Bridging the Gap: Rural Librarians’ Journey to Understanding Students’ Role in OER Outreach

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Abstract

Literature detailing how small, rural academic institutions have implemented initiatives for Open Educational Resources (OER) is limited; most articles focus on university systems, state schools, and R1 research institutions. Our outreach – conducted over the past year at rural Adams State University – initially targeted faculty. However, after encountering silence from this group, we sought to explore the largely uncharted possibility of engaging students as advocates. While our continuing efforts will certainly seek to promote faculty awareness and address barriers to adoption, we have come to understand two things: that faculty engagement is not enough and that student advocacy can play a great role. The librarians’ first goal in our nascent OER initiative is to educate and empower the student body, and by doing so, help bridge the gap between librarian advocates and faculty adopters. Our initial outreach effort to measure student awareness and interest had two aspects: in-person and online. The first step was to talk to students face-to-face about textbooks and associated costs, while informing them of the existence of OER and alternative textbook sources. The second step was to engage students online via a survey. This helped us gain insight into their perspectives regarding the problems they face due
to textbook prices. Going forward, we plan to create a two-pronged outreach method: some continuing education of faculty, but more emphasis on students. Our goal is to equip students with the knowledge to advocate for OER to faculty, administration, peers, and even family. Final takeaways from this project include the need to involve students in outreach efforts and to encourage them to participate in future OER planning and projects. No single group can solve the problem of outrageous textbook costs; it is only by faculty, librarians, and students working together that Adams State University will join the nationwide OER movement, not just as participants, but as contributors.

**Keywords:** librarians, student advocacy, OER/open educational resources, outreach, faculty

**Background and Initiative Context**

With the rise of technology in education has come the idea that everything on the Internet is (or should be) freely accessible. While librarians and faculty know that this is far from the truth, through OER we can take steps towards making this stereotyped perception a little bit closer to reality, with the removal of cost, copyright, and other access barriers. Already, resources like OER Commons and OpenStax provide textbooks free of charge to students. In the last two decades alone, the amount of information that has been published on how to incorporate OER into higher education has increased exponentially. This literature has become a great resource for many libraries trying to start their own campus OER initiatives. Despite this new wealth of information, there seems to be a notable lack of smaller or more rural universities attempting to incorporate OER into campus practice. For all of this lack of representation, the need for OER at these schools is immense. Many rural schools face the same financial problems as larger institutions – such as underfunding – but lack the workforce required to apply for the grants that can alleviate the strain. OER grants are becoming more prevalent, but each one takes time and effort to apply for, and few faculty or staff members are able to dedicate their limited resources when outcomes are not guaranteed. Although inconclusive, publishing our findings will hopefully help fill a gap in the literature regarding rural universities’ implementation of OER initiatives.

Adams State University is a small, Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located in rural Colorado, specifically in the San Luis Valley, home to some of the poorest counties in the nation. It is because of the community’s general poverty that bringing OER to our campus has become a priority for the library; more affordable textbook options are something our students desperately need. At the same time, it is also one of the largest hurdles: we lack the ability to offer the financial incentives that can encourage faculty adoption at larger institutions.

The school was built on the idea that Adams State would be able “[t]o become the university community of choice for diverse, historically underserved groups, and all who value quality education and inclusivity” (Adams State University, n.d.). That means we need to address
the specific needs of traditionally underrepresented populations. Research done by California’s Channel Islands shows that it is minorities – specifically Latinx – and first-generation students who suffer the most when it comes to high textbook costs (Hannans, 2018, slides 7 & 9). With those costs increasing 88% between 2006 and 2016 (Bureau of Labor Statistics), the situation is becoming critical. Another issue that needs to be addressed in order for Adams State to live up to its mission statement is the varied impacts that information privilege has upon our students. Information privilege is defined as the “ability to access information others cannot” (Hare & Evanson, 2018, p. 726), due to socioeconomic status, enrollment in or affiliation with higher-education institutions, reliable internet access (including access to tech devices to view information), even proximity to local public libraries, or a combination of these and other factors.

