Taking OER Abroad with Library-Led Partnerships
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Abstract

Partnerships are key to strengthening open and affordability initiatives on campus, allowing for strategic collaboration and the alignment of department goals to promote open educational resources (OER) in the classroom. This paper focuses on our libraries’ partnership with our International Programs (IP) division to promote open course materials and the open movement at our international study centers and study abroad sites through a specialized alternative textbook grant (ATG) program and targeted outreach for instructors teaching in global environments. An overview of the partnership between the Florida State University Libraries and our IP department is detailed and guidance is provided for other academic libraries and/or open and affordable initiative teams in developing globally focused open programs.
Introduction

At Florida State University, International Programs (IP) was identified as an early partner for our open educational resources (OER) initiative due to the widespread course materials complications our global sites face without access to a local bookstore and in maintaining the high-cost, traditional textbook model in the increasingly flexible global learning environment. IP coordinates our university’s extensive study abroad program, which offers opportunities for global learning at four international study centers and faculty-led programs in over 20 locations. This collaboration has grown to include an internationally focused mini-grant program, mirroring our on-campus alternative textbook grant (ATG) program. Instructors travelling from the main campus to teach abroad or those located permanently at our international study centers are offered support for switching from a traditional textbook to a low-cost or open option, funded by the IP department. Furthermore, our collaboration has allowed for targeted outreach to the high enrollment courses taught abroad and the opportunity to provide workshops and presentations to our international faculty with a focus on the specific course material issues that affect instructors teaching overseas. This article provides an overview of our University Libraries’ partnership with International Programs in supporting and promoting our open and affordable initiative beyond main campus with guidance for other academic libraries and OER teams on partnering with global learning divisions and the general benefits to developing specialized OER outreach programs.
**Literature Review**

In order to assess the impact of OER initiatives, many OER researchers have focused on cost, outcomes, usage, and perceptions – the so-called COUP Framework developed by the Open Education Group (Hilton, Wiley, Fischer, & Nyland, n.d.). However, very few researchers have focused on the use of OER initiatives to forge new partnerships between stakeholders at an academic institution. In cases where researchers have focused on this topic, they typically do so in a cursory fashion as part of a larger argument. For example, Salem (2017) examined many specific examples of library-led OER initiatives that involve various kinds of partnerships, but only briefly mentioned the importance of intra-institutional partnerships in particular, and then only with reference to common partners, such as teaching and learning centers, faculty development units, institutional research offices, student governments, and university bookstores. Although Kleymeer, Kleinman, and Hanss (2010) explored the skills and advantages that academic libraries can bring to intra-institutional OER partnerships, they mostly focused on the libraries rather than on any other specific partners and made no mention of international study abroad programs as a potential partner. Researchers have also explored partnerships between librarians and faculty (Avila & Wray, 2018; Goodsett, Loomis, & Miles, 2016), inter-institutional library partnerships (Smith & Lee, 2016), cross-institutional partnerships to develop OER (Marshall, Kinuthia, & Richards, 2012), and partnerships with third-sector organizations (Macintyre, 2013). In contrast to the above studies, this article provides an in-depth case study of a partnership between the University Libraries and the Office of IP at the authors’ home institution, with a view to informing library practice by expanding the horizon of possible intra-institutional partnerships for academic librarians working on OER initiatives.
Background

Florida State University’s IP department offers study abroad opportunities to over 1,600 students a year through the support of international study centers and study abroad sites across the globe. The most popular program is the First Year Abroad/First Semester Abroad Broad Curriculum at the three European campuses in Florence, Italy, London, United Kingdom, and Valencia, Spain, which allows students to complete liberal studies and core courses abroad and fulfills the university’s summer residency requirement. The additional international study center is located in Panama City, Republic of Panama and is the only degree-granting international campus under the university umbrella. It is also differentiated in the student demographics, as nearly all of the campus population is from Latin America and the Caribbean, as opposed to the American students travelling to Europe for First Year Abroad/First Semester Abroad. Our students studying at the Panama campus are eligible for a special 2+2 scholarship, where after studying for two years at the Panama campus, they are able to transition to the main campus to finish their degrees while qualifying for in-state tuition rates, saving them up to $15,000 annually. In Florence, London, and Valencia, a majority of instructors travel from the main campus in Tallahassee to teach at these study centers in the summer as opposed to more local instructors in the spring and fall. Panama’s faculty and staff are almost entirely local Panamanians, with only a few instructors travelling from main campus to teach each year. While Panama and Florence have full time librarians, the London library is managed by the IT staff members and Valencia does not have a formal library or library staff.

