Policy Brief

Magnifying the Impact of College Promise through Open Educational Resources

BY LISA PETRIDES, PHD

The COVID-19 pandemic is making it more difficult for millions of students to access and afford higher education. But even before the pandemic, in a period with high employment, the gap between what students can earn and the total costs of their education made it difficult for today's community college students to pay their way through school. According to the Center on Workforce Development at Georgetown University, most students work in sales and food-service jobs that pay only about $15,800 annually – enough to cover community college tuition but not enough to cover the rest of their needs, including housing, childcare, and textbooks, all of which pose significant – and potentially insurmountable – obstacles for students in completing their studies. These hurdles are not only limited to community college students; the difficulties of covering college costs are just as true for university students.

College Promise programs are a crucial means to help address this challenge. These programs typically consist of efforts that offer recent high school graduates a scholarship paying up to 100 percent of tuition and fees at postsecondary institutions, lifting that burden and allowing students' limited resources to be redirected toward living expenses and out-of-pocket costs.

These programs have had success in delivering greater access to higher education but can be strengthened further by incorporating solutions that address other student needs.

One such solution is Open Education Resources (OER) – freely available, openly licensed textbooks, videos, interactives, and primary source material for individual courses and even entire degree programs – to both offset the cost of textbooks, and to introduce more dynamic teaching and relevant course materials. Some community colleges and College Promise programs are already taking steps to incorporate these free resources, and research indicates that this can save full-time

To receive a monthly update about Promise news, events, and publications, sign up for our newsletter at www.collegepromise.org

RECOMMENDATIONS

Investigate OER policies in your state:
- Statewide coordinating councils
- Grant programs that can support OER creation and adoption
- Resources for course and program conversions to OER
- Regulations about labeling no or low-cost courses in course descriptions or registration materials

Identify or create grant programs and funding opportunities to support institutional and faculty pilots of OER materials.

Connect administrators and faculty to other institutions and organizations supporting OER adoption.

Educate administration, faculty, students, and other stakeholders about OER and its benefits.

Ensure that OER materials are accessible for students with disabilities.

community college students a significant portion of the $700 to $1,300 per year they pay for textbooks [1], the costs for which have increased by 73 percent since 2006 – more than four times the rate of inflation. With the cost of an individual textbook reaching $200, $300, or even $400 per book [2], half of community college students report using financial aid for books compared to 28 percent of students at four-year public institutions [3]. As a result, "Last dollar" Promise programs, which provide funding only after the sources of aid as Pell Grants are exhausted, limit opportunities for community college students to use financial aid to cover textbook costs in many places [4]. When students turn to loans to pay for books, interest and other fees only add to the disproportionate impact of textbook costs on low-income students, which in turn contribute to other affordability issues, including housing and food insecurity.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, more than one-quarter (27 percent) of community college students report dropping out of one or more classes because they cannot afford the textbooks [5]. Nearly half of all college students report that textbook prices impact which and how many courses they can take, and two-thirds say they have skipped buying a textbook because of cost [6].

A growing number of institutions – and some Promise Programs – are recognizing the impact of textbook costs on access and attainment. Introducing the use of OER represents a significant opportunity to magnify the impact of these efforts while affirming their institutions' commitment to affordability, access, and quality.

Open Educational Resources

As the Internet has made free, always-available access to information became the norm across many sectors. Yet, legacy publishing models continue to constrain higher education, imposing high costs on institutions and students.

OER addresses this issue by allowing institutions and faculty members to adopt,

Lisa Petrides, Ph.D.

is founder and CEO of ISKME, a global nonprofit dedicated to democratizing access to education, and whose work inspires and supports educators to adopt open education practices. Petrides is a scholar and international open educational resources (OER) expert who has helped lead the development of tools and strategies to create and support the field of OER. Her work includes the creation of ISKME's award-winning OER Commons, a digital public library of open educational resources and collaboration platform that facilitates the discovery and improvement of high-quality digital resources that are free, openly licensed, and available for a diverse range of learners. ISKME also produces an international event dedicated to designing innovations in education, Big Ideas Fest.

A former professor in the Department of Organizational Leadership at Columbia University, Teachers College, Petrides has advised and led development efforts that have enabled schools, colleges, universities, ministries of education, and the organizations that support them to expand their capacity to use data and information, and create inclusive knowledge-driven environments focused on teaching and learning.

modify, and freely distribute to students a wide range of learning resources, including textbooks and full courses. Unlike the freely available materials on the Internet, OER are licensed under specific legal terms that allow their downloading, editing, and sharing to better serve all students. Many are created under rigorous editorial and peer-review guidelines, and OER libraries allow faculty to review and contribute to existing materials [7]. OER adoption is growing rapidly throughout higher education. Thirteen percent of college faculty used OER as required course material in 2018, up from 5 percent in 2016 [8]. Growing numbers of colleges are introducing Z-degree programs, built around low or no-cost OER textbooks and other resources.