“Opportunity and access for all” is a universal institutional value (Adams State University, n.d.), yet equitable access to information is impossible without a paradigm shift. Senack and Donoghue (2016) made the compelling point that, “[y]ears of dominance by profit-maximizing publishers have created a value system around false measures of quality. Traditional textbooks face no standardized test of efficacy, or student success” (p. 12), and yet, OER are expected to prove their comparative value. Unless we work to overcome the instinctive sense that traditional textbooks have inherently better information than Creative-Commons or openly licensed material, the all will never have the opportunity and access we strive to provide.

OER can help combat the cultural norms that support the ongoing and worsening nature of information privilege, the divide between the haves and have-nots. Not only is openly licensed academic information available to students at no charge, whole courses are available to the public, in support of equitable education for all. The UN declared fundamental education a basic human right in Article 26 (United Nations, 1948), but so many citizens are prevented from continuing their education due to cost that information privilege remains prominent. In most cases, OER offer perpetual access, which combats both the economic cost and academic enrollment criteria of information privilege, some of the biggest limiters when it comes to accessing quality academic resources.

Early OER Failures

Three Adams State faculty members had previously adopted OER without institutional support, and with very uninspiring results. One professor claimed that his upper-division math texts were traditionally published and later rereleased under CC License and were of good quality; however, he felt the lower-division texts from OpenStax were “of lower quality than I’d like and we are probably going back to ‘normal’ for those two classes.” He finished with, “I’m definitely not passionate about OER but I am committed to lower costs for students when it’s [sic] prudent” (A. Langdon, personal communication, Feb. 19-20, 2019).

The second professor reiterated the shared lack of passion, but agreed that student costs need to be lowered “whenever feasible.” His opinion was that the quality of material was “in the
middle of the pack.” He also noted that “in most cases, the students do not seem to read it,” referring to all texts regardless of price or licensing. While learning outcomes are outside the scope of this paper (Grimaldi, 2019 and Hilton, 2016 pointed out flaws in recent studies), it is worth noting that this professor felt that “switching to the lower-cost option has not seemed to impact student learning” (A. Langdon, personal communication, Feb. 19-20, 2019). The third professor merely said that the department was looking at TopHat, pending an institutional subscription (A. Langdon, personal communication, Feb. 19-20, 2019). (TopHat is an affordability option that offers low-cost textbooks and educational resources.)

In the beginning stages of implementing a concerted OER initiative, the librarians advocated exclusively to the faculty. We were guest presenters at the monthly meeting of all campus department heads. We defined OER and used several slides from Hannans, Jenkins, and Leafstedt’s (2018) webinar, which demonstrated how Latinx and first-generation students were most heavily impacted by high textbook costs. The faculty members were largely disinclined to take on a project that would disrupt their already frenetic semesters. We hoped that a seed had been planted and that there might be a trickle-down of information and encouragement to each department.

The following month, we held a free lunch-and-learn session. Fewer than 10 faculty members attended, but they were the most interested in adoption. Without financial incentives – which have been lacking up to this point – almost no one is choosing to adopt OER. During the summer of 2019, 10 faculty members were given Title V grants for course redesign, in order to modify them for the Fall 2019 launch of our new first-year experience. The redesigns emphasized Latinx Studies; Crime & Forensics; and Health, Sports, & Wellness. The library reached out through the Title V office to offer assistance in choosing open material for these revamped courses, but there was sadly no response. This may have been due in part to the fact that for some of those 10 faculty members, the whole course-redesign was to take place in one month’s time. When met with such silence – inspired by unfamiliarity with Open Educational Resources, in addition to heavy course loads and other responsibilities – the librarians at Adams State have turned to the underserved students themselves to encourage advocacy.

