More colleges use open educational resources

Students in Washington’s Pierce College District show their support for open educational resources. Photo: Pierce College District

BY ELLIE ASHFORD  FEBRUARY 4, 2017

Students at Maricopa Community Colleges (MCC) in Arizona have done just as well academically with open educational resources (OER) as with traditional, high-priced textbooks.

In addition, students and faculty are more engaged in teaching and learning in courses that use OER, which are free or low-cost teaching and learning materials, and students are more likely to complete degrees faster.

Those benefits, as well as the cost savings, could be used in marketing efforts aimed at encouraging more students to enroll, according to OER advocates.

MCC is among the growing number of community colleges that have been moving toward the creation of OER degree pathways since Tidewater Community College in Virginia pioneered the concept with its first no-cost “Z-degree,” in business, in 2013.
The Maricopa Millions OER Project was started in 2013 with the goal of using free and low-cost (less than $40 per course) instructional materials to save $5 million in five years.

That goal was achieved early; by fall 2016, the district had saved over $5.7 million, says Lisa Young, co-chair of Maricopa Millions and faculty director for the Center for Teaching and Learning at Scottsdale Community College (SCC).

Outlining the need

When expensive textbooks are required, Young says, many students don’t have them on the first day of class and some never buy them.

In addition to reducing costs and ensuring all students start class on an equal footing, she says, the program was started because “we had pockets of innovation where faculty were doing it on their own. Faculty felt textbooks weren’t meeting their needs.”

So far, 18 courses using OER have been approved for the Maricopa Millions Project in English, developmental education, chemistry, general business, psychology, Spanish, statistics, public speaking and other courses.

The new goal for Maricopa Millions is the creation of OER degrees. SCC plans to offer an OER associate of arts degree in general studies and an OER general education certificate – both for transfer students.

The most important lessons learned from Maricopa Millions: Faculty engagement is critical, as is support from the administration, Young says. A steering committee for the project included the president, chancellor, IT personnel, instructional designers and faculty.

OER trends

It’s hard to gauge the extent to which OER are used, as data is not tracked nationally, says Una Daly, director of the Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources. OpenStax, a nonprofit based at Rice University, estimates the OER materials it provides led to savings of $42 million in textbook costs in 2015-16.

As the nation’s largest OER provider, OpenStax has created open textbooks for about 25 popular general education courses, allowing students and colleges to order relatively inexpensive printed copies for about $25 to $60 from Amazon or college bookstores.
Because there is so much good OER material available, Daly says, faculty are now more likely to adapt OER to their needs – by customizing them or eliminating unnecessary chapters – than to create their own OER from scratch.

When faculty do develop OER texts, it’s most often done in career and technical education. In one example cited by Daly, faculty at the College of the Canyons in California wrote an OER text for a course in water management when they couldn’t find good existing materials.

Some colleges give faculty release time or a stipend to help them create, update or adapt OER materials. A few community college systems, including those in Massachusetts, California and Michigan, award faculty grants for this work.

Giving faculty more control over their teaching and instructional materials means “faculty bring more passion to the classroom, and that leads to students feeling more engaged. We believe that contributes to completion and retention,” Daly says. “Does it take time and effort? Yes, but the results are worth it.”

Positive results

While there isn’t much national data on whether OER leads to higher student success rates, a study at Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) showed some positive results. Students in OER courses in NVCC’s pilot test had a 9 percent higher success rate on average, in terms of completing courses with a grade of “C” or better, than students in courses with traditional textbooks, says Preston Davis, director of instructional services.

NVCC launched its first OER course in 2013. Since then, the average success rates at NVCC are about 5 percent higher among students in classes using OER. There are also fewer withdrawals in those courses.

Davis attributes that success to the fact that all students have access to the resources. Also, he says, OER materials come in a variety of formats, including videos, they better meet students’ learning preferences.

Through the use of OER, NVCC students saved more than $2 million since 2013, Davis says. “If a student can save $150 in a couple of courses, that can translate into enough savings to pay for another course.”

Courses using OER tend to fill up quickly, he adds; once students take one, they actively look for other courses using OER. As that trend continues, “we expect to see students progress toward a degree more quickly,” Davis says.
NVCC offers more than 40 courses where students don’t have to purchase a textbook. Two OER associate of science degree pathways – in general studies and social sciences – are in place, and an OER associate of arts degree in liberal arts is in development.

