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Open Educational Resources: Opportunities for Saint Mary's College of California

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Open Educational Resources: Opportunities for Saint Mary's College of California

By

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Abstract

The basic tenets of Open Educational Resources (OERs) – access, equity and social justice – have driven the push for lower-cost or no-cost, high-quality textbooks and course materials. While legislation exists mandating development and implementation of OERs at California public institutions of higher education, no such incentives exist for private liberal arts colleges such as Saint Mary's College of California (SMC). Nevertheless, many of SMC's peer institutions have successfully sponsored and implemented OER initiatives. Challenges to the implementation of OERs, such as complex copyright issues and maintaining textbook quality and currency, can be daunting. Mergers and acquisitions within academic publishing are changing the landscape and will affect the way faculty select textbooks and course materials. From raising the academic profile of SMC to making textbooks and course materials more affordable and fulfilling the Lasallian mission, Saint Mary's College is fertile ground to begin exploring the creation and use of OERs.

Introduction

Open Educational Resources (OERs) refer to learning and teaching materials presented in different formats that are openly available to the public, without price barriers and with limited access restrictions (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, n.d.). Since the early 1990s, OERs have been developed with the goal of providing access to free, online curriculum materials for higher education. Today, OERs are becoming more common and libraries increasingly see an opportunity to support the development of OERs in response to the interests and needs of teaching faculty and the financial pressures faced by students who purchase traditional textbooks, often at considerable expense.

This white paper briefly describes what OERs are, along with its history and some recent related trends. This paper also reviews what Saint Mary's College of California's (SMC) peer

institutions and libraries have done in response to OERs and the OER movement. Finally, it makes a case for how SMC can embrace OERs. Some of the challenges associated with OERs, goals for OERs at SMC, how the SMC Library can support OERs, and resources needed for OERs at SMC are also described.

Definition of Open Educational Resources

Open Educational Resources (OERs) describe “teaching, learning and research materials in any medium - digital or otherwise - that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions” (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, n.d.). One of the important elements of OERs is the ability to adapt and modify the materials to suit the needs of the user. This type of flexibility is commonly referred to as the “five R’s” of OERs. They include the ability to retain (download and store), to reuse (utilize the content in a variety of ways), to revise (edit and adapt the content as needed), to remix (combine the content with other materials), and to redistribute (share the content whether it be the original or remixed versions) (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, n.d.).

For example, an OER textbook would be available online for free access and downloading. It would be provided in a format that would allow the instructor using the book to edit text and media, move or delete chapters, and combine it with content from other OERs. And the instructor would be able to then share their new version of the textbook for free online. An OER could also be as simple as a worksheet that is shared online in an editable format with a Creative Commons license that allows others to change and share it.

OER terminology

Creative Commons - An organization that offers different types of licensing options for authors to open up access to their works. Creative Commons is a popular option for many authors who wish to make their materials available online.

Fair Use - In US copyright law, the defense that copyright use is not violated if the material is used in specific ways. The four factors of fair use are:

1. What is the purpose of the proposed use?
2. What is the nature of the copyright work to be used?
3. How much of the copyrighted work will be used?

4. What is the effect on the market or potential market for the copyrighted work? (Baker, 2009).

MOOCs - Refers to massively open online courses, which are courses that are open and freely available for enrollment by anyone with online access.

Public domain: Works that are not (or are no longer) protected by copyright are considered to be in the public domain, meaning they can be accessed and used freely by the public (Creative Commons, n.d.).

History of Open Educational Resources

While the term OERs were first established at a UNESCO forum in 2002 (Baker, 2009), the practice of OERs has been around since 1997 when the California State University system created the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) repository to share educational materials for faculty use in classrooms (California State University - Institute for Teaching and Learning, 2019). David Wiley of Ohio State University, who became a major figure in the OER movement, further defined OERs with the “five R’s.” When influential institutions such as MIT (with MIT OpenCourseWare), Rice University (with Connexions, now called OpenStax) and University of Minnesota (with Open Textbook Library) committed to OERs, other US institutions started to take notice and follow suit. On the international level, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released a report with resources for OERs, underlining the global impact of OERs (OECD, 2007). As networked technology advanced in the 2000s, educational companies and startups, such as Khan Academy, took off. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has become a major proponent of OERs and has “taken a pioneering role in the development and use of OERs with its support of many initiatives” (Baker, 2009). OERs continue to diversify and expand with organizations and coalitions such as the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) evangelizing open content.

Trends in Open Educational Resources

The latest NMR Horizon Report identifies the proliferation of OERs as a mid-term trend, forecasting widespread adoption within the next three to five years (Becker et al. 2018). The basic tenets of OERs (an emphasis on access, equity and social justice) are manifest in the increased democratization of higher education. These tenets align well with the community college culture of “access, responsiveness to community need, and equity” (Troyer, 2015), as

well as with the targeting of large general education courses at the four-year university level. As an example of the latter, California State University, Channel Islands (CSUCI) has implemented what is known as OpenCI, providing a pathway to a degree through so-called Z-majors and, increasingly, Z-degrees, with “Z” indicating zero textbook cost associated with a course. Currently at CSUCI there are two such degrees, Communication and Early Childhood Studies, with a third, Health Sciences, beginning in the fall of 2019 (Dodge, Yap, Hannans, Jenkins, & Wood, 2018). Public institutions of higher learning in California are mandated by legislation to provide an increasing number of open textbooks and supporting materials (SPARC, n.d.).