We acknowledge the necessity of faculty involvement in our continued OER outreach; however, we have decided to shift most of our focus from the faculty to the students. Woodward (2017) and Senack and Donoghue (2016) recommended that students advocate for themselves, but aside from one mention of “workshops and seminars” (Senack, 2014, p. 14) and “a student advocacy session” (Woodward, 2017, p. 211), we have found nothing in the literature about librarian-led outreach to students that has lead to successful student advocacy and notable change. If students understand both the financial/economic costs of higher education, as well as the other dynamics that play a role in information privilege, they can begin the slow process of addressing the disparities such privilege perpetuates, both on this campus and in the wider San Luis Valley community. It is also our hope that using the student outreach data we have collected, our next grant proposals will stand out from the crowd and perhaps provide us with desperately needed resources.
Barriers to Faculty Adoption

Most of the literature pertaining to OER-advocacy agrees that it is librarians who lead the charge for campus-wide OER adoption and instruction. Bell’s article title, “It’s up to the Librarians,” is quite apt, as we are often the first and strongest advocates for this change. Braddlee and VanScoy (2019) called it a “professional responsibility” (p. 429), and it is undeniable that we are in the best position to find new and better resources, to curate and catalog them, to add metadata and make them findable. A portion of the librarians’ charge is aimed at debunking misconceptions held by faculty regarding the quality of open resources and at attempting to educate the educators, understanding and addressing the barriers to faculty adoption. The first seems to be ignorance of open options (Belikov & Bodily, 2016, p. 239), with “time and effort to find and evaluate” OER (Allen & Seaman, 2014, p. 4) being a close second.

FlatWorld, a low-cost textbook publisher, performed a study in May of 2019, finding that 90% of surveyed faculty were aware that there was a problem with rising textbook costs, but 59% were unaware of campus programs or initiatives to rectify the problem (FlatWorld, 2019, p. 3). In part, it was this apparent lack of awareness that has shaped our plans for marketing and outreach going forward. In a report entitled Opening the Curriculum: Open Educational Resources in US Higher Education, 2014 by Allen and Seaman (2014), their first key finding is that “[f]aculty are not very aware of open educational resources … between two-thirds and three-quarters of all faculty classify themselves as unaware on OER” (p. 2). It is very likely that same unawareness is behind faculty reluctance to change to OER at Adams State, but more research needs to be conducted to ascertain the best approach to use as we develop our initiative. It seems that an institutional strategic direction promoting OER could help offset faculty hesitancy, but at this time, our administration remains equally unaware of the OER movement.

Opinions in the literature regarding quality of OER are mixed, and we believe the trend is that faculty unfamiliar with OER mistrust the quality, believing free is bad, while those who have experimented with it tend to find it comparable to, if not better than, traditional textbooks. Braddlee and VanScoy (2019) showed that the second greatest perceived deterrent to OER adoption, at 26.5%, is “Resources are not high-quality or up-to-date” (p. 434, emphasis added). On the other hand, Allen and Seaman (2014) found that while only about 12% of faculty surveyed felt that open resources were superior, 61.5% felt that they were comparable (p. 38). Belikov & Bodily (2016) claimed that “only 3% of those surveyed stat[ed] that the OER were worse than traditional textbooks” and 97% felt that OER were equivalent to (56%) or better than (41%) traditional textbooks (p. 236). Cooney’s (2017) response rate was comparable to Belikov and Bodily’s, with 3% feeling that OER are “somewhat worse” (1.5%) or much worse (1.5%). Library Journal (2019) suggested “more faculty education on the quality and safety of OERs” is needed (p. 25), and that seems like a good direction to take when starting an OER initiative at any institution.

Overall, in both our findings and the literature, the greatest barriers to faculty adoption are faculty course-loads and a lack of financial incentives. Small, rural universities tend to have a larger percentage of adjunct faculty/visiting appointments. These employees have fewer ties to
the school, less long-term commitment to new initiatives, and less time on campus with students. This is not to say that adjunct faculty do not care, but the constraints on their time limit their ability to engage.

