Textbook Alternatives Take Hold at Community Colleges

Inside Higher Ed

A high-profile affordable textbook program wraps up in Arizona having doubled its original goal, and other institutions share similar successes.

By Mark Lieberman

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Institutional funding for a high-profile affordable textbook initiative in one of the nation's largest community college districts is on track to run out as scheduled this spring -- but the program exceeded the district's expectations by a wide margin, and efforts will continue in a new form.

Meanwhile, a Michigan community college is on schedule thus far to meet an ambitious goal for 70 percent of its instructors to be exclusively offering open educational resources in their courses by 2020.

These two-year institutions are among several across the country that have in recent years doubled down on commitments to providing open educational resources. To Una Daly, director of the Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources, momentum around OER is translating into concrete results.

"I find that myself when I go to conferences and present, people know what an open educational resource is now," Daly said. "There's still some lack of knowledge from a faculty perspective about how to go about it … But when you're at these larger events, many administrators are aware of OER. They see that as a real positive for their college to attract students."

Maricopa Looks Ahead

The Maricopa Millions project launched in 2013 at the Maricopa Community College District in Arizona with a mission to save students money by encouraging instructors to adopt course materials that cost students less than $40 per semester. At that time, the district announced five years of funding for a total of $160,000 in grants, and established a goal of $5 million in savings for the district's 11 institutions over that time period.

"We were like 'Oh, it would be wonderful if we could meet that,'" said Lisa Young, faculty director for the Center for Teaching & Learning at Scottsdale Community College, who served as one of the founders of the program. She thought it was unlikely.

District officials estimate a figure around $11.5 million -- quite a bit more than anticipated, which reflects how quickly OER has grown in prominence.

Those figures were calculated from an average textbook cost of $100 and an average class size of 20; most of the classes participating in the program have significantly higher enrollment. Institutions often struggle with determining exactly how much students saved over that time period, because the number is different depending on whether the calculation factors in students who already save money by renting textbooks instead of buying them and students who would have paid nothing because they chose not to buy books.

As the grant program wraps up, the steering committee for the program is looking to the future. Matthew Bloom, a professor of English at Scottsdale, will serve for two to three years as the institution's first "dedicated OER coordinator." For the first time, a single person will be in charge of the institution's textbook transformation programs.

The budget will be smaller, but Bloom doesn't see that as a downside. The most important project to pursue going forward, he said, is improving courses that have already been developed around OER and other low-cost materials. Involving students in the creation and curation of materials is a key focus.

Further Reading

How instructors use OER to take ownership of course materials.

States mandate OER labels in course catalogs despite challenges.

Congress invests in OER, slowly but surely.

Foreign language students help create OER.

The new setup puts faculty members at the center of discussions, according to Young, who helped strategize the program's future.

"Really what Matthew's going to have an opportunity to do is continue the work and grow the work in a full-time manner instead of having two or three people in a part-time manner," Young said. "He can really strategically dive into it with both feet."

Bloom expects much of the job at first will be that of an "OER detective" -- developing an inventory of existing projects and getting a better sense of the district's progress.

Awareness has increased markedly since 2013, but Bloom acknowledges resistance among faculty members is still out there.

"Sometimes they are skeptical of the amount of time and work that they think's going to be needed to adopt OER. Sometimes they're skeptical of the quality of OER," Bloom said. "Sometimes they just like to have the materials curated and packaged nicely by a publisher."

Plans to incorporate more open-access materials include Mesa Community College's ongoing efforts to develop a z-degree program, in which students pay nothing for textbooks in all of the required courses. Bloom also helps to develop partnerships with bigger local and regional institutions like Arizona State University and the University of Arizona.

Progress Elsewhere

Lansing Community College had hoped for 70 of its 700 faculty members to have fully converted to OER by now. According to Regina Gong, OER resource manager at Lansing, the current number is 75, in 26 courses representing 154 sections.

That number is likely to start growing faster thanks to a $500,000 grant the college's president and Board of Trustees approved last fall. More money might be in the pipeline as well, according to Gong.

These funds go toward creation and development of OER. Faculty members receiving grant money will begin launching their resulting projects this fall.

Nicole Allen, director of open education for the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, thinks Lansing's investment is significant, though not unprecedented.

"It's a substantial strategic commitment to scale up a model that has proven highly successful and beneficial for students," Allen said. "LCC already established itself as a leader in OER, and this is another way they are pushing the bar higher."

Salt Lake Community College in Utah estimates that as of this spring, students have saved more than $5 million on textbooks thanks to four years of OER advocacy, focused on general education courses. College officials arrived at that figure by looking at the old and new prices of textbooks and splitting the difference.

According to Jason Pickavance, who leads faculty development and educational initiatives at the institution, students are saving a little more than $1 million per semester, with more than 1,000 open sections slated for next fall.

Eventually, according to Salt Lake's provost, Clifton Sanders, the university hopes to offer fully online degrees comprised entirely of OER resources.

"I think we're most of the way there and still have some work to do," Sanders told "Inside Digital Learning" last fall.

Daly, of the Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources, traces the recent spread of OER in part to federal grants from the Department of Labor under President Obama, and the subsequent Department of Education requirement that all grant-funded projects include openly licensed materials.

"All of that has contributed to a lot of awareness around OER which has really helped," Daly said.

She believes the big challenge for community colleges will be to integrate OER and other affordable materials into the institutional culture and operations -- keeping the bookstore abreast of changes, notifying faculty members about newly available materials and monitoring the institution's overall engagement with affordable courseware.

"When the grants are running down, how do they make sure that OER is part of the policy?" Daly said.

Read more by Mark Lieberman