University Libraries supports and enhances the teaching, learning, research, and service activities of the university through strategic engagement in collaborative partnerships to advance intellect discovery. Florida State University Libraries has focused on strengthening its
partnership with IP and supporting the international study centers with resources, services, and staff significantly since creating an Extended Campus and Distance Services Librarian role in 2014. Library staff and administrators visit the study centers on a regular basis, complementing our online outreach efforts to students and instructors with in-person orientations, workshops, and faculty meetings. In order to formalize and standardize our partnership, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was established in 2018 which designated specific responsibilities of University Libraries (provision of access to resources and services, outreach, instruction support, OER, information literacy, collection projects, copyright, and support learning) in exchange for funding in support of resources, staff, and annual travel. Our collaborative work to support the study center differentiates from our general distance library services portfolio in that it goes beyond our online learning objects, asynchronous information literacy program, and integration in the learning management system to instead meet the unique needs of our international locations. One aspect of collections that has been a challenge and, therefore, a focal point for global library support is course reserves and instructional material support. When travelling to the European study centers, students rarely bring their textbooks with them due to the nuisance of international travel with heavy, introductory level course materials; however, there is no access to a local bookstore and shipping overseas only exacerbates the already high price of these materials, causing many students to forego their required materials completely. While there is a small subsidiary of the campus bookstore in Panama, the staff struggles with how many items to purchase for each course, as books have to be purchased well in advance and students are able to drop and add courses into the first week of classes, causing simultaneous issues of overstock with some courses and a lack of availability for others. This has been a hindrance to the teaching and learning at each of the study centers with administrators, instructors, and
students bringing this to the attention of the Extended Campus and Distance Services Librarian. This led to a critical moment of recognition as to how University Libraries could better support and alleviate the instructional material predicament at our international study centers.

**Overview of Partnership**

Our OER initiative has been slowly growing on campus since 2016. Drawing from other open and affordable programs, we assembled a small team of librarians to plan, develop, and promote student- and faculty-focused campaigns. This effort included the implementation of an ATG program to support instructors transitioning from traditional, commercial textbooks to open, affordable alternatives. Successful applicants received $1000 in grant funding and support from our OER team in finding suitable materials, navigating licensing, and using OER-enabled pedagogy.

Based on experience in the first iteration of University Libraries’ mini-grants program, the Extended Campus and Distance Services Librarian recognized an apropos opportunity: to extend and target the mini-grant program to instructors teaching abroad. IP was approached with a proposal to match the current funding model provided by University Libraries, limiting applications to only instructors teaching at our European study centers, as these students faced the bulk of the textbook challenges. Our partners at IP were immediately enthusiastic about the proposal and committed to providing $10,000 for 10 $1,000 grants. Once the requirements and workflow were negotiated with IP and the study center administrators, we drafted an email introducing the new grant program, outlining the open textbook movement, and offering guidance on the application process and requirements. Furthermore, the OER team had previously employed a targeted outreach approach to high-enrollment on campus courses, proactively emailing all instructors with recommendations for high-quality open textbook
options to replace their current traditional course material model. Since many of the courses offered at the European study centers overlapped with the high enrollment courses on main campus (as core courses and general liberal arts), we were able to adapt our outreach to the local and on-campus instructors teaching abroad, sending textbook substitution suggestions via email individually to instructors as well as a reminder to apply for our new IP ATG program.

As a site visit funded by the annual travel funds designated in the IP MOU had been planned for Spring 2018 to campuses in Florence, Valencia, and London, library staff were able to center faculty presentations and meetings around the new IP mini-grant program, providing ample opportunity for broader OER discussions and impromptu consultations with instructors on locating open or affordable options to replace their commercial textbook options. These promotion strategies were imperative for not only introducing the program, but also engaging in a dialogue with instructors about using OER and providing a space to hear feedback and address concerns. As many of the instructors abroad were brand new to the open landscape, the face-to-face discussions were key to meaningful outreach strategy.

**Launching OER Abroad**

The situation at international campuses necessitated the need for distance library services staff to adopt OER advocacy as part of their role. However, there are several factors that shaped a good fit for the initiative beyond the ongoing textbook challenges. The First Semester Abroad/First Year Abroad, broad curriculum program provided a plethora of high-quality general textbook options available to instructors; almost every course had a title available from OpenStax or the Open Textbook Network. The high cost of studying abroad lends itself to other cost-saving measures, in order to offset some of the costs of global learning. Yet, it is within the
role of librarians, as liaisons and as advocates, to identify these connections and mindfully align cross-campus department goals.