**Student Outreach: Methods and Discussion**

We want to emphasize “a focus on student choices, not just student voices” with our ongoing outreach. Students are regularly polled regarding the impact traditional textbook and course-material prices have on them (Brandle et al., 2019; Cooney, 2017; Florida Virtual Campus, 2018; Senack, 2014; Senack & Donoghue, 2016; among others), but there the student input seems to end. Academic writers seem to solicit student opinions in order to talk about the findings, rather than with any intent to talk to the students – or, more importantly, to give students a voice in the one aspect of steadily rising academic costs that students have a modicum of control over: textbooks and related course materials. Once polled, most students are relegated to the proverbial “kiddie table,” while the “grown-ups” (librarians and faculty, sometimes administration) talk about how students are expected to spend their money.

While we sought and obtained IRB approval for our research, the results were secondary to the outreach itself. The purpose of both the research and this paper was to discuss the need for documented methods of creating student outreach that go beyond soliciting numbers or statistics and into engaging students in conversation about textbook costs and the consequences thereof. The multifold benefits of such dialogue include promotion of the library and librarians as valid resources for students’ educational needs; increased student awareness of information privilege and how it impacts them, both positively and negatively; and, of course, knowledge of open resources so that they can advocate for a shift away from traditional textbooks and toward more open sources.

The first round of research was poorly timed, with summer classes finished and fall classes not yet in session. We spent four days visiting various campus buildings with two laptops (the campus coffee cart, the School of Business atrium, and the Student Union Building), asking students if they had time to discuss textbook costs with us, and to take a brief, one- to two-minute Google Forms survey. We offered candy as thanks for those who participated, but many declined the reward. The students were open and willing to talk, and the interactions as much as the results told us they were actively engaged with what we were saying. The interest generated by placing the students at the center of our outreach efforts seemed to increase faculty interest as well; several professors stopped to ask for more information. This solidified our hypothesis that students advocating for themselves may bring better results than librarians working with faculty alone.

In a second form of outreach, we emailed a link to the survey to all enrolled students, undergrad and graduate, on-campus and off-campus. It is possible for students to have completed more than one survey per person; no email addresses were gathered; but it is felt to be very unlikely. The email’s subject line – “Are you impacted by high textbook costs? Tell us about it!” – caught far more attention than we had hoped, and when we gathered the data for the paper, we had 159 results in fewer than 10 days. While this is only about 6% of our total student body, it
was a decent number of respondents during so short a window, when students are far less likely to be checking their school email accounts or thinking about buying books. The survey contained 12 questions; all except ethnicity were required. We asked them to provide their year in school and major to ascertain some basic demographic information. However, the focus was upon those questions involving student perceptions of textbook costs.

Our first non-demographic question asked them to rate their stress level when purchasing textbooks. 75.4% (120 students) reported feeling stress frequently or always; 18.2% experienced it sometimes, and only 6.3% reported feeling stress rarely or never. One student told us that his mother worked for a textbook company, so while he didn’t have to worry about obtaining material, he acknowledged that he was uncommonly fortunate and understood the advantage he had over his classmates in that regard.

To what extent do you experience stress when purchasing textbooks/course material (involving price, balancing other financial needs, obtaining the material in a timely manner, etc.)?

139 responses

![Figure 1: Stress.](image)

One factor sometimes addressed in the literature, which we felt was of some importance, is the idea of student preference regarding format of reading materials. Brandle et al. (2019) reported that 58% of students at City University of New York (CUNY) print all or some of the online material. 353 CUNY students did so because they wanted to be able to annotate, and 322 simply preferred paper for readings. Forty-four CUNY students reported limited or no access to either tech devices or the Internet as the reason for their preference (Brandle et al., 2019, p. 92). Here again is a tragic example of the “double-edged sword” nature of information privilege: students have greater access to information subscribed to by the academic library, but without computers, phones, tablets, or reliable internet, information remains beyond reach. Continuing Brandle et al.’s trend, 77% of students polled by Petrides et al. (as reported by Cooney, 2017),
prefer print (p. 163). Library Journal’s (2019) findings are slightly different, citing that faculty perception is that “students prefer print to digital texts” (p. 5, emphasis added).

