individual marching in a protest for LGBTQ+ rights), these collections focus on people living their lives. For example, the group Affect (n.d.-a) is a "disability-led effort to create resources that amplify…marginalized people of color and embody disability justice" ("affect" section). One of their projects is the *Disabled and Here* stock image and interview series (Affect, n.d.-b). The Affect website discusses media portrayals of disability being one-dimensional and framed either as pitiful or inspirational. The creators wanted to reclaim how they are depicted and feature diverse individuals with the photos categorized by themes inspired by everyday life like lifestyle, social, and work.

Figure 3

A list of websites containing diverse photos and an example photo from one such site (Blicher, 2020).

- Images of Empowerment: Free images of women's lives and work, created by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and Getty Images; License: CC-BY-NC-4.0

- Allgo Plus-Size: Free stock photography collections featuring plus-size people; License: While attribution is not required, please credit

- Disabled And Here: Free stock photography featuring disabled BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color), varied body sizes/types, sexual orientations, and gender identities in the Pacific Northwest; License CC BY 4.0

- The Gender Spectrum Collection: Free stock photos of trans and non-binary people, licensed CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Photo by @taylorckt1 from nappy.co (CC0)

As the project's work moved forward into the second year, the leadership team recognized that it was important to find a different approach to introduce the next cohort of authors to DEI concepts and the other elements of content design. Coordinating synchronous training sessions, while effective for some with the availability to attend, was not useful for those unable to attend synchronously or for those with learner variability. In its place, the leadership team focused their efforts on creating an interactive, accessible toolkit, organized in the form of a Pressbook, that provides participants with synchronous and asynchronous options for

engagement (Blicher et al., n.d.). The equity consultants collaborated with the program manager and the open education instructional designer to write the course outcomes (Figure 3).
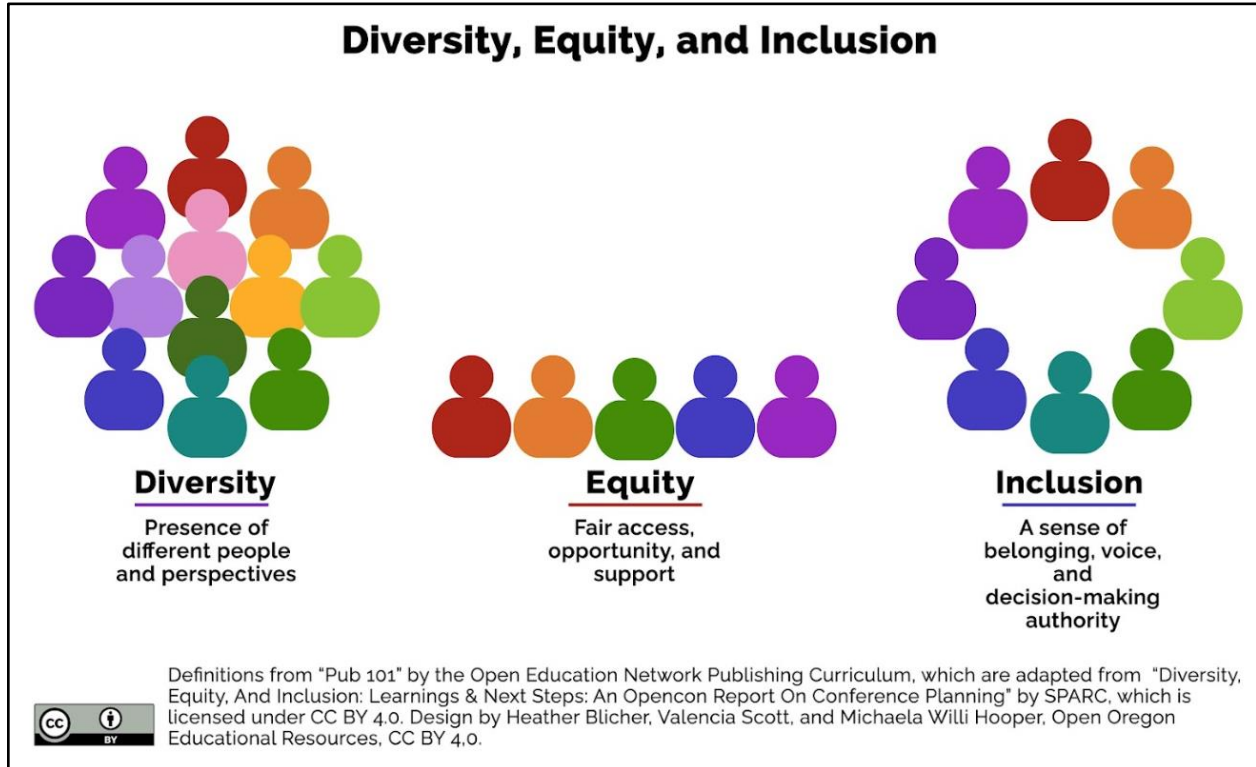
Figure 4

