

Against the Grain

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A System-wide OER Initiative: The SUNY OER Initiative

by **Mark McBride** (Library Senior Strategist, SUNY Office of Library and Information Services) <Mark.McBride@suny.edu>

Similar to other colleges and universities, for students at the **State University of New York (SUNY)**, cost of textbooks can be expensive. **SUNY** is the largest comprehensive university system in the United States. With 64 institutions, including research universities, academic medical centers, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, colleges of technology, and an online learning network, **SUNY** serves a diverse student demographic of over 430,000 undergraduates and graduates: 57% White, 13% Hispanic, 11% Black/African American, 6% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% non-resident alien, 3% multi-race, 5% unknown, and less than 1% other.

To help reduce the costs of education, several **SUNY** community colleges began to explore the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) as a replacement to traditional course materials. OER are typically licensed using a license model from the **Creative Commons**. These licenses legally allow anyone to customize and change the content for their own teaching and learning situation. An education resource is considered OER if the content has an appropriate license that permits reuse, alteration, redistribution and is freely accessible. This is distinctive to content that is just free. Content that is free and that has not been openly licensed is considered copyrighted. Copyrighted materials can not be customized or changed.

OER usage in **SUNY** became mostly apparent through **SUNY's** Innovative Instruction Technology Grants (IITG), a competitive grant program designed to encourage the development of innovative projects in the college classroom. In addition to incubating promising, innovative projects, IITG required all projects coming out of the grant program to be openly licensed, with the hope that the openness would foster sharing and collaboration among **SUNY** faculty and staff.

In 2012, **SUNY** IITG funded the creation of Open **SUNY** Textbook Project. This open publishing initiative, established by **SUNY Geneseo's Milne Library** and involving several **SUNY** libraries, provided faculty with the vehicle to create open textbooks. The initial response from **SUNY** faculty was encouraging because the number of requests that came in to create open textbooks surpassed the capacity of the project team. What was truly inspirational, were the number of college instructors that reached out to the project team, seeking existing OER. At the time, **SUNY** had no real response but to direct faculty to the myriad of OER repositories available on the web. But a seed had been planted and some began to believe OER could be an innovation that could be scaled across the system.

In June 2016, five **SUNY** community colleges were awarded a grant through Achieving the Dream to develop OER degree programs on their campus. Building off the momentum and effort of many of our community colleges, and the work of the Open **SUNY** Textbook Project at Geneseo, the Provost Office at **SUNY** System Administration established a shared service, the **SUNY** OER Services (SOS). Through a partnership with the **Lumen Learning**, **SUNY** launched SOS as a vehicle to support the growing demand for OER in **SUNY**. SOS was built to support OER adoption, adaptation and creation. **SUNY** OER Services provides mentoring, technical support, and access to a broad catalog of OE at oer.suny.edu.

The early adopters of OER in **SUNY**, particularly our faculty, instructional designers, and librarians, advocated for OER adoption at their campuses, and while the initial message was mainly focused on saving students money, several faculty commented on witnessing an overall improvement in students' academic performance in their classes. Particularly, they spoke of modest improvement in grades and in the overall retention in their classes where they implemented OER. Not surprisingly, this caught the attention of many **SUNY** campuses.

Further, it became apparent in **SUNY** that the libraries were going to stand up and provide leadership on many of our campuses and across the system. Similar to students, libraries felt they have been priced out of the marketplace by many of the commercial vendors. Libraries have also for years tried to supplement student textbook needs by standing up reserve programs where the materials could be borrowed for a specific amount of time (2-4 hours) for use within our libraries. Textbook reserve programs are incredibly popular with students, but the question remains how effective of a service are textbook reserves if we can only provide access to a small number of people at one time. OER was a welcome solution most **SUNY** libraries embraced.

In 2017, New York State announced a \$4 million investment in OER which helped to expand **SUNY's** OER efforts. In response, **SUNY** issued a call to institutions to commit to the adoption of OER. With the goal of saving students money, and the hope of improving the overall academic performance of **SUNY** students, many of our campuses agreed to adopt OER in their high enrollment, general education courses. The funding for OER was restored again for 2018, and to date, **SUNY** institutions have saved more than 153,000 students in NYS, more than \$15.8 million in two years.