**Figure 2: Media Preference**

Our own findings show that 79.9% of students prefer print; 51.6% prefer video/visual, with 47.8% desiring graphic/pictorial form, and the least preferred format is sound/audio at 28.9% (multiple answers were permitted). For textual material, we asked our students to rate their paper/screen preference (screens include computers, tablets, phones, etc.). A total of 7.5% require paper for readings; nearly half (49.1%) can read from screens but prefer paper; 36.5% can read from screens and paper equally; 5.7% prefer screens but can read from paper; and only 1.3% (2 students) require screens for reading.
With this preference for paper – despite the perception of digital natives doing nearly everything on their screens – the need for printed texts is clear. Faculty unfamiliar with OER may very well lack “the knowledge that OER have the capacity to be printed or purchased and are not inherently digital” (Belikov & Bodily, 2016, p. 240); faculty may believe that traditional textbooks are therefore the only way to provide students with material in the format they prefer. While the shift from print to digital by traditional textbook companies may seem like it has the ability to save students money, the fact of the matter is that digital books come with digital “locks,” effectively preventing students from printing, downloading, or annotating the material (McGreal, 2017, p. 295).

Looking at Brandle et al.’s (2019) statistic of 353 students wanting to annotate their readings, we asked how many of our own students were aware that annotations could be made within some e-readers. Nearly one-third (32.7%) said that they were not aware; this provides faculty with an opportunity to increase students’ technological skills and make better use of digital texts.
Another of Brandle et al. (2019)’s statistics is worth keeping in mind at our rural institution: 44 CUNY students reported limited or no access to tech devices or the Internet (p. 92); how many of our affiliates would answer the same way? This is a question we intend to include in future outreach, although shame may downplay the results to some extent. We need to ensure that inexpensive print options are not only available, but also clearly explicated, either in the course catalog or in the syllabus on the first day of class. This offers librarians the opportunity to work more closely with the campus bookstore (Follet-based) to look into print-on-demand options for Open Educational Resources. Jhangiani (2017a) called the inaccurate assumption that all students have equal access to digital resources “digital redlining,” which is an insidious aspect of information privilege.

Reinforcing this concern are the results of our next question: When it comes to digital content, how important is it to you to be able to download content and save it for use when you’re not connected to the network (offline availability)? A total of 9.5% (14 students) answered not important or only a little important; 17.6% answered neither important nor unimportant, while 73% (116) ranked it as important or very important. This reinforces the fact that reliable Internet access is a concern for our students. Many traditional publishers restrict downloads or other offline access modes for protection of copyright and to ensure that students do not share or distribute the material illegally. While that is a valid concern, it also perpetuates information privilege.
Thompson, Cross, Rigling, and Vickery (2017) posed the theory that “introductory courses assign materials that some students would prefer not to purchase,” in contrast to materials for higher-level courses that would “be valued as part of a personal or professional library” (p. 122). Our data supports that hypothesis: 38.4% of our respondents were Master’s students, with 30.2% classified as “upper classmen” (third, fourth, or fifth year undergraduates). This correlates quite closely with 51.5% of students saying that it was important or very important to be able to keep their texts (books, research articles) after the end of the class/end of term/after graduation/after leaving the university. A total of 26.4% said that they had no feeling of importance, with less than one-quarter (22.1%) saying that it was unimportant or not very important.
Most encouraging for our outreach was the feedback on our last question: How interested are you in learning more about affordable/accessible course material, which can support your education and financial needs, and the needs of others (peers, friends, family)? One student said not at all interested, three students said not very interested, eleven students (6.9%) said neither interested nor disinterested, 27% said interested, and 63.5% stated that they were very interested in learning more. We hope that this interest will translate into partnerships with librarians and student leadership groups that will learn about and spread the word regarding open course material options.
Continuing and Expanding Outreach