IP aims to provide a seamless educational experience abroad in order to cultivate students to become intercultural and global citizens. IP faculty members often speak of taking learning out of the classroom, taking instruction from the ordinary to the extraordinary. University Libraries’ role in this is key to our partnership and this work requires creativity and ingenuity, taking the library out of the ordinary as well. This program speaks to more than just identifying a problem (textbooks) and a solution (OER), but also to a foundational culture change where cross-campus partnerships can merge ideas and align goals to create something innovative and groundbreaking. The mini-grant program had to be adapted to fit the needs of IP and the instructional needs for teaching abroad. Deadlines were modified. A new web presence was created. The funding model required creativity as University Libraries’ disbursement of grant funds was disseminated as funding for technology or professional travel, while IP aimed to align the program with their travel funding reimbursement model; it was decided that the grant funds would be distributed as meal reimbursements within the same process. Flexibility is key in establishing any collaborative program, especially in the landscape of open and affordable in order to be responsive and effective in program development.

Challenges

University Libraries’ partnership with IP has presented a number of challenges, both for the partners involved and for instructors who are interested in participating in the ATG program. Communication about the partnership has been a challenge for University Libraries, since we lack a direct communication channel for distributing information to IP instructors. All communication from University Libraries must be sent to IP staff to then be sent on to the
instructors. This arrangement has resulted in calls for participation being sent to instructors very close to the application deadline, allowing less than adequate time for instructors to consider the opportunity and prepare an application. University Libraries’ ATG team can mitigate this challenge somewhat for the main campus instructors by sending out promotional materials through campus-wide communication channels. This strategy does not work for instructors who are local to the international study centers, however, since they are typically excluded from campus-wide communication channels.

A major challenge both for program partners and for course instructors has been the perception that course materials assigned at international study centers should conform to those assigned on main campus. This perception is not universal; some academic departments give instructors the freedom to assign whatever materials they see fit, while others maintain curriculum committees that seek to standardize materials across different sections of a course and ultimately have final say over what materials are assigned. Even in cases where instructors technically have the freedom to select their own course materials, however, both the directors of IP study centers and the course instructors themselves sometimes prefer that their instructors select the same materials as equivalent main campus courses in deference to the preferences of the sponsoring academic departments.

This challenge is not specific to IP instructors; many main-campus courses have standardized course materials across all course sections and instructors in said courses often feel like they have limited freedom to adopt new materials, creating a real or imagined barrier to instructor adoption of OER. This challenge is also very difficult to address due to the diversity of course material selection processes in place in different departments. In theory, the best strategy for overcoming these challenges would involve identifying and consulting with those responsible
for course material selection in departments that make decisions centrally. Our ATG team has had difficulty pursuing this strategy, however, due both to the scale of the work involved and a lack of responsiveness from chairs of curriculum committees.

This challenge of deference to main-campus course material selection can also present an interesting opportunity, particularly in cases where an IP instructor makes a bold choice to select course materials that deviate from those used by other course sections. For example, at the IP study center in the Republic of Panama, instructors have adopted *The Word on College Reading and Writing* from the Open Textbook Library for a high-enrollment English Composition course, citing a need to reduce the cost of the materials used by main campus sections of the course. In such cases, if IP students perform as well or better with the newly adopted materials, IP instructors may be able to demonstrate to the sponsoring academic department that the benefits of adopting the new materials outweigh the risks. Although the librarians who manage the ATG program have no direct way of evaluating student performance, they do share the guidebook to research on OER adoption with all new ATG instructors and encourage them to evaluate student outcomes using the COUP Framework (Hilton et al., n.d.).

**Impact**

The most immediate impact of the IP partnership has been an increase in funding for the ATG program. University Libraries allocated $6,000 for the ATG program in 2017 and increased the allocation to $10,000 in 2018 and 2019. IP contributed an additional $5,000 in 2018 and $18,000 in 2019, significantly expanding the total funding allocation for the program. Although these contributions exceeded the level of interest from IP instructors, they were nonetheless an encouraging development, allowing the ATG team to award more mini-grants than would have otherwise been possible with funding from University Libraries.
Since the launch of the IP partnership in 2018, the ATG team has received 11 applications from IP instructors, 10 of which were approved for funding (see Table 1). The total student enrollment across these 10 courses was 373, and the total estimated savings to students (based on the new print retail cost of the materials previously assigned in these courses) was $44,956.40. Stated a different way, the IP mini grants have generated $4.49 in student savings for every $1.00 spent. It should be noted that these projected savings are based only on the first iteration of the courses that adopted zero-cost course materials. If participating instructors continue using these zero-cost materials in subsequent iterations of their courses, the ratio of dollars saved to dollars spent will improve over time.