Some research suggests that OER could have a positive impact when used as a replacement for traditional course materials.

For example, there are studies on the impact OER has had on student grades and class completion (Hilton III, J. L., Gaudet, D., Clark, P., Robinson, J., & Wiley, D. 2013; Allen, G., Guzman-Alvarez, A., Smith, A., Gamage, A., Molinaro, M., & Larsen, D. S. 2015; Fischer, Hilton, Robinson, & Wiley, 2015). This was mentioned as an experience some of our **SUNY** faculty found in their own classes. Many conclude that the reason for these improvements is due to the fact that all students now have access to their course materials. That may be true, but it seems unlikely that the only reason for these improvement is due to access to course materials. In fact, many of our **SUNY** faculty have commented that the real benefit of OER is that it allows the faculty member to easily make changes to the materials, allowing them to individualize the learning experience for the students in their classes. This level of faculty engagement with the materials must translate to deeper engagement with their students.

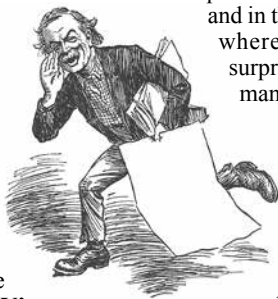
Much of the educational materials used in teaching and learning have been copyrighted and publishers traditionally hold the rights to the materials. OER have been licensed which gives them distinctive attributes that are referred to as the 5Rs (Wiley, 2015; Duse, Duse, & Bonnano, 2017).

- **Retain** Creators retain the rights to the OER and with these rights they make it acceptable for people to take and control copies of the OER, provided they give proper attribution to the creator.
- **Reuse** Anyone has the right to use the OER, and how the OER is used is not determined by the creator but determined by the users of the OER because the license grants permissions for anyone to use.
- **Revise** Anyone has the right to adapt, adjust, modify, or alter the OER to suit their needs.
- **Remix** Anyone has the right to combine existing OER content with other existing OER content leading to the creation of a new OER.
- **Redistribute** Creators license their work to share, allowing the users' to make revisions and remix with other OER. An OER that has been created is redistributed to the community with the understanding that the OER they created could be revised and remixed by other users.

The 5Rs are what make OER powerfully innovative.

There is research on the impact that OER adoption has had on student retention. A 2015 study on the impact of OER indicated that students who used OER instead of traditional

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Beyond Affordability

by **Mark Cummings** (Editor and Publisher, Choice) <markc@ala-choice.org>

A standard argument for the use of OER in undergraduate classrooms goes something like this: spiraling commercial textbook costs are forcing students to forego their purchase altogether, use second-hand, out-of-date editions, borrow from classmates, or rely on scant library copies (where available), with predictable effects on student outcomes and retention. In extreme cases, these costs have priced a college education beyond the means of many. The use of free or low-cost open educational resources can remove these pernicious barriers, improve outcomes, and put a college education within the reach of more students.

Thus phrased, affordability is the most frequently used and until now most effective strategy for OER advocacy. The notion of free or low-cost course materials is so appealing on the face of it, and so morally attractive from the standpoint of social justice, that it is tempting to regard affordability in-and-of-itself as sufficient reason for OER adoption. The problem with this approach is that it is looking at only one side of the issue.

At the end of the day, adopting OER, or any new textbook for that matter, means redesigning one's entire course. The selection processes for the new texts alone are time-consuming, particularly given that open resources are not readily discoverable. Then come the associated problems of finding new and congruent ancillary resources, reworking homework and research assignments, finding or creating new problem sets, and, ultimately, recasting the entire array of assessment tools. Adjuncts (assuming there are any) need to be retrained, libraries put on notice as to new reserve readings, and new materials loaded into the LMS.

