Brittany Dudek, MLIS, is the Colorado Community College System’s OER subject matter expert, advocate, and trailblazer. As the Library Coordinator at Colorado Community Colleges Online, Brittany has been instrumental in the collaborative efforts leading to more than 80 zero textbook courses (ZTC) and Z-degree pathways in HIS and ECE. Brittany has served on the Colorado Department of Higher Education’s OER Council since 2017, and is currently serving as Chair. She is also a member of the CCCOER’s Executive Council, the Association of College and Research Libraries’ Community and Junior College Library Section OER Task Force. Brittany is a 2019-2020 Open Education Group OER Research Fellow.

IJOER’s OER & Beyond Moderator, Hilary Baribeau, sat down with Brittany to glean her thoughts on COVID-19’s impact on students and instructors. To prevent further spreading of the virus, stay-at-home orders across the globe have forced higher educational institutions to rapidly convert face-to-face courses to a fully online learning format. Experienced in online learning, Brittany shares who instructors should contact first when designing their online courses.

1 Hilary: In what ways have community colleges been particularly impacted by Covid-19?

Brittany: Community colleges have been impacted by Covid-19 in a number of ways. Our students are often balancing work, families, and school and a pandemic has complicated their already busy lives. Students may have lost their incomes or become essential workers and are now teaching their children at home or have lost childcare. In some cases, students have lost access to school: their libraries or campuses closed and they may not have technology at home. Community college students are resilient and come up with solutions to the challenges they face every semester, but when you add in the stress and anxiety of an international disaster, many students are encountering a crisis.
Hilary: Drawing on your experience as a library coordinator who has primarily dealt with distance education, do you have any advice for instructors as they move to online instruction for the first time due to Covid-19?

Brittany: I’ve worked in distance education and distance library services for nearly 6 years. In that time, I’ve learned that it’s critically important to rely on the strengths of others. This was particularly true during the rapid shift to remote instruction and even more so during the anticipated move to online and distance education for Summer and Fall 2020. Our institutions have instructional designers, educational technologists, accessibility specialists, OER coordinators, and librarians for a reason: we’re all subject matter experts just as faculty are subject matter experts in their fields. I cannot recommend strongly enough that faculty and instructors lean on their campus experts for assistance in taking their courses online. Librarians can help find material or answer questions regarding copyright/Fair Use/Teach Act. Instructional Designers and Educational Technologists can assist with implementing best practices of online course design, assignment and assessment creation, and interactivity and engagement. Accessibility coordinators can help ensure that appropriate guidelines are followed so all students can access their learning materials. It can be overwhelming when thinking of all that has to be done to take a course online, but there is no reason to go at this alone when we have subject matter experts ready and eager to share their expertise. We’re all working in higher education for the same reasons: education is a common good and we want to see students succeed.

Hilary: Additionally, any suggestions for best practices or strategies for OER advocates as they encourage faculty members to adopt OERs in their online materials?

As OER advocates, we know that OER can help provide solutions for some of the issues our students (and faculty) are facing during the Covid-19 crisis. The costs of course materials were a barrier to education before the pandemic and they will continue to be a barrier during and after. Perhaps even more of a barrier now that we are also facing an unemployment crisis, and students are losing access to the on-campus systems that supported their course success: technology, Internet access, and shared textbooks.

As faculty are shifting to online courses, I would encourage OER advocates that this is the time to gently remind faculty of some of the benefits of OER: a) immediate and continued access to course materials; b) no cost; and c) remixing and adaptation of materials. Since converting to online and changing course materials simultaneously is a big shift, I would encourage all OER advocates to make the time to offer assistance in converting to OER. The benefits of converting to OER for students and faculty are exponential right now.

Hilary: You currently serve as the Chair of the Colorado Department of Higher Education’s OER Council. What are some of the Council’s development goals and the support the Council provides?

Brittany: Colorado is fortunate to have a common course numbering system. So, as our first-year grant projects come to a close, we are setting up a referatory of Colorado OER Grant projects aligned to the courses. Faculty (and OER advocates) will be able to
easily find related course materials. Our grants have touched over 100 courses and we're excited about the future of OER adoption in Colorado!

Like many others, we had to postpone our annual convening which was to be held in June. But we realize the benefits of professional development to OER advocates and are moving forward with a virtual event. We hope to hold a fall event and plan to continue our virtual webinar series. The OER Council recognizes the relationship between student access to education and access to course materials and strongly supported the reallocation of our conference funds to the Colorado Department of Higher Education’s No Lapse in Learning Fund (https://highered.colorado.gov/no-lapse-in-learning) which provides students with technology access so they can continue to access their education.

The OER Council is particularly proud of our OER Ambassador program which has trained over 140 OER advocates around the state who serve as the campus champions and experts when it comes to OER advancement. These Ambassadors, coupled with campus-level OER committees, provide an excellent infrastructure to support OER efforts.