A $9.8 million initiative managed by Achieving the Dream, a national community college reform network, is working with 38 community colleges in 13 states to support deeper implementation and sustainability of OER across degree pathways that ATD will make available to other colleges nationwide. Funding for the initiative comes from a variety of funders [9].

In addition, adoption is being supported by policy and legislation. More than half of all states have considered OER legislation in recent years, including grants and funding for OER adoption and training, support for zero textbook cost degrees, the creation of commissions or task forces to study OER implementation, and including OER within broader textbook cost/college affordability initiatives [10].

Increasingly, states have acknowledged that addressing textbook costs is an important part of their broader College Promise and education affordability efforts. For example, under the same budget that established the Excelsior Grant program for nearly 1 million New York students [11], the Governor apportioned $8 million for furthering the use of OER at state campuses. Following concerns that their tuition-focused "TOPS Grants" were leaving some students behind [12], the legislature in Louisiana has required state institutions to develop plans to introduce OER on campus. Policymakers in Hawaii, Minnesota, Rhode Island, California, and a number of other states have created parallel OER and College Promise programs – which would undoubtedly benefit from greater coordination [13].

At the federal level, Congress provided financial support for OER for the first time in 2018 and 2019 with $10 million in grants. The Affordable College Textbook Act, which was introduced in both houses of the 115th and 116th Congress following earlier bills introduced in 2009, 2010, 2013, and 2015, if passed, would provide ongoing funding and policy measures supporting OER adoption.

OER and Community Colleges

OER represent an important part of efforts to improve access and attainment at community colleges. Given that students recognize the importance of textbooks – 94 percent say they recognize that doing without them jeopardizes their academic

success [14] – ensuring that all students have access to course materials from the first day of classes is a critical equity imperative. Because faculty have the ability to adapt and tailor materials to meet local learning objectives, OERs are particularly well suited for community colleges, whose missions are focused on meeting their specific regional workforce and learning needs. The collaborative process of curating and adapting OER materials for local needs also empower faculty, improving teaching and learning within institutions.

OER also provides opportunities for community college faculty to tailor materials to make them more relevant for their unique student populations including minority, first-generation, and other underserved students. For example, Minneapolis Community and Technical College in Minnesota published a freely accessible anthology of student, staff, and faculty stories focusing on the challenges faced by the institution's underrepresented student populations.

The college also has saved students more than $1 million in textbook costs since 2017 by adopting OER materials, complementing the Power of You Initiative that makes the first two years of college tuition-free for graduates of Minneapolis and St. Paul public high schools [15].

Community colleges across the nation report significant cost savings and improvements in student outcomes from the use of OER. Among them:
- A study conducted by Achieving the Dream found that students at nearly 40 institutions are saving between $66 and $121 per course by using OER materials.
- De Anza College in California estimates it has saved its students more than $3 million by using just one OER text in one statistics course since 2008.
- Tidewater Community College in Virginia reduced overall student costs in its OER-focused Z-Degree programs by 25 percent and concluded it could increase institutional revenue by $100,000 annually through increased retention rates by converting more programs to OER.
- A survey conducted by Leeward Community College in Hawaii found that 80 percent of students felt they performed better in courses with OER.

An analysis of more than 25 research studies has shown that students using OER do as well as or better than those using traditional textbooks and other materials and that the vast majority of faculty and students who have used both believe OER are of equal or higher quality [19]. Individual studies also suggest that Pell-eligible students may see outsize improvements in end-of-course grades and decreased failure and withdrawal rates [20].

Getting Started with OER

Just as Promise programs reflect the context of their state and local environments, OER implementation may look very different from institution to institution. Stakeholders can explore the potential benefits of OER adoption by:
- Investigating OER policies in your state, which may include statewide

> " OERs are particularly well suited for community colleges, whose missions are focused on meeting their specific regional workforce and learning needs. The collaborative process of curating and adapting OER materials for local needs also empower faculty, improving teaching and learning within institutions. "

coordinating councils, libraries or repositories, grant programs that can support OER creation and adoption, resources for course and program conversions to OER, regulations about labeling no or low-cost courses in course descriptions or registration materials, and research or feasibility studies. The state policy tracker in the resources below may serve as a starting point.

