Improving Access to Higher Education with Open Educational Resources (OER)

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Abstract

The increasing costs of traditionally published course materials and online homework platforms has further limited who can afford to obtain a degree in higher education. Open Educational Resources help make higher education more accessible to low-income students by relieving the burden of expensive textbooks. Adoption of OER has proven to improve academic success for students and increase retention rates. Use of OER materials allows educators to adapt their curriculum to students' specific learning needs with the ability to remix or alter textbooks. OER is a growing initiative in higher education as tuition and textbook rates continue to skyrocket. My role as the Digital Scholarship and OER Librarian allows me to lead these initiatives at Emporia State University through my work in committees, collaborating with faculty to implement OER materials, and promoting OER adoption. This paper will further explain the issues with the textbook industry, how OER can help relieve the financial strain on students, and my own initiatives to make higher education more accessible to everyone at ESU financially and academically.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is becoming much more inaccessible for students due to excessive costs. Despite the assistance of financial aid and scholarships, many students still struggle to cover expenses. Course materials and textbook costs are mandatory expenses that contribute to the financial burden students face. One way to alleviate the financial burden on students is to make course materials more affordable with open educational resources. Open educational resources are becoming more common place in colleges today. These resources benefit students and faculty through cost savings and remixing capabilities afforded by flexible licensing. My position as an OER librarian allows me to advocate for the best interests of students and faculty through the expansion of OER at Emporia State University (ESU). OER is a step in the right direction toward college affordability and has the potential for more inclusivity through open educational practices.

THE COLLEGE TEXTBOOK INDUSTRY

The increased costs of higher education prevent academic and financial success for many students. The National Center for Education Statistics reports a decrease of 12 percent in financial aid support with a 17 percent increase of tuition rates in the year 2020-2021 (Irwin et al., 2023). Rising costs continue to burden all students and make higher education far less accessible to low-income families who rely on financial support to attend college. A 2020 survey of five-thousand students on textbook affordability by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) Education Fund explained that most out-of-pocket costs for students come from textbooks, other course materials, and access codes with "over $3 billion in financial aid spent on textbooks a year" (Nagle & Vitez, 2021, p. 6). Course material costs have impacted students for a long time and is still a huge burden today. The average cost of course materials for students, according to Education Data Initiative, is between $339-$600 each academic year (Hanson, 2023). Course material costs lead to academic decline for the 65 percent of students that report skipping the purchase of required textbooks and contributes to the rate of food insecurity in college students (Nagle & Vitez, 2021, p. 10). Eleven percent of students report skipping meals because of course material costs (Hanson, 2023). The negative academic and financial impact that course material costs have on students is clear and stems from the textbook industry.

The textbook industry, valued at $5.58 billion in 2021, has added to the financial burden of course materials in various ways. E-textbooks were first seen as a way to reduce costs for students as they were more cost effective than physical textbooks. Since the adoption of access codes and book bundles, the

initial savings no longer exist. Despite the decrease in price for physical textbooks in the last few years, as made clear in part with Cengage's declining hard back sales and Pearson's 14% drop in textbook sales, the profit of the textbook industry continues to grow through the rising costs of e-textbooks and access codes. (Hanson, 2023). College textbook costs are determined by the publishing companies that own them. The U.S. PIRG Education Fund explains that 80 percent of the textbook market in the United States is controlled by three companies: Pearson, Cengage, and McGraw-Hill (Vitez, 2020). These publishing companies have monopolized the textbook industry and continue to limit students' purchasing choices by restricting long-term access to e-textbooks and online homework platforms.

The popularity of online homework platforms deepens the financial burden for students who have no choice but to purchase the course materials through the publishers. Vitez accurately describes the main issue students face with the use of these platforms. "Programs that increase the use of access codes, and force students to pay to participate in class, cannot be in a student's best interest" (Vitez, 2020, p. 12). Book bundles, or course materials that combine textbooks with online access codes/homework platforms, restrict students from purchasing materials outside of the bookstore and force them to spend more overall. Even with physical textbooks, students cannot sell the book later as it becomes obsolete without the access code limiting the ability to purchase used textbooks. Publishing companies, such as Pearson, have been upfront with their intention to restrict print materials in favor of digital (Vitez, 2020). The shift to this new business model for publishers is clear through the concept of automatic billing.

