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Abstract

It began with a conversation in 2018. How could a consortium of private academic libraries in Iowa promote the use of open educational resources (OER) at their institutions? We could see the potential. An OER is defined as "a teaching, learning, or research resource that is offered freely to users in at least one form and that either resides in the public domain or has been released under an open copyright license that allows for its free use, reuse, modification, and sharing with attribution" (Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, Citation2021). The Iowa Private Academic Libraries consortium (IPAL) has 30 institutional members, with an average of 1,500 students at each institution. Few of the member institutions had coordinated OER initiatives or funding to support faculty who wanted to experiment with OER.

Keywords

colleges and universities, open educational resources, project, Iowa, textbooks

Disciplines

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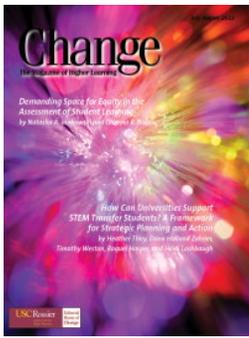
Be the Spark: Institutional Recommendations for Open Educational Resources

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Be the Spark:

Institutional Recommendations for Open Educational Resources

By Jenni Breems ⒾⒹ and Christopher Doll ⒾⒹ

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In Short

- The Iowa Private Academic Library Open Educational Resources Project supported 62 open educational resources (OER) projects at 18 private colleges and universities in Iowa.
- The project impacted 1,800 students during the 2021–2022 academic year. Students saved more than $208,000 on the costs of textbooks.
- OER adoption led to positive impacts for students, faculty, and institutions.
- Conversations are beginning, but challenges remain.

It began with a conversation in 2018. How could a consortium of private academic libraries in Iowa promote the use of open educational resources (OER) at their institutions? We could see the potential. An OER is defined as "a teaching, learning, or research resource that is offered freely to users in at least one form and that either resides in the public domain or has been released under an open copyright license that allows for its free use, reuse, modification, and sharing with attribution" (Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, 2021). The Iowa Private Academic Libraries consortium (IPAL) has 30 institutional members, with an average of 1,500 students at each institution. Few of the member institutions had coordinated OER initiatives or funding to support faculty who wanted to experiment with OER.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act provided funding to states to support education relief. Part of this funding was known as the Governor's Emergency Education Relief

(GEER) Fund. Iowa's governor prioritized projects that would "develop, curate, and support the adoption of open educational resources" and gave preference to consortia (Iowa Department of Education, 2020, p. 3). With a collaborative mindset, very little grant administration experience, and a "we-can-do-this" attitude, IPAL seized the opportunity. We applied for GEER funding and were thrilled to receive a grant in 2021. Then the hard work began.

Research shows that one of the most effective ways of increasing OER adoption is to offer small grants to faculty to incorporate OER into their classes (Alpi et al., 2017). IPAL used the GEER grant to increase OER adoption through mini-grants to faculty at participating institutions. These faculty adopted or remixed OER texts for the classes, created supplemental OER materials, redesigned courses to incorporate OER, or created new OER texts.

Much of the existing OER literature comes from state university systems and large universities. Well-known examples include State University of New York OER Services (2023) and Affordable Learning Georgia (2023). According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), there were 3,733 postsecondary institutions in the United States in 2020. Of those institutions, 1,963 were private institutions with enrollment of less than 5,000. The challenge of the IPAL OER Project was to take a model from large, state university systems and adapt it for the needs of multiple small, private institutions. Each of these institutions has its own governance, policies, procedures, and capacity for institutional support.

The results of the project were beyond what we had expected. When the IPAL OER Project

concluded in June 2022, we had funded 62 faculty minigrants for OER. Textbook costs were reduced for 1,800 students. Eighteen private colleges and universities in Iowa now had at least one faculty member who had used OER.

Cost savings and numbers are only part of the story. In our roles as project coordinators, we had an up-close view of the impacts of OER on students, faculty, and institutions. After describing our experience with the IPAL OER Project, we recommend considerations for other open education initiatives.

The Structure of the IPAL OER Project

The IPAL OER Project provided a significant spark for the adoption and creation of OER at institutions in the consortium. The goal of our grant-funded project was to increase OER adoption. By design, librarians were key players in the grant's success. They obtained letters of support from chief academic officers, identified liaisons on each campus, provided technical support with publishing software, gave advice on Creative Commons licensing, and promoted OER to their faculty and administrators.

The IPAL OER Project was awarded approximately $250,000 in GEER grant funds. More than 80 percent of those funds went to minigrants to faculty at participating institutions. The faculty minigrants needed flexibility to accommodate various points in an OER journey and multiple scenarios for institutional support. So, in true OER spirit, we borrowed structures from existing minigrant programs and scaled them for multiple institutions (Iowa State University, 2022; University of Iowa Libraries, 2022). Faculty were eligible for five types of award funding: adoption, remixing, support materials, course redesign, and OER creation. Each award type had specific requirements and a range of available funding (see Table 1).

