

## Review of *OpenStax college success*

**Claudia Chiang-Lopez**

Faculty

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

[chianglo@unlv.nevada.edu](mailto:chianglo@unlv.nevada.edu)

Baldwin, A., August, L., Bennett, J., Mathues, S., Monroe, S., O’Leary, MJ, Pearson, A., Troesh, J., Watts, M. (2020). *OpenStax College Success*. OpenStax.

<https://openstax.org/details/books/college-success>

Textbook costs remain prohibitive for students, leading many students to delay their purchasing until financial aid has been disbursed, sharing or pirating their books, or, in 43% of cases, foregoing the book (Florida Virtual Campus, 2012). Other students rely on older versions of their textbooks, whether they purchased them or rent them from the library on an intermittent basis. This creates a gap between how the class is planned to be taught and how it is actually experienced by students (Buczynski, 2008). Students who do not purchase their course textbook are more likely to withdraw from their courses, and are less likely to do well in them (Florida Virtual Campus, 2012). This can lead to increased time to degree completion. Open Educational Resources (OER) are one possible solution to this problem. OERs can be defined as “teaching, learning and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others” (Atkins, Brown, & Hammond, 2007, p. 4). Thanks to being free, using an OER can increase student access to textbooks.

The *College Success* textbook is an OER focused on guiding first year students through their freshman year that I have used in my own first year seminar courses for a year. The book

was co-authored by Amy Baldwin, Lisa August, James Bennett, Sabrina Mathues, Susan Monroe, MJ O’Leary, Ann Pearson, Joshua Troesh, and Margit Watts. Published by OpenStax in 2020 and updated as recently as January 2022, it is part of the OpenStax College Initiative at Rice University. The nonprofit has received funding from various foundations, including the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Watson, Domizi, & Clouser, 2017), in order to create free and open textbooks. The OpenStax books are peer-reviewed, and licensed under a Creative Commons License 4.0 International (Watson, Domizi, & Clouser, 2017).

The book opens with an introduction to college and its culture, as well as how the book might be helpful to students. It then turns, for the first 6 chapters, to cover topics that are helpful for new students, like time management, learning strategies, the hidden curriculum, goal-setting, academic planning, reading, studying and notetaking skills. The following chapters are called Thinking (covering critical thinking as well as creative thinking), Communicating (looking at technology, and conflict resolution), and Understanding Civility and Cultural Competence. While the book focuses on freshmen, those sections could be useful for courses in Interpersonal Communication or Speech courses. Appendix A, which gives information on conducting and presenting research could also be helpful for those courses. The last chapters focus on student’s overall wellbeing and cover financial literacy, self-care, and career planning.

One of its strengths is that it encourages students to self-reflect at multiple points in each chapter. Chapters open with a short survey for students, based on the chapter they will be reading and prompting them to think about their own current knowledge on the topic. At the end of the chapter, the questions are revisited, so that students have an opportunity to think about how their thoughts or feelings have changed as a result of the reading. The chapter objectives are outlined

after the opening survey, followed by content which includes questions, activities, links to websites to explore the subject further, hypotheticals, and charts to illustrate concepts. Most *College Success* chapters also include active learning writing activities that ask students to consider how the different topics are applicable to their lives. Instructors could assign these as homework or use them for in-class activities (like warm-ups or to inspire small group discussions). In addition to all of this, the chapters include an “estimated completion time” counter. This might be helpful for students who could otherwise feel overwhelmed by the length of the chapters.

Students have the option to view the book online, download it, print the book themselves, or order a print copy of the textbook from the publisher (at this time, it would cost around \$30) or their school bookstore. Students might prefer this as there are some things lost with some online-only version of an open source textbook, including the ability to highlight and annotate the book. The book itself can be used without an account, but these features are available for students who make a free account through their website. In addition to this, they include a reading, studying, and notetaking guide for students, which could be especially helpful for new college students.

The book also has features that are helpful to instructors. Unlike many OER textbooks, the *College Success* book also includes instructor ancillaries like lecture slides, lesson plans, a resource manual, and a test bank. Research has found that students prefer that their instructors add links to specific chapters or sections into their institution’s learning management system (LMS) (Baker, Thierstein, Fletcher, Kaur, & Emmons, 2009). This is easily done with the *College Success* textbook. As an instructor, I have found it immensely helpful to have the ability to link to specific passages within our LMS for each weekly module. In my experience, it helps

students access information quickly and efficiently. Other instructors would likely also enjoy being able to insert the readings into a module along with pages outlining the objectives for the module, links to supplemental material, and quizzes.

Still, there are areas of improvement for the textbook. Some content areas seem a little sparse, in particular the research appendix, which does not cover how to conduct research online or how to consider source credibility, something that is particularly important for students who may have never learned how to think critically about media. The lack of a term glossary seems a glaring oversight, especially as some educational terms and concepts might be unfamiliar to students from marginalized groups, like first-generation students.

Overall, the textbook has many strengths. I believe it is especially useful when supplemented with information on university resources that students might not be familiar with. The *Goal Setting* and *Career Planning* chapters, for example, provide an opportunity for instructors to talk to students about their academic success centers or career centers. This customizability and the variety of topics covered make it a book I feel comfortable recommending.

## References

- Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2014). Opening the curriculum: Open educational resources in the U.S. higher education, 2014. Online learning survey.  
<http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/openingthecurriculum2014.pdf>
- Baker, J., Thierstein, J., Fletcher, K., Kaur, M., & Emmons, J. (2009). Open textbook proof-of-concept via Connexions. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10(5), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v10i5.633>
- Buczynski, J. (2007). Faculty begin to replace textbooks with “freely” accessible online resources. *Internet Reference Services Quarterly*, 11(4), 169-179.  
[https://doi.org/10.1300/J136v11n04\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1300/J136v11n04_11)
- Florida Virtual Campus. (2012). 2012 Florida student textbook survey. Open access textbooks.  
[http://www.openaccesstextbooks.org/pdf/2012\\_Florida\\_Student\\_Textbook\\_Survey.pdf](http://www.openaccesstextbooks.org/pdf/2012_Florida_Student_Textbook_Survey.pdf)
- Watson, C. E., Domizi, D. P., & Clouser, S. A. (2017). Student and faculty perceptions of OpenStax in high enrollment courses. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 18(5), 287–304. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v18i5.2462>