To push the use of access codes, publishing companies sought partnerships through automatic textbook billing contracts with various colleges across the United States. The contracts provide course materials to students by adding the cost directly to tuition bills. Automatic textbook billing goes by many names depending on the publisher. It has been called innovative pricing, all-access, FirstDay, digital discount, and includEd. These contracts claim to save students money on course materials and are federally required to price materials below market value (Vitez, 2020). Contracts reviewed recently in a 2024 report show no clear proof of savings and explain that some contracts may not provide any savings at all (Ridlington & Xie, 2024). Additional concerns found in these automatic billing contracts include restrictions on print materials, uncapped price increases, lack of price transparency, and high participation quotas that take discounts away if unmet. Another problematic aspect of these contracts is the predatory opt-out approach, which automatically opts in students without their permission and restricts access to mandatory course materials if choosing to opt out. The lack of transparency, predatory publishing practices, and use of access

codes drastically diminishes student choice and prioritizes textbook publishers over the best interests of students (Ridlington & Xie, 2024).

The increasing textbook prices and predatory practices from publishing companies considerably affects students' access to higher education. A 2020 study conducted in a Southern California University explains the burden of course materials on historically underserved students concluding that "Rather, educational institutions and academic publishers in the United States have created a systemic condition in which students' learning potential is limited by their purchasing power" (Jenkins et al., 2020, p. 8). The textbook industry and current model that favors digital materials, access codes, and automatic textbook billing has created new barriers for low-income or underserved students. These practices make course materials unaffordable to students and lead to increased student loan debt, poor academic performance, food insecurity, longer working hours, higher stress levels, and larger drop-out rates (Jenkins, 2020). Fortunately, the use of open educational resources, OER, has continued to grow and supports students access to education by eliminating some of these costs.

OER: A STEP TOWARD ACCESSIBILITY

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation defines OER as "teaching, learning, and research materials that are either in the public domain or licensed in a manner that provides everyone with free and perpetual permission to engage in the 5R activities: retaining, remixing, revising, reusing, and redistributing" (2024). OER materials have the least restrictive licensing as compared to traditionally published materials and give faculty the ability to customize resources that best fit students' needs, learning styles, and learning outcomes. For a material to be considered OER it must have an open license, be freely available, and modifiable. There are several benefits of OER for students and faculty, the most obvious being cost savings and the ability to freely customize materials without licensing restrictions. The vast majority of OER research suggests that faculty and students find OER to be equal to or higher in quality than commercial textbooks, which makes the high price of textbooks harder to justify (Hilton, 2020). Replacing commercial textbooks with OER options is the most direct way to save students money and allows them to access the materials long after the class ends. Reports have noted that OpenStax, a well-known OER repository, has saved students $1.2 billion already (Xie, 2023). OER is beneficial for instructors with the ability to customize course resources to fit learning outcomes and the needs of students through open educational practices, as well as the inclusion of diverse perspectives. OER also encourages collaboration with other instructors in the same subject area and in other institutions.

It is important for students to relate to course materials through accurate representation of various cultures and perspectives, which leads to better student engagement and strengthens a students' sense of belonging (Elder, 2019; Sergiadis et al., 2024). Including students in OER creation through open pedagogy is a good way to incorporate diversity. Open educational practices are possible because of the flexibility of OER licensing (Sergiadis et al., 2024). Considerations for diverse representation includes inclusive language, inclusive references and examples, usability, and a universal design for learning (Sergiadis et al., 2024). Web accessibility is also important to consider as most OER are digital materials and can meet the standards of universal design, as well as current web content accessibility guidelines.