So while adoption of open educational resources is something of a cause for many academic librarians, it is important to keep in

mind that it comes with high switching costs for instructors, many of whom also worry that the quality of these new resources, *and thus of their teaching*, may decline if they adopt noncommercial resources. By and large, commercial textbooks are accurate, well written, meticulously edited, and handsomely produced. When the publisher of a known and respected textbook lowers its prices in response to challenges to its affordability, it offers instructors an immediate, powerful incentive to adopt it. Under such conditions, appeals to affordability by themselves cannot win the day for OER. Only the quality of these materials can do that. Quality and an understanding of how to use them to their maximum advantage. In other words, for OER to achieve their promise, the decision to adopt them must be based not on cost but on their pedagogical superiority. But how do we demonstrate that?

Historically, one method of demonstrating a work's fitness, or otherwise, has been peer review, the focus of which has been assessment of such content-centered elements as provenance, accuracy, lack of hidden bias, cultural relevance, internal consistency, comprehensiveness, acknowledgement of sources, and so forth. These elements are no less important to a review of OER, yet the requirements that define an open educational resource require that its review consider additional issues. Ultimately, what makes an OER "open" is not its cost but the rights profile pertaining to ownership and use of the work and, following on that, the ability of the instructor, and even the student, to modify its content, combine it with other works, and reuse it in other contexts. In the absence of these elements of open education, an OER is just an inexpensive textbook, and while there is nothing wrong with this, OER used in this way are unlikely to precipitate the educational transformation its adherents

envision. If the goal is to promote OER as part of a larger educational program, and not merely as an affordable alternative to commercial products, we must do a better job demonstrating the possibilities such resources provide. Thoughtful reviews of OER, written to a standardized format designed to expose these elements, can be an important factor in this process.

Critical reviews are not always easy to come by, and I hope it is not going too far to suggest that one area for librarians to contribute to this effort is to enlist reviewers for works either contemplated or already in use on their campuses or to provide interested faculty with a template against which to evaluate them on their own. **Choice** has created such a template, available at <https://www.choice360.org/content/1-openchoice/choice-oer-review-template.pdf>. The template elicits evaluation in twelve areas: format and source, provenance, subject, target audience, licensing, accessibility, adaptability, content quality, pedagogy, interface design, ancillary materials, and competing works. Another good source, written by **SUNY's Mark McBride**, can be found at <https://www.rcampus.com/rubricshowc.cfm?code=L9WC6X&sp=true&>. Both of these explicitly call out those elements that make for a serviceable open educational resource.

The real promise of open educational resources lies not in their affordability but in their potential to change teaching and learning. Ensuring that the works we use conform to this goal in all respects, and are of a quality equal to or better than their commercial counterparts, is vital to the success of the enterprise. 🐼



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materials tended to have higher grades, and fewer students withdrew from the class compared to students in courses that did not have access to OER. Similar results were found in another research study conducted that compared students in two biology classes (Fisher et al, 2015). The students who were assigned OER earned better grades and were more likely to persist through the entirety of the class than students who were given the traditional course materials. One could conclude that grades increasing and student persistence are indicators that OER may have a direct impact on student academic achievement, but this should be tracked over several semesters. None the less, very promising.

Further, if the ability to customize OER is the real benefit of OER in the eyes of many faculty, and these faculty take full advantage of their ability to customize these resources, the result will be deeper engagement with their students. I believe this could lead to an increase in retention. The more engaged a faculty member, the more engaged the students.

Many traditional commercial publishers have made a pivot to offer OER, but most have dramatically decreased their costs and have started to offer a package they call inclusive access. They are banking on lowering prices to compete with OER, but the materials are still copyrighted and therefore, can not be customized by instructors. They lower the price and that's a wonderful thing, but a skeptic may say, "what took you so long?" OER is more than a cost savings solution. OER empowers faculty

to make the necessary changes to course materials they want their students to engage with. For years faculty have done this, but OER simplifies the process and provides a license that makes the ability to alter resources legally acceptable. Many faculty are using OER as a vehicle to change the way their students interact with the content, even by creating OER for the course.

More research is needed to truly understand the advantages to using OER, but many faculty are beginning to believe the real advantage to using OER may not just be the student savings. The benefits may be the ability to customize these resources (i.e., engage with the 5Rs), resulting in deeper engagement for our faculty with their students and improving the overall learning experience for our learners. 🐼