Course outcomes for the Targeted Pathways *DEI Toolkit*
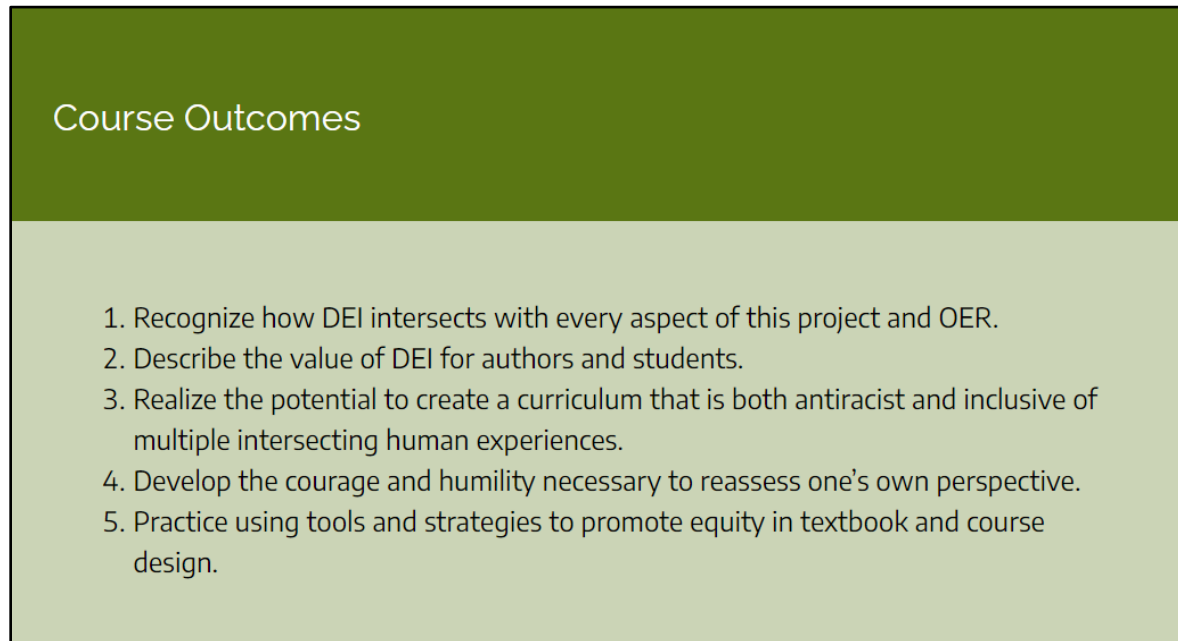
We then developed the anchor module, "Introduction to DEI in Targeted Pathways" to introduce the new author cohort to DEI concepts. Sections of the module include an "Overview," a section focused on explaining "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion," "Finding Your Lens: Language, Theory, and Equity," "Writing Textbooks with an Equity Lens," and an " Apply and Submit" activity that equity consultants were responsible for review submission and providing feedback (Blicher et al., n.d.). This allowed authors to participate at their own pace with regular and sustained interaction with equity consultants, along with the other members of the leadership team based on the area of focus.

Figure 5

A graphic from the DEI Toolkit highlights the differences between diversity, equity, and inclusion (Chapter 1.2 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion).

Note: Here is a link to the graphic: https://openoregon.pressbooks.pub/dothework/chapter/1-2-diversity-equity-and-inclusion/

Conclusion

To quote Maha Bali (2022, 25:02), "There will always be oppression wherever we are." If we are aware of this and take steps to build equity into OER creation, we can do better. This is a complex issue that is not easily solved. While the inclusion of equity consultants and the overall approach Open Oregon Educational Resources took in the Targeted Pathways project certainly had (and continues to have) a dramatic impact on the project, it is not perfect, but we learn as we go.

There are other elements of the project I did not include that were completed by leadership team members, like organizing a workforce advisory board for the subject areas. This includes community representatives from diverse backgrounds to ensure the content is relevant and inclusive. This is an important component of the project that we have not yet seen the results from yet. Additionally, the open education instructional designer designed artifacts to use with pilot instructors using the new open textbooks. The open instructional designer also

trained grant-funded instructional designers to work with the pilot instructors to design their courses with a focus on inclusive design principles, including Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Transparency in Teaching and Learning (TILT), and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). All these elements have had an impact (Vold, n.d.).

The Targeted Pathways project is still in process. I am grateful to have been a part of the project from the beginning, to see the evolution of the project and to cheer on the authors and pilot instructors in accepting such a mighty ask, and to use the transformative power of education to ensure a student experience that it is inclusive and respectful of all individuals, regardless of their race, gender, age, ethnicity, body size, sexual orientation, and abilities.

Heather Blicher is the Director of the Community College Consortium for OER of Open Education Global and an equity consultant with Open Oregon Educational Resources. While writing this column, Blicher was an OER librarian with Virginia Tech University and held an additional grant-funded position with Open Oregon Educational Resources as an instructional designer.

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