In the publishing world, academic publishing houses are merging with or buying start-ups that incorporate OERs. Wiley recently purchased Knewton, an adaptive learning organization that has recently become known as an OER company. A pending merger between Cengage Learning and McGraw-Hill purports to strengthen a commitment to more affordable options for students and use of “inclusive access” as a business model. The thought is that inclusive access will provide students (on a subscription basis) use of textbooks and course materials from day one. Additionally, publishers are showing interest in developing interactive OERs using such trends as gamification, adaptive learning, embedded simulated experiments, and artificial intelligence (Blumenstock, 2019). In 2018, EBSCO, a library services and information company, announced a partnership with Intellus Learning, an educational platform as a service company, to curate openly licensed course materials and facilitate OER use by course instructors (EBSCO, 2018).

Ancillary to the growth of OERs, there is an increasing emphasis on open pedagogy, whereby students are viewed as creators of information, not simply consumers of it. In conjunction with their professors, students become co-creators of their courses, resulting in learner-driven education. (UTA Library, 2016).

MOOCs represent another facet of open knowledge. First introduced in 2012, the concept was imagined as a democratization of education, providing access to the farthest reaches of the networked world for those with limited access to higher education. Instead, MOOCs appear to appeal almost exclusively to those from affluent countries, enrollment has been steadily declining, and a consistently low retention rate have restricted its growth (Reich & Ruipérez-Valiente, 2019).

Open Educational Resources and Peer Institutions

At a more local level, there have been OER developments at SMC peer institutions as well. In 2018 the University of San Francisco developed an OER pilot program with library-funded faculty stipends totaling up to \$3,000 for faculty creating and/or using OER materials in lieu of a

traditional textbook. The pilot program was modeled on successful programs across the country, including programs in California funded through the California Textbook Affordability Act of 2015 (AB 798) (Borchard & Magnuson, 2017, p. 3).

In spring 2019, Loyola Marymount University, through its Center for Teaching Excellence and in partnership with its Academic Technology Committee, offered a “Faculty Incubator for Innovative Teaching (FIIT)” grant. The FIIT grants included a 3-day workshop to provide “time, resources, and support for awarded faculty to design innovative projects, strategies, and assessments grounded in pedagogy and research” (LMU CTE, 2019). Three tracks were developed for awarded faculty to select based on their projects: online and hybrid teaching; technology integration; and an OER track, where interested faculty partnered with a library team to investigate OER creation and adoption.

OERs have also been explored at other institutions through small-scale efforts including simply mentioning OERs in a library strategic plan (University of San Diego) (USD Copley Library 2015, p. 4), screening a webinar on OERs (Santa Clara University), and promoting OER “finders” or guides (Seattle University, Santa Clara University and many others). The above efforts at peer institutions suggest that there are opportunities to begin exploring OERs at SMC as well—even on a small scale.

Open Educational Resources at Saint Mary’s College

Why should SMC explore the use and creation of OERs? Below we argue how OER initiatives at Saint Mary’s College can align with SMC’s strategic priorities, as articulated in the *College Strategic Plan, 2015-2020*—particularly goals one, two, three, five and six (Saint Mary’s College of California, 2015).

Goal 1: “Discovery in Dialogue.” OERs can raise SMC’s academic profile and distinction by promoting student-driven pedagogy and innovative teaching practices. For faculty members who choose to create and develop open educational resources, the Saint Mary’s Digital Commons is the ideal archiving repository platform to increase the visibility, discoverability and impact of faculty open scholarship, promoting scholarly communication, and helping to further the College’s goal of being “nationally recognized for academic excellence.”

Goal 2: “Access to Success.” OERs can support the student lifecycle and contribute to student success by expanding access to free, unrestricted, high-quality online textbooks and course materials. Open textbooks are customizable, scalable, and can be revised and adapted as needed. The quality of open textbooks has also been shown to be as good as commercial textbooks

(Jhangiani, Dastur, Le Grand & Penner, 2018). Some studies show students get better exam and course grades and have lower failure and withdrawal rates in courses that use OER textbooks (Fischer, Hilton, & Robinson, 2015; McKenzie, 2018).

Goal 3: “From De La Salle to Lasallian.” OERs align with the goals of inclusive equity, social justice, and the common good. The adoption and use of open, freely-available to read and use, educational resources can help fulfill the SMC mission and Lasallian principles by upholding social-economic justice, educating the poor, cultivating lifelong learners, and creating an equitable student-centered community.

