University Students' Council Standing Policy on

Open Education Resources (OER)

Legislative History
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Introduction and Overview

Over the past fifteen years, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has identified open educational resources (OER) as a critical and "strategic opportunity to improve... education."[1] OER, also referred to as open-access resources or open-access education resources, play an important role in both reducing the costs associated with attending university and providing instructors flexibility in course design.

OER are, as defined by Thompson Rivers University, "teaching, learning, and research resources that are created with the intention of being freely available to users anywhere. They may include, but are not limited to, textbooks, readings, multi-media files, software, assessment tools, and even entire courses."[2] In the global context, OER supports high-quality learning in both high- and low-income countries by making knowledge available beyond a book store. In the Canadian context, OER have the capacity to positively impact student success, reduce the increasing cost of textbooks, and present course facilitators with an ability to tailor their curricular material to their students.

High textbook costs are also demonstrated to impact the quality of a student's education. According to a 2012 survey conducted by Florida Virtual Campus, 60 percent of students have opted not to purchase a textbook due to prohibitive cost. A further 35 percent take a reduced course load to help manage textbook costs while 14 percent have dropped a course altogether due to textbook costs.[3] Since 2008, the cost of textbooks is reported to have increased at more than double the rate of inflation, indicating that the affordability of course material is a long-lasting and rapidly worsening issue.[4]

The soaring cost of postsecondary education has driven some North American institutions, such as the University of Georgia and the University of Oklahoma, to embrace OER initiatives as a means to counter a growing affordability crisis. Creating environments in which the free and unfettered share of knowledge is aided and abetted by universities has a measurable impact on the cost of postsecondary education. As of February 29th, 2016, students enrolled in 26 postsecondary institutions across British Columbia have saved between $1.2 and $1.4 million in textbook costs.[5] The University of Georgia alone has saved over 21,500 students close to $2 million since 2013.[6] By encouraging faculty to adopt OER, institutions across North America are slowly addressing issues of affordability in higher education and making university degrees more accessible and attainable.

Recommendations

The University Students' Council proposes the following recommendations in an effort to launch an OER initiative at Western.

1. Western University should facilitate an open educational resource pilot project.
2. Western University should develop a comprehensive presentation on open educational resources during faculty orientation
3. Western University should recruit an open educational resources coordinator.

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[1] http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/access-to-knowledge/open-educational-resources/

[2] http://libguides.tru.ca/oer

[3] http://florida.theorangegrove.org/og/file/10c0c9f5-fa58-2869-4fd9-af67fec26387/1/2012_Florida_Student_Textbook_Survey.pdf

[4] http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/back-to-school-2015-how-post-secondary-students-can-fight-grim-reality-of-rising-textbook-costs-1.3215013

[5] https://open.bccampus.ca/2015/09/10/more-bc-open-textbook-stats/

[6] http://ctl.uga.edu/oer

Recommendation 1: the University should facilitate an open educational resource pilot project

Principle: feasibility of promising initiatives – especially those that could significantly impact students' pocketbooks – warrant institutional testing.

Concern: an initiative of this nature would prove near-impossible for students to champion and spearhead independently of University administration.

Recommendation

The University should facilitate an open educational resource pilot project in order to gauge, within a Western context, the feasibility of using OER as no- or low-cost alternatives to regular textbooks.

An OER pilot project at Western University would allow the institution to gauge faculty interest, student uptake, impact on knowledge retention, impact on Book Store revenues, and dollars saved for program participants, amongst other key indicators. It would also create an opportunity to supplement Western's catalog of open access educational resources.

American institutions that have successfully launched pilot projects that developed into lasting OER initiatives include Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Northwestern Michigan College, and the University of New Hampshire. In the United Kingdom, a national investment in OER resulted in 80 funded pilot projects at institutions such as Exeter University, Oxford University, and University College London, many of which were expanded upon in subsequent project phases.[7]

Perhaps the most significant implication for Western's academic leadership would be the ability to receive a stipend for developing custom course material. Alberta's provincial open access initiative states that a key objective of OER is to "provide... the opportunity to apply for funding to support the assembly, use, development, implementation and evaluation of open education resources in support of teaching learning and research."[8] Incentivizing individual faculty members to create open access course material could have hugely positive consequences on curricular flexibility, allowing participating faculty members to tailor their course material instead of searching for publications that may only support part of their curriculum. At the University of California Los Angeles, a pilot project endorsed by the Vice-Chancellor, Provost, and Senate compensated course instructors for the creation of custom open access resources.[9]

Small-scale testing supported by the institution would allow for a measure of success prior to heavy investment and may allay concerns related to product quality and student success rates. The gradual, intentional, pan-university incorporation of OER into curriculum would be an indispensable foundation without which a robust open access program could not be built, as a decentralized, non-incentivized model lacks a meaningful ability to capture a significant percentage of the student population. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), what began as a small-scale initiative comprised of 50 digitally published open access courses has developed into an internationally renowned OER system containing over 2000 full courses, over 100 of which come with a full set of lecture videos.[10]

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[7] https://openeducationalresources.pbworks.com/w/page/24838092/Pilot%20Programme%20-%20OER%20Release

[8] http://albertaoer.com/about-us

[9] http://www.library.ucla.edu/about/collections/collection-development-initiatives/affordable-course-materials-initiative

[10] http://ocw.mit.edu/about/15-years/?utm_source=OCW&utm_medium=HomePage&utm_campaign=OCW

Recommendation 2: the University should develop a comprehensive presentation on open educational resources for sharing at faculty orientation

Principle: changes to curricular structure and selection of course texts are at the discretion of course instructors.