A team of five librarians scored the grant proposals. They reviewed the potential impact of the projects, timelines, assessment plans, cost savings, feasibility, and potential impact on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). The scoring rubric gave full points for DEI if "the proposal clearly demonstrates a commitment to including diverse perspectives, serving populations disproportionately affected by textbook costs, and making the resource accessible to all students" (IPAL, 2022; rubric available upon request).

Every faculty member who received minigrant funding submitted a final report. These reports included descriptions of the projects, syllabi for classes impacted by OER, the number of enrolled students, and final project budgets. Quotes from grantees in this article are drawn from their final reports.

OER and Students

One of the documented benefits of OER is cost savings for students. A study conducted by

Table 1. Award Levels From IPAL OER Project Call for Proposals, 2021

Award	Award range	Description
Adoption	$500–$1,000	Use an existing open textbook or library licensed material* for a course with no editing and minimal course adaptation required.
Remixing	$750–$2,000	Adapt, update, combine, or improve existing OER or library licensed material* to replace a currently used textbook.
Support materials	$1,000–$3,000	Develop test bank questions, teaching support materials, quizzes, interactive learning aids, or other support materials for existing OER or library licensed material.*
Course redesign	Up to $5,000	Redesign a course around the use of OER or library licensed material.*
OER creation	Up to $10,000	Create an original OER to be used in a course and shared under an open license.

*Note. Library licensed material must be free of digital rights managment (DRM). This means an eResource that is free of restrictions and allow for unlimited users, downloads, saves, and prints. To learn more about DRM-free resources and what options you have, please contact a librarian at your institution.

> **Faculty who received minigrants saw increased student engagement when students had access to course materials.**

the Midwest Higher Education Compact showed that adopting an OER textbook saves an average of $116 per student per course (Zaback, 2022). Another benefit of OER is improved student success. A study by Colvard et al. (2018) found that the number of A, A–, and B+ grades increased when a faculty member adopted an OER text. More importantly, the rate of D, F, and withdrawal letter grades decreased by 2.68 percent when OERs were adopted.

Nearly 1,800 Iowa students were enrolled in courses taught by faculty who received minigrants through the IPAL OER Project. Assuming $116 per student/per adopted OER, the student savings on textbooks costs in the 2021–2022 academic year was $208,452. Cost savings for students will continue to accrue as faculty use the OER resources in subsequent semesters.

Faculty who received minigrants saw increased student engagement when students had access to course materials. One IPAL OER grantee wrote, "When all students have the same access to resources, participation is increased." Another grantee noted that "[i]nteractive texts allow students to engage in a non-linear fashion that can be customized to different student learning needs." Due to the timeframe of GEER grant funding, the IPAL OER Project did not have the scope to address student success outcomes.

Some faculty grantees brought students alongside them in the process of content creation. Open pedagogy projects included student-authored pieces on athletes and activism, photo collages on racial justice, and Latin translations of short stories. In other projects, students assisted with the creation of assignments, gave input on a revamped environmental toxicology course, and designed the layout for a special education textbook.

OER and Faculty

The IPAL OER Project attracted a broad range of faculty participants. Some were in their first year; others had more than 35 years of classroom experience. The 62 projects were conducted in disciplines across the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Grant-funded financial compensation allowed for faculty to experiment with open educational resources. One IPAL OER grantee wrote, "If done well (which means, having the funding and time to prepare the material), OER is a unique opportunity to publish and make available teaching material that, because of its experimental nature … would have very little chance of becoming useful to the public otherwise." Using OER can "broaden instructors' philosophies about teaching and catalyze innovative instructional strategies. Reimagined courses can enact more student-centered, equity-focused approaches that elevate students' knowledge and cultures and give students greater agency over their learning" (Griffiths et al., 2022, p. 6).

OER can promote faculty collaboration across institutions. Participating faculty spread the word about their OER experiences through conference presentations and online discussions. Some of them contributed their work to open collections, such as the OER Commons. In one IPAL OER Project, grantees from two different institutions partnered to adapt an existing analytical chemistry text for use in classes taught at both colleges. They wrote, "Collaboration between institutions is a valuable approach for developing these types of materials. The additional perspective provided by another

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professional in the field added a great deal to the quality of this work."

However, adoption of OER is not without its problems. Faculty often struggle to find OER that are relevant, up-to-date, and of good quality (Admiraal, 2022). In many cases, OER options do not include the instructor resources that are available with conventional textbooks. Instructors may need to identify or create supplemental resources for their courses. Copyright, fair use, and Creative Commons licensing presented another set of challenges for grantees. To learn more about these issues, librarians and faculty from IPAL institutions took advantage of training opportunities through groups such as the Iowa OER (2023) and Open Education Network (2023). Identifying and working with new collaborators presented challenges for some grantees. In some cases, grantees were unsure of how to identify institutional partners who could support their OER projects. Common collaborators included business office personnel, student assistants, campus administrators, information technology staff, and disciplinary peers at other institutions.