- Because faculty have the ability to adapt and tailor materials to meet local learning objectives, OER are particularly well suited for community colleges, whose missions are focused on meeting their specific regional workforce and learning needs. The collaborative process of curating and adapting OER materials for local needs also empower faculty, improving teaching and learning within institutions.
- Identifying – or creating – grant programs and funding opportunities to support institutional and faculty pilots of OER materials. Connecting administrators and faculty to other institutions and organizations supporting OER adoption, such as the Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources (see resources).
- Educating administration, faculty, students, and other stakeholders about OER and its benefits by holding workshops, presenting faculty awards, and inviting OER experts to present on campus.
- Ensuring that OER materials are accessible for students with disabilities.

Expanding the Promise of College for All

If we are to realize the vision of the College Promise, we have to reduce student costs and make elements of the college experience affordable for all. By increasing access and the quality and relevance of learning resources, OER represents an important part of that process. It also brings with it the potential of energizing faculty and students, helping to improve teaching, learning, and ultimately outcomes at every institution.

OER RESOURCES

Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources
https://www.cccoer.org/

SPARC OER State Policy Tracker
https://sparcopen.org/our-work/state-policy-tracking/

#GoOpen
https://goopen.us

COLLEGE PROMISE

College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

Learn more at: collegepromise.org or email info@collegepromise.org

References

1. College Board. Trends in College Pricing (2014). Retrieved from https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/2014-trends-college-pricing-final-web.pdf, Hill, P. Reprise: How Much Do Community College Students Actually Pay for Textbooks? July 28, 2016. Retrieved from https://eliterate.us/reprise-how- much-community-college-students-actually-pay-textbooks/
2. Perry, M. Chart of the Day: The astronomical rise in college textbook prices, September 1, 2016. Retrieved from https://www.aei.org/publication/chart-of-the-day-the-astronomical-rise-in-college-textbook-prices-vs-consumer- prices-and-recreational-books/
3. Student PIRGs. Covering the Cost (2016). Retrieved from https://studentpirgs.org/2016/02/03/covering-cost/
4. ACCT. First Dollar vs. Last Dollar Promise Models. Retrieved September 28, 2019 from https://www.acct.org/page/first-dollar-vs-last-dollar-promise-model
5. The Institute for College Access and Success. On the Verge: Costs and Tradeoffs Facing Community College Students (2016). Retrieved from https://ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy-files/pub_files/on_the_verge.pdf
6. Student PIRGs. Access Denied: The New Face of the Textbook Monopoly (2016). Retrieved from https://studentpirgs.org/2016/09/21/access-denied/SPARC.
7. OER Mythbusting (2017). Retrieved from https://sparcopen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/OER_Mythbusting_2017.pdf
8. Seaman, J&J. Freeing the Textbook: Educational Resources in U.S. Higher Education (2018). Retrieved from https://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/freeingthetextbook2018.pdf
9. Fiscal sponsors of this initiative include the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Great Lakes Higher Education Guaranty Corporation, the Shelter Hill Foundation, and the Speedwell Foundation.
10. SPARC. OER State Policy Tracker. Retrieved from https://sparcopen.org/our-work/state-policy-tracking/
11. New York State Government. Tuition-Free Degree Program. https://www.ny.gov/programs/tuition-free-degree- program-excelsior-scholarship
12. Casey Parks. Bayou Brief. https://www.bayoubrief.com/2017/12/06/louisianas-free-college/
13. Ibid. SPARC OER State Policy Tracker.
14. US. PIRG Education Fund and the Student PIRGs. Fixing the Broken Textbook Market (2014). https://uspirg.org/reports/usp/fixing-broken-textbook-market
15. Minneapolis Community & Technical College. Affordable Textbooks. Retried September 28, 2019 from https://www.minneapolis.edu/about-us/affordable-textbooks
16. Griffiths, R. OER Degrees Can Cut College Costs for Students and Improve Course Material Alignment, October 12, 2018. Retrieved from https://www.sri.com/blog/oer-degrees-can-cut-college-costs-students-and-improve-course-material- alignment
17. Wiley, D., Williams, L., DeMarte, D., & Hilton, J. (2016). The Tidewater Z-Degree and the INTRO Model for Sustaining OER Adoption. Education policy analysis archives, 24, 41. doi:https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.24.1828
18. University of Hawaii. Student Satisfaction Survey Results. Retrieved September 28, 2019 from https://sites.google.com/a/hawaii.edu/zero/student-satisfaction
19. Hilton, J. Education Tech Research Dev (2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-019-09700-4
20. Colvard, N., Watson, C., Park, H. The Impact of Open Educational Resources on Various Student Success Metrics. International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education 2018, Volume 30, Number 2, 262-276, Retrieved from http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/pdf/IJTLHE3386.pdf