How much should a textbook cost? Try '$0.00'

December 13 2023, by Benjamin Kessler

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OER (open educational resources) are learning materials that have been licensed for payment-free use by educators and students. Researchers and experts in the field of higher education are increasingly considering

OER as a useful tool for reducing the financial burden on students. After all, the average cost of a college textbook in 2022 exceeded $105.

Sophia Marshall, an assistant professor in the Business Foundations area at Costello College of Business, recently made a valuable contribution to this discussion with her completed dissertation for her EdD from Marymount University, entitled "Closing the Traditional Textbook to Make Room for Open Material." Marshall surveyed 33 faculty members on their use and perceptions of OER.

Marshall's respondents were vaguely familiar with OER as a concept, and their answers indicated positive feeling about using OER as a form of financial relief to students. However, their responses evinced confusion as to the differences between OER and other forms of unlicensed material downloadable from the internet.

For example, solid majorities of survey respondents reported being either "aware" or "very aware" of U.S. copyright and public domain frameworks, while less than half claimed similar familiarity with the Creative Commons licenses governing OER usage.

Also, faculty adoption of OER did not see a statistically significant increase from spring 2020 to spring 2022, suggesting that the growth in academic implementation of OER remains a "slow burn."

In addition to using OER in their courses, faculty can choose to get involved in creating OER related to their area of expertise. Advocates for the practice have argued that authorship of OER can be a valuable professional development activity for faculty. It can aid in the pursuit of grants and fellowships, facilitate collaboration with students and colleagues, and help faculty fulfill academic publishing obligations—to name just a few possible benefits.

Marshall's survey respondents were generally aware of these benefits. Yet only 24% of respondents said they had ever considered producing OER.

Marshall summarizes that "everyone is interested in saving students money." In terms of the other aspects of OER, many may not understand "what it is and how to go about creating it."

When it comes to OER, librarians and instructional designers can certainly assist in selecting material and directing pedagogues to the right repositories. But for Marshall, there is no substitute for knowledgeable faculty. "It's important to have subject matter expertise," she says.

That is why Marshall emphasizes educating faculty as the first step toward wider adoption of OER. "I think faculty need more information on the specifics of copyright, as well as the importance of the contribution to the overall community. What's in it for faculty, since they aren't being paid to produce OER?"

Practical recommendations for educators in Marshall's dissertation include forming an OER task force to gather data on course material usage; tracking the total amount of money saved by students as a result of OER and sharing that figure with key stakeholders; and providing a venue for information-sharing among faculty who are teaching and/or authoring OER (Marshall suggests teaching conferences as a suitable forum).

There are also fundamental misconceptions that Marshall would like to see dispelled, such as the idea that "free" is synonymous with low quality. Departments should educate faculty about OER, as a starting point.

Provided by George Mason University

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