

Opening the conversation: An introduction to open educational resources

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Abstract: This column explores the concept of and issues surrounding Open Educational Resources (OER) for librarians.

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“OER are experiencing a watershed in higher education in the United States” and are a “top trend” in academic libraries (ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, 2016). What, however, are OER, and why are they increasingly gaining momentum in libraries and academia at large?

Most articles and presentations about OER begin by discussing the crisis of high textbook costs. The figures and issues raised are compelling, as textbook costs are outrageously high: from 2006-2016, the cost of textbooks increased by 73%, with an overall increase of 1,041% since 1977 (Senack & Donoghue, 2016). The most recent report from the *National Association of College Stores* notes that spending is down as “college students are spending less by accessing free course materials, often assigned by faculty” (NACS, 2017.) The phrase “free course materials” does not fully explain or define OER. As Chief Academic Officer of Lumen Learning David Wiley explains, OER provide a “free grant of permissions” (Wiley, 2016). These materials are not only free to students to access, but also grant the creator and users the 5R Permissions: Retain, Reuse, Revise, Remix, and Redistribute. These permissions distinguish OER from simply free, or low-cost, course materials. In addition to student savings, OER help to invigorate faculty teaching, increase student achievement, and align materials with educational goals.

The conversations surrounding OER present opportunities for libraries. As Jensen and West (2015) assert, libraries can lead in OER where faculty have expressed a need for “supporters in policy, help in finding quality materials, and professional development around copyright, open licensing, and integrated course design.” Some of these competencies, namely finding quality materials and copyright education, fall within traditional library expertise. Librarians are also entering new conversations as part of the OER discussions. Questions arise around whether, and how, OER should count as a type of scholarship as per the faculty tenure and promotion process, how materials should

be reviewed and adopted by curriculum committees, how the quality of higher education and academic freedom is maintained, and even logistical questions, such as how students will know that their course does not require a traditional textbook.

In the coming months, this column will provide an overview of the evolution of OER. These will include discussions surrounding funding and incentives in OER initiatives, the impact that OER can have on student success, collaborations across college campuses to support OER work, the textbook ecosystem and publisher adoption/co-option of OER, the major players in the OER world, and emergent issues relating to open education.

During the past year, I chaired the OER Working Group at Lehman College as we developed an initiative for faculty to create Zero Textbook Cost Courses. We started with \$3,000 in funding to provide incentives for three faculty to ditch their textbooks. The result was around \$15,000 savings for students in just the first year of the initiative. These savings will continue as faculty continue to teach with the OER they curated and developed. The unintended results are also faculty who feel their pedagogy has been refreshed by this process. We started a small initiative on a small budget. In the middle of our first initiative, Governor Cuomo granted CUNY and SUNY four million dollars each for OER work. This amped up our OER work, and we are currently converting twelve high enrollment courses to Zero Textbook Cost Courses at Lehman alone. This column can provide a space for asking questions and a place to explore the world of OER together.

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