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OER Helps Buoy Gen Ed Success at Community Colleges and Universities

Open Education (/open-education/)

Across the country, colleges and universities are leveraging Open Education Resources (OER) to expand access to general education courses. Not only are students saving money on books, many are performing better in courses and beyond. It's a win for faculty, too, who can be more creative, nimble and responsive to their class needs with digital materials.

General education courses are a foundational requirement at most two- and four-year degrees across the United States. While there are a variety of ways that institutions and states structure general education programs, there are some common courses, content areas, and skills required in order to reach graduation.



When general education courses use expensive textbooks, it can create a disproportionate hardship on some students—adding to student debt and creating a barrier to completion. OER is becoming more widely available in common general education topics, presenting institutions with an opportunity to expand enrollment and, more importantly, increase student retention and success.

Z-Degrees gain traction in Maryland

Montgomery College (MC), a large suburban Maryland community college, near Washington D.C., recognized that using OER

benefits students in many ways. The college already had a variety of advocates among faculty, staff, administration and students, so it was ~~not~~ a easy decision to look for ways to advance OER, says Samantha Streamer Veneruso, chair of the General Studies department.

(<https://sparcopen.org>) The college received an Achieving the Dream grant that allowed it to accelerate OER in powerful ways by creating zero-textbook degrees (known as Z-Degrees) or pathways to degrees that do not require students to purchase texts by relying on OER.

“We first chose the general studies program for Z-Degree development because it was the largest degree at the college, so there was the potential to impact the most students,” Streamer Veneruso says. “It is also a degree that many students rely on for transfer into a 4 year program—saving them time and money to completion.”

MC now has several Z-Degrees beyond General Studies. Surveys indicate students believe OER materials are robust and are easier to read than some textbooks. Content is relevant and, since faculty have created the material, students appreciate that it is actually used throughout the courses – rather than buying an expensive textbook only to have a professor reference just a chapter or two, says Streamer Veneruso.

“As a faculty member, I feel I am able to engage students in developing materials that work best for them. It creates a sense of agency over their own learning, that I am trying to foster in my classrooms. It puts them at the center of their own educational journey,” Streamer Veneruso adds

MC supports faculty in the development and advocacy for OER through faculty professional development workshops, fellowships, open-labs, and a network of faculty developing OER and advancing open pedagogy.

Since the implementation of the Z-Degrees at Montgomery College in Spring 2017, students have saved approximately \$9 million.

Georgia students give OER high marks

At the University System of Georgia, online general education courses that use OER through its eCore program have been steadily growing for years. Enrollment increased by 13 percent last year, despite the pandemic.

There are now 21 institutions participating in the cooperative academic program that offers nearly 700 course sections that all use a lot of OER learning materials, according to Christy Talley Smith, director of curriculum and instruction for USG eCampus.

(<https://sparcopen.org>) Nearly 24,000 students enrolled in eCore in Georgia have free electronic texts. Since 2013, students taking eCore classes saved a total of \$25 million by using OER materials adopted and created in the eCore curriculum.

Among students, OER gets high marks for ease of use and affordability. For faculty members, many enjoy the ability to remix and adapt the eCore curriculum's educational resources, Talley Smith says. Faculty subject matter experts can also develop complementary resources for homework systems in STEM courses and create ancillary resources that boost student success as needed.

Through a partnership between eCampus and the University of North Georgia Press and Affordable Learning Georgia, OER has been produced and adopted for eCore courses. The USG eCore instructional design team works with subject matter experts from all over Georgia from a variety of USG institutions to produce and implement high-quality OER, Talley Smith says.

Faculty can revise content as needed and as information changes," Talley Smith says. "Having colleagues that have prepared these materials who are tenured, celebrated, successful experts in the field, gives us essential buy-in with the faculty." Additionally as the eCore curriculum converted to 100% OER, course completion and success rates in courses have continued to increase.

OER reduces financial barriers in Arizona

(<https://sparcopen.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Gen-Ed-3-Jeswin-Thomas-scaled.jpg>) Mesa Community College in Arizona developed an online general education degree with no textbooks costs that is significantly lowering the cost of college and providing students with greater flexibility. The college calculates that the MCC Z-Degree saves students more than \$8,000 or 62% over the cost of a traditional associate program.

Altogether, between the spring of 2018 and spring of 2021, about 7,400 students have enrolled in Z courses saving them approximately \$1.13 million in textbook costs.



Instructors work closely with the MCC Center for Teaching & Learning team to develop the content for each Z course offered. Their materials include OER, streaming media, library databases and faculty-developed content, says Laura Ballard, MCC director of eLearning.

(<https://sparcopen.org>) Faculty already doing OER initially were contacted to develop Z courses. Media specialists and instructional designers worked with professors to create content and expand the offerings. Interest among professors grew as word spread the classes with OER had higher success rates.

The Z program exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the college moved to remote learning, Ballard says. Recently MCC has moved to a guided pathway model to ensure students are taking the right courses to be able to effectively transfer to a state university. Targeting general education courses with the highest enrollment allowed the college to lower the cost barrier, improve access for the most students and prepare them for a success beyond the community college.

Ballard, who also teaches English, says every semester she hears from students who are grateful the OER has saved them money and time locating textbooks.

“Many of them are single parents working full time. Some textbooks cost more than their tuition and they just really appreciate the savings,” she says. “And they always say the content is the same, if not better.”



Across the Scientific Community, Consensus Grows on Need for More Equitable Publishing Model



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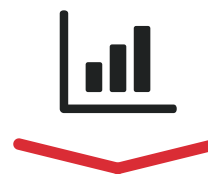
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