Goal 5: “Claiming Our Competitiveness.” By adopting OERs and reducing the cost of textbooks for students, Saint Mary’s can send a strong message that the College embraces a student-driven multimodal learning environment for students from all economic backgrounds. Prospective students may be more likely to choose an education at SMC if one can make the case that SMC offers a higher return on investment and lower educational costs for students compared with SMC peer institutions and other public colleges and universities. As SMC looks to increase its population of transfer students, the College should be mindful that many of these students will be coming from community colleges where OERs are commonplace, and they may come to SMC expecting their instructors to use OERs.

Goal 6: “Strengthening Foundations in Affordability.” OERs improve Saint Mary’s financial stability by providing affordable and equitable access to open educational materials (Peet, 2019). While SMC Library purchases textbooks totalling about \$20,000 annually for its textbook collection, some of these resources could potentially be repurposed toward supporting faculty use, adoption or development of OERs. The positive effects of OERs on student success could help SMC retain more students from historically underrepresented groups. As the College relies less on high-priced textbooks over time, faculty and students could benefit directly from being able to access and use quality OER content that is free to use and read, and free of copyright and licensing restrictions.

Challenges of Open Educational Resources

There are also potential challenges that SMC would face regarding OER initiatives. Switching textbooks for one’s course takes a lot of time and work. Adopting an open textbook or creating one’s own textbook is even more labor-intensive. The quality, stability, and credibility of OER content needs to be evaluated and monitored. While some studies show that OER textbook quality is as good as commercial textbooks, instructors would still need to assess each OER in terms of its quality, currency, relevance to course needs, and sustainability (OECD, 2007). Also,

publisher-funded textbooks often come with ancillary materials (test banks, study guides, online videos and animations) that open textbooks sometimes do not. Some educators are skeptical of OER accessibility compliance and the technological challenges they could pose for certain students. Moreover, due to the lack of ancillary materials and updates in OERs, using OER textbooks could widen the achievement gap for underserved populations in math and sciences (McMurtrie, 2019).

OERs often come with complex intellectual property and licensing concerns. Although Creative Commons is a free and reputable copyright licensing tool used by many scholars, their licenses could be overly complicated for some users and misused by others (Creative Commons, 2019; Chae, 2015). Financial sustainability is another concern for OERs. While OERs are free for end-users, it is not cost-free for content providers and publishers (Lederman, 2018). Unlike commercially produced textbooks, OERs do not generate profits for their authors. During the early stages of OER implementation, many colleges and universities usually need to provide some incentives and allocate funding for faculty to work with open educational materials (Chen, 2010).

Goals for Open Educational Resources at SMC

Based on a review of OERs' potential benefits, challenges, and opportunities, the SMC Library has identified three goals for further investigating and promoting OERs at SMC:

1. Encourage departments with introductory or high-enrollment courses to explore adopting OERs for their classes.
2. Raise awareness about the number of faculty on campus using some form of OERs.
3. Reduce the cost of course materials for students by promoting the use and creation of high-quality OERs.

Library Support for Open Educational Resources at SMC

The library can support the adoption of OERs by seeking grants and internal funding to support OER initiatives. The library can also build partnerships with early adopters of OERs on campus, as well as the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship (CTLS), the EdTech Center, and the campus bookstore to facilitate campus-wide conversations and collaborative initiatives. Furthermore, the library can create online guides, curating high-quality OERs for faculty, while

subject liaison librarians can also assist faculty members in determining what, if any, OERs are currently available for courses they teach and help interested faculty to find appropriate OERs to use or adapt.

Resources Needed for Open Educational Resources at SMC

In order to move forward with OER initiatives, the library has identified the following items that will aid in the success of OERs at SMC. These resources would ideally come with full support from the Provost and college administration.

One need that has been identified has been to adopt a Saint Mary's College intellectual property and OER policy. This policy would encompass copyright and digital repository guidelines, as well as provide information on Creative Commons copyright and author rights.

The college would also need to find funding to support OER course redesign, implementation, and sustainability and provide resources for funding grants.

While it is important to have an infrastructure in place to provide long-term support for OERs, it will also be helpful to develop assessment plans to measure OER impact.

Finally, it will be crucial to partner with faculty governance to encourage departments to consider open-access educational resources and usage in their promotion and tenure decision making.

Conclusion

With its increasing use in colleges and universities, OERs can be viewed not only as an alternative to costly textbooks, but also as a way for faculty to create learning materials that are flexible and adaptable. Trends in OERs show the emphasis on zero textbook cost, open pedagogy, and MOOCs. SMC's peer institutions are taking diverse approaches to OER, from providing funding to creating informational guides. SMC has the opportunity—with support from college administration and the library—to assist in OERs through storing OERs in the digital repository, obtaining faculty grants and stipends, and working in partnership with relevant campus departments. Aiding faculty in learning their copyright options and creating an

intellectual property and OER policy is a necessary component of successful OER implementation on this campus. However, it is also important to measure the impact of OERs on student success to ensure that we are adhering to the tenets of open education: access, equity, and social justice.

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