Concern: many instructors are unaware of the benefits associated with integrating OER into their curricular composition.

Recommendation

The University Students' Council believes that Western University should develop a comprehensive presentation on Open Educational Resources to share with course facilitators during Faculty Orientation. According to a nationally representative survey conducted by Babson University of 2,144 American faculty members, it was found that "most faculty remain unaware of OER."[11] In a global climate where universities are striving to be at the forefront of pedagogical advancement, awareness of new and rapidly developing advancements in open access materials is essential.

The Babson survey found that professors rate "proven efficacy" and "trusted quality" as the two most important considerations in selecting teaching resources for students. Research conducted at the University of Virginia found that students in courses that used OER reported higher grades, lower rates of failure, and lower withdrawal rates than their counterparts in courses that did not use OER.[12] A follow-up survey of 315 students found that nearly 95% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that OER were "easy to use" while 78% of respondents felt that the OER provided access to more up-to-date material than is available in print textbooks. Studies conducted on a total of over 11,000 students and faculty, including at Mercy College (New York), Houston Community College, and Kansas State University, have found that there is no instance where a majority of students or faculty report that the OER were of inferior quality or efficacy when used as a primary resource.[13][14][15]

The University of New Hampshire (UNH) recently launched an OER Ambassador Pilot Program, the stated purpose of which is to "establish and recognize a cohort of… academic leaders who are committed to improving the student learning experience through the use of OER and who are eager to share their experiences with colleagues and peers throughout the university."[16] As at the UNH, using faculty orientation as a means to solicit faculty participation in an eventual OER pilot project could be hugely beneficial.

The University Students' Council believes that bridging the knowledge gap for faculty at Western regarding OER will have a significant impact on the number of participants willing to contribute to a pilot project. A comprehensive presentation on the benefits of OER, as outlined in the Introduction and Recommendation 1, will not only alert faculty to the potential of OER, but the data addressing commonly-raised concerns with OER will assure faculty of the high quality and efficacy of OER.

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[11] http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/openingthecurriculum2014.pdf

[12] http://www.eurodl.org/index.php?p=archives&year=2012&halfyear=2&article=533

[13] http://er.educause.edu/articles/2013/11/adopting-oer-a-case-study-of-crossinstitutional-collaboration-and-innovation

[14]
http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02680513.2012.716657#aHR0cDovL3d3dy50YW5kZm9ubGluZS5jb20vZG9pL3BkZi8x MC4xMDgwLzAyNjgwNTEzLjIwMTIuNzE2NjU3QEBAMA==

[15] http://jolt.merlot.org/vol9no1/lindshield_0313.htm

[16] http://www.unh.edu/it/unh-oer-ambassador-pilot

Recommendation 3: the University should recruit an open educational resources coordinator

Principle: Universities should, wherever possible, work with students and governments to reduce the costs associated with attending a postsecondary institution.

Concern: while much attention is lent to affordability within the context of university fees – both tuition and ancillary – very little is directed at other costs of living associated with school, including the cost of textbooks.

Recommendation

The University Students' Council believes that a small annual investment from the University in an open education resource coordinator would be well worth the hundreds of thousands of dollars a Western-led OER program could save students each year. As some postsecondary institutions begin embracing OER as a means to rein in spiraling costs and provide course facilitators with greater flexibility when designing their curriculum, a handful, including the Universities of Georgia and Oklahoma, are recruiting a staff complement to manage their OER initiatives. The University Students' Council believes that the recruitment of an Open Educational Resources Coordinator will lend meaningful leadership to an OER pilot project as outlined in Recommendation 1, and will better equip universities to expand cost-cutting and flexibility-inducing OER initiatives.

At the University of Oklahoma, the mandate of the Open Educational Resources Coordinator is to "assist in the creation, promotion, and utilization of open educational resources and open access content in support of OU's goal to reduce textbook costs through the development of open access educational resources for both students and faculty."[17] A similar position at Western University would allow any OER program developed to expand into a robust and well-supported initiative that has the capacity to work directly with faculty members on creating or acquiring open access resources.

At the University of Georgia, the Coordinator of Open Education Resources is housed within the Center for Teaching and Learning and has been responsible for coaching interested faculty members through the process of adapting open access resources in their courses. To date, the University of Georgia's OER initiative as coordinated by this individual has saved over 21,500 students a total of $1.98 million in textbook costs since 2013.[18]

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[17] http://guides.ou.edu/alternativetextbooks

[18] http://ctl.uga.edu/oer