Table 1. Comparison of Student Savings across IP and Main Campus Courses.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Applications funded</th>
<th>Total student enrollment</th>
<th>Total estimated student savings</th>
<th>Savings per dollar spent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>IP courses</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>$44,956.40</td>
<td>$4.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Main campus courses</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2,651</td>
<td>$333,356.40</td>
<td>$13.90</td>
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<tr>
<td>All courses (IP and main campus)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3,024</td>
<td>$378,312.80</td>
<td>$11.13</td>
</tr>
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The above savings are considerably lower than those generated by non-IP instructors who participated in the ATG program. Indeed, the total estimated savings across all 34 mini-grants awarded since the launch of the ATG program in 2017 will reach $378,312.80 by 2020, which works out to $11.13 in student savings for every $1.00 spent. This discrepancy in student savings is likely attributable to the fact that class sizes at IP study centers are much smaller than those on main campus. In 2018, for example, two mini-grants were awarded to instructors of Introduction to Sociology courses, one located on main campus and the other taught at an IP study center.
Whereas the enrollment for the main campus course was 400, the enrollment for the IP course was only 120, resulting in significantly lower student savings for the IP course.

Moving beyond student savings, the ATG team has noticed other benefits of the IP partnership that are more difficult to measure. One of these benefits is the adoption of OER by instructors who do not apply to participate in the ATG program. This was the case with the English Composition courses at the Republic of Panama study center initiating a campus-wide change from a traditional textbook to an open textbook and at other study centers as well. While it would be disingenuous to posit a causal link between the IP partnership and these OER adoptions, the fact that the former preceded the latter suggests that there may be a positive correlation. Another possible benefit that is difficult to measure is the increased recognition of textbook affordability concerns on campus. Although the authors have no formal evidence to support this, it seems reasonable to conclude that IP’s efforts to advocate for textbook affordability generally and the ATG program in particular have helped to reach a greater number of instructors than would have otherwise been possible through University Libraries’ efforts alone.

**Future Directions**

In order to proactively address the challenges of the program and further advance OER for our study abroad constituents, a number of future directions and projects have been planned. Integrating OER support into the study abroad instructor onboarding experience is a major goal for expansion. As faculty outreach is key for embedding information literacy into our international curriculum, two certificate programs have been planned utilizing asynchronous modules to inform and promote library resources and services with a major component on OER and open pedagogy. One certificate program will be focused on the needs of local (to the study
center) instructors, many of whom have never visited our main campus in Tallahassee and currently adjunct for multiple institutions. The other module will be built with the needs of main campus instructors travelling abroad in mind with information about the mini-grants and other strategies and support for utilizing open materials in their courses abroad. Furthermore, IP has agreed to add language about adopting OER in the application forms for instructors teaching abroad, where preference will be given to instructors who select open and affordable materials. Since there is no traditional, in-person orientation for instructors teaching abroad, these asynchronous options will not only introduce open textbooks and open pedagogy, but also guide instructors to actively explore OER options for their courses abroad to better support non-traditional learning models.

In-person, face-to-face contact is an important component to maintaining and growing partnerships, even with distance and extended campus users. University Libraries’ MOU provides external funding for library staff to visit the international study centers and incorporate thoughtful and timely OER outreach to campus administrators and staff including one-on-one meetings with instructors, faculty forums, and formal workshops on OER-related topics. Additionally, main campus workshops are offered on OER and open-enabled pedagogy on a regular basis, offering on-campus faculty travelling abroad the opportunity to engage with the OER team and take advantage of our on-campus support offerings.

Lastly, to build on and augment our current OER initiative, our team is in the midst of exploring a new program to promote affordability on campus and beyond, through the acquisition of unlimited, nonlinear eBook licenses for currently assigned textbooks that fit specified criteria and auto-populating these resources within the Canvas course site. Similar projects have been implemented at institutions such as Penn State and University of Florida.
This program is an effective complement to our current open initiatives, providing options to instructors who are unable to locate suitable open resources to support their curriculum. This eBook program will allow the OER team to not only support students through the acquisition of current material licenses, but will also instigate further conversations with instructors who are not eligible for the program about important factors when selecting course materials, such as vendors, licensing, and open and affordable alternatives.

Partnerships are key to any successful open and affordable movement. Librarians have a unique opportunity to drive OER through collaboration as they work with departments and units across campus in varying roles and capacities to support high impact teaching and learning. It is within the role of librarians, as liaisons and as advocates, to identify these connections and mindfully align cross-campus departmental goals. Our Florida State University Libraries’ collaboration with IP provided the foundation to build an innovative OER program through alignment of division goals and by means of effective outreach strategies, going beyond simple solutions to envision and create something more monumental and lasting. We share our experience with the hopes that other library staff working to support OER can emulate our model by acting as agents of open and affordable change.

References