Just as our background work involved both faculty and students, so will our outreach going forward. To best address faculty barriers to adoption, it is our intent to develop a faculty survey based on questions asked by Allen and Seaman (2014), Belikov and Bodily (2016), and Braddlee (2019). We hope to ascertain what Adams State’s faculty know or perceive about OER, and utilize the information gleaned to help shape our future outreach efforts. In addition, we have a $1000 dollar grant stipend, which we hope to use to incentivize five faculty members to spend 10 hours reviewing an open text in their field. Faculty members who are skeptical about the quality of open textbooks/resources are often pleasantly surprised when they dig into the material in order to review it (Ernst & Cohen, 2019). Many open texts are openly licensed versions of well-known, core textbooks in the field, were produced at “good” institutions (perceived as being of inherently better quality than lesser-known schools), or were highly reviewed by leading professionals in the field (e.g., MIT professors). With continued and persistent outreach and education, as well as clearly outlined ways in which librarians can assist instructors with finding resources, we hope the initiative will gain momentum.

However, our primary focus will be to develop working relationships with student representatives on campus, including Adams’ Associated Student & Faculty Senate (AS&F). This group can help us interpret our survey results, make effective use of the data we have collected, and identify the ways students can effectively communicate their needs. We would also like to form an OER advisory committee that includes representatives from all four campus groups: students, faculty, librarians, and administration. We want to emulate North Carolina State University Libraries’ efforts to “connect with our students over their experience…[and] engage them in conversations that empower student advocacy for open educational resources”
(Thompson et al., 2017, p. 123). Even more, the library could directly benefit from these kinds of connections. Thompson et al. (2017) further stated “[t]hese conversations have also helped us to spread the word about the Libraries’ commitment to textbook affordability … engendering recognition and appreciation of the Libraries.” Most campus libraries would no doubt find that kind of appreciation advantageous.

In addition to our faculty survey, we intend to revamp our initial student survey to include some of the following questions:

- Did you consider textbook costs when registering for classes?
- Have you chosen not to enroll in a required course due to textbook costs?
- If so, what level was the course?
- How many courses have you ___ because you couldn’t afford textbooks or course materials (including access codes)?
  - Not registered for
  - Failed
  - Withdrawn from
- How have you sought to mitigate high textbook costs?
  - Decided not to purchase material at all
  - Rented digital (online) copy
  - Rented print (physical) copy
  - Bought used copy from the campus bookstore
  - Bought used copy from another source (Amazon, Chegg, friend, classmate, etc.)
  - Shared a copy with classmates/friends
  - Used a library copy (Reserve or general stacks)
- Do you have consistent, reliable access to both a tech device and Internet service in order to access material online?

**Conclusion**

Our research and survey results have provided us with greater knowledge of the challenges inherent in student outreach and advocacy, and in tailoring faculty promotion of OER. It has given us direction for future outreach, both to students and faculty. It has also shown us how far we have to go before OER will be a fully realized practice on our small, rural campus.

More institutional support will be essential to increase student and faculty engagement, although we acknowledge that support – given the location and size of our school – is far easier said than done. While the results of our advocacy efforts with faculty were mixed, we acknowledge the necessity of faculty involvement with OER initiatives. And we have come to understand that the presence of students advocating for themselves to those faculty members is also essential. Our desire is to educate students about faculty barriers to adoptions and to show how students can take an active role in advocating for more support. More engagement from students through student government and participation in an OER Advisory Committee will further our goals of having student voices heard. We must strive to bridge the gap between
librarians and faculty through student advocates if we are to bring OER to Adams State University.

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