OER has its limitations in areas of accessibility, subject availability, and the time needed to develop or adopt materials. Students may have limited access to the internet creating barriers to access digital materials. There are some compatibility problems with assistive devices and the inconsistent use of web accessibility guidelines by OER repositories, which makes it harder to navigate or access the materials for some. Updates and maintenance of OER materials is not a guarantee, pushing the burden onto faculty. Some disciplines, especially in higher-level courses, do not currently have a wide range of OER options. To address some of these concerns, institutions have developed OER evaluation programs, created OER quality guidelines for faculty, course management resources, or OER repositories with user-generated quality ratings. Some OER repositories are also in development of zero or low-cost homework platforms for students. As OER continues to grow, materials are being created in subjects previously lacking options.

OER LIBRARIANSHIP

Emporia State University, ESU, began its journey with OER in 2019. An OER taskforce developed and later became a functioning committee. The provost office granted $35,000 toward OER efforts at the university. The following year was when the Class Resource Affordability Initiative Grant, CRAIG, was first awarded, which support faculty in the adoption, adaption, compilation, and creation of OER materials (Emporia State University, 2023). Fall 2020 was when the first OER based courses took place. A five-dollar universal fee that would regenerate the CRAIG funding also began with the support of students. The first OER based faculty position at ESU began in 2023. My position as the Digital Scholarship and OER Librarian came with the responsibility of leading the current OER initiatives and furthering them. This includes being the chair of the OER Committee, awarding and keeping track of the CRAIG grants, representing

the university in the Kansas Board of Regents OER Steering Committee, and more.

In my efforts of supporting faculty and further implementing OER at ESU, there are several new initiatives taking place. The OER committee is working with registration to develop OER based course marking in the interest of transparency for students deciding which courses to take. The two options for course attributions are for OER based courses and zero textbook cost (ZTC) courses. Course attribution options provide transparency for students as they decide which courses to take and what the costs will be. It also gives recognition for faculty that choose to use OER materials in their classes. The library is promoting OER-based workshops that are focused on introducing OER and the topic of copyright to faculty. Educating faculty on the basics of open educational resources and encouraging the use of OER benefits students by increasing the amount of OER based courses at ESU. The workshops also help faculty better implement OER in their classrooms by encouraging proper accessibility practices and the use of open pedagogy. Open pedagogy promotes collaboration between faculty and students in the creation and implementation of OER. Another initiative at ESU is to advocate for acceptance of OER in tenure and promotion, which involves an ad hoc committee currently developing a proposal and plan. Faculty benefit with OER inclusion in tenure and promotion leading to a higher interest in OER adoption or creation. These initiatives are just the start as the OER Committee collaborates with faculty, the bookstore, and other departments to support students. My position allows me to support faculty one-on-one in the adoption and creation of OER, as well as ensure recognition for their efforts. My involvement in various committees, daily work as a librarian, student advocacy, OER outreach, and faculty support helps to further increase adoption of OER at ESU.

CONCLUSION

The increasing tuition rates and course material costs have affected students for many years. The textbook industry's latest predatory practices of restrictive digital materials, access codes, and automatic textbook billing has only exacerbated the issue. These costs make higher education less accessible for many low-income students and contribute to food insecurity, higher amounts of debt, academic decline, and increased drop-out rates. Open educational resources help to relieve some of the financial burden on students. OER is beneficial for students and faculty regarding cost, the ability to remix and customize content, and inclusive practices through collaboration with other academics or students. OER has its limits in areas of accessibility practices, the overall burden on faculty, and subject availability. However, institutions are addressing these concerns through

encouragement of standard web accessibility guidelines, providing faculty with financial support through grants, creating OER evaluation programs, and encouraging the development of OER materials. My position as the OER librarian at ESU allows me to further OER initiatives that support students and faculty. My efforts through committees, collaboration with departments and faculty, and daily efforts as a librarian strengthen the impact of OER at my university. OER is a step in the right direction in making higher education more accessible for everyone.

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