Some IPAL OER Project grantees underestimated the time and types of expertise that open education projects would require. For example, one faculty grantee hired a student graphic designer to assist with the layout of a new OER text. The complexity of the project was outside the student designer's skillset and the faculty grantee was unable to give guidance. Eventually, they sought additional help from a member of the art department to complete the project. This project also encountered technical difficulties in hosting and publishing the book on

an unfamiliar hosting platform. They dealt with that challenge by using a Google Doc with view-only permissions as a temporary solution.

OER and Institutions

We saw that the IPAL OER Project clearly had both benefits and challenges for participating faculty grantees. But, we wondered, what role do institutions play in facilitating OER? In a study for SRI International and Achieving the Dream, Griffiths et al. (2022) visited eight community colleges to observe innovative teaching and learning practices related to OER. Their report lists institutional practices that can facilitate OER or act as barriers to OER adoption. This includes academic policies and leadership, financial considerations, training, equity considerations, and classroom support.

We asked several library directors who had participated in the IPAL OER Project to describe how it had impacted their institutions. For one library director, the impact was seen in increased conversation. They wrote, "Promoting the program opened larger conversations about educational resources, textbook equity and costs, as well as the opportunities that open education affords. Our campus dialogue grew quickly, involving about one-quarter of our full-time faculty. … We consider that energy a true success as instructors make changes in their teaching and course materials. … We hope to continue building on that success, benefiting more students in the future."

A second library director also noted the benefit to students: "The learning aids created to help

students successfully pass a chemistry, calculus, or philosophy class will allow each of our institutions to retain students to graduation, which in turn leads to better jobs and a higher standard of living." At this university, the economic incentives of the minigrants were linked to innovative teaching. The same library director wrote, "Providing this financial incentive to faculty unleashed so much creativity! The economic impact of providing free instructional materials is easy to measure and attractive to campus administrators."

Other IPAL institutions also saw the impact of the OER project through increased conversation with other campus groups, creativity in the classroom, reduced textbook costs, and greater student access to required materials. The publicity generated by the IPAL OER Project allowed librarians and faculty at individual institutions to network with each other and raised awareness of existing OER programs in the state of Iowa.

Recommendations for OER Initiatives

The comments from the library directors illustrate that the IPAL OER Project accomplished what it set out do. Through one-time grant funding, the project increased OER adoption and creation at participating institutions. Based on our experiences with this collaborative project, we recommend these institutional considerations for OER initiatives:

External funding may be needed. OER initiatives will likely require outside grant funding. The external funding was a significant spark for institutions that participated in the IPAL OER Project.

Invest in training for grant writing and grant management. Many IPAL OER Project minigrant recipients were working on their first grant-funded projects. Teaching faculty may not have experience writing grant proposals.

Do not underestimate administrative costs and time. Successful programs will allot enough time and resources for project management and grant administration.

Promote textbook access for all students. OER materials include multiple perspectives. They help students most affected by high textbook costs. And they make course materials equally available to all students.

Create space for flexibility. IPAL OER Project faculty were drawn to the course redesign and OER creation funding categories because they allowed for customized content. This customization enhanced their teaching styles, providing benefits to students.

Utilize campus partners. Institutional support from OER might come from a center for teaching and learning, a research/grants office, the information technology department, the library, or an instructional designer. Other campus partners might be working on DEI issues. In IPAL's case, each institution had differing supports available to the faculty with minigrants.

Work with the campus business office. Grant-funded projects can be complex. IPAL OER Project grantees found that strong working relationships with personnel in campus business or finance offices were key.

Understand licensing and copyright. Any OER initiative should include someone with knowledge of copyright and Creative Commons licensing. Check with your library.

Be the OER Spark

How can OER efforts be nurtured and sustained? This is an ongoing question that was outside of the scope of the IPAL OER Project. We raise these questions for others who are considering OER initiatives. Could OER be incorporated into existing processes for course/program review? Are there internal funds that could be used to support the scholarship or pedagogy of OER? Can creation of OER materials be used as evidence for tenure or promotion? Are there ongoing opportunities for collaboration?

In summary, one-time funding through the IPAL OER Project sparked the adoption and creation of OER at 18 private colleges and universities in Iowa. Participating faculty and librarians at these institutions saw positive impacts for their institutional communities. The fledgling OER experiments were not without challenges. Institutions will need further conversation and creativity to support and grow their OER initiatives. Our hope is that the efforts of the IPAL OER Project are a spark that will grow and spread.

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