“We want to ensure students are not just selecting random courses; we want to build a program toward completion of a full OER degree,” Davis says.

When the college started with OER, it provided small stipends to faculty, but now it provides workshops and other support mechanisms instead. “That is more valuable to faculty than a stipend,” Davis says.

NVCC uses materials from OpenStax and Lumen Learning. The college’s instructional designers developed a system in-house for scaling OER courses to degree pathways in a relatively short time, Davis says. “Having instructional designers, faculty and librarians work together as a team was a culture shift at the college.”

A role for librarians

As OER gain ground at community colleges, librarians are getting more involved in helping faculty find good resources for their courses.

Faculty charged with developing OER for courses often don’t know where to find appropriate resources and are unfamiliar with Creative Commons licensing and the implications of copyright law, says David Wright, associate dean of learning resources for the library at Surry Community College in North Carolina.

At Surry, “librarians help faculty find online content from e-books and other resources faculty might not have thought about,” says Wright, who also chairs the National Council for Learning Resources, an affiliate council of the American Association of Community Colleges.

Even when he taught college classes using a traditional textbook, “I wasn’t using it cover to cover,” Wright says, noting that only about 60 percent of the average textbook aligns with a course’s learning objectives. “OER forces the alignment, and that encourages faculty and students to be more engaged with the materials.”

Faculty at Surry began using OER in some of the highest-enrollment courses in developmental English and the social sciences, and the concept is gradually spreading to other areas, including general education, history and fine arts.
The dream in the beginning was that faculty members would develop their own OER and people would contribute to it, Wright says. “Realistically, faculty are teaching a lot of courses and don’t have time to develop their own materials.”

It takes a big commitment, as well as a lot of time, to ensure the materials are up to date, as faculty can no longer rely on a publisher putting out a new edition. “That puts a lot of responsibility on the faculty,” he says. To compensate them for the extra work, Surry pays a small stipend.

Statewide support

Students in the Pierce College District in Washington saved more than $500,000 over the past 19 months through the Pierce Open Pathways program, which includes more than 40 OER online and in-person courses, says Quill West, OER manager for the district.

Pierce College at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, one of three community colleges in the district, offers an associate of arts degree for transfer with OER materials available for all 40 core courses.

“Students are pretty positive about the OER courses,” West says. “Faculty using OER are enjoying the experience because they have more choices in how courses are designed.”

Since its first OER degree was launched, Pierce joined the Achieving the Dream’s Open Educational Resources Degree Initiative. Faculty are using a grant from that program to develop an all-OER, two-year pre-nursing degree.

Washington had the first statewide OER initiative, West says, and the board of Washington State Community and Technical Colleges “is really invested in OER,” providing professional resources to faculty.

There’s also plenty of state-level support in Oregon, says Amy Hofer, the OER librarian for all 17 community colleges in the state.

Open Oregon Educational Resources, a component of the state’s Higher Education Coordination Commission’s Office of Community Colleges and Workforce Development, lists on its website more than 200 OER materials, including online textbooks and low-cost e-books.

Open Oregon has a $200,000 grant program under way, which is funding 35 projects involving the adaption, revision and creation of OER courses. According to Hofer, the development of an OER degree in the state is still a year or two away.
Hofer works with librarians, bookstore managers, administrators and faculty to help them develop and adapt OER. Every community college is working on OER but some, like Linn-Benton Community College, are farther along than others, she says.

By comparing bookstore data with faculty textbook adoptions, administrators at Linn-Benton were able to discourage faculty from requiring students to buy textbooks when the college already had the license for the e-book version. E-books are not open or free, but there is no cost to the student.

Students concerned about college affordability have been particularly active in the OER movement at Mount Hood Community College, she says. They’ve taken the cause to board meetings and hosted an OER festival with games like “The Price is Wrong.”

So far, the available materials are mostly in high-enrollment courses for transfer, she says. Open Oregon would like to see more OER courses in career and technical fields and developmental education, where students are especially vulnerable to high textbook prices.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellie Ashford

is associate editor of Community College Daily.

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