

# OER Textbooks: A Helpful Tool for DEI Initiatives in Higher Education

**Kurt Stanberry**  
**University of Houston Downtown**

*This is a policy paper that discusses the contributions of open educational resource (OER) textbooks to the success of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in institutions of higher education. DEI is often identified by universities as an institutional goal; however, it is usually addressed at the institutional level by large scale university initiatives and programs. The question addressed herein is how can faculty contribute on an individual level to the success of higher education DEI goals? One very practical tool that can help is the use of (OER) textbooks at the individual course level. Expanding student access to educational resources has the potential to make a significant contribution to the success of diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.*

*Keywords: OER, DEI, Open Resource Textbooks, diversity, inclusion*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Universities often stress the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as a key aspect of an ethically responsible and academically successful institution of higher learning.

While DEI is often identified as an important institutional goal, it is one that is most often achieved by university-level initiatives and programs. It is challenging to identify ways that an individual faculty member can contribute to the achievement of their university's DEI goals in a meaningful way. One clear-cut, material way that virtually all faculty members can make a difference on an individual basis is by making the decision to use open educational resources (OER), which are cost-free for students, (Kramer, 2018).

## **THE PROBLEM: HIGH COST OF TEXTBOOKS**

Studies indicate that the cost of textbooks has increased by seventy-five percent over past fifteen years. That is more than quadruple the inflation rate, (Senack, 2016).

The financial reality for many college students is that the cost of textbooks and related course materials, such as access codes, are a major financial burden. The high cost of materials often leads to a difficult decision by many to bypass purchasing the textbook altogether.

Consider these eye-opening statistics on students and textbooks in higher education:

- 7 in 10 college students have not purchased a required textbook in one or more courses because it was too expensive, (Redden, 2011).
- 6 in 10 college students have delayed purchasing textbooks until after they've received their financial aid, (Redden, 2011).

- 5 in 10 college students responding to a large survey in Florida reported that they did not buy required textbooks because of high cost, (Hilton, 2016).
- 2 in 10 college students have skipped or deferred a course altogether due to the price of the required learning resources.

The harsh reality of this data is that textbook costs open a Pandora’s Box of potential problems that may result in lower student grades, reduced graduation rates, higher dropout rates, and other related challenges for students, as well as the institutions in which they are enrolled.

## **A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM: OER RESOURCES**

Fortunately, this is a problem with a real world solution – OER textbooks, which are free for students. Faculty members who make course textbook decisions should do so with an open mind about how they can help achieve DEI goals. This means being cognizant of the economic reality of students’ financial resources. At times, higher education faculty can be traditional in their textbook decisions, looking only at content, and not at cost. Some faculty may claim that there is only one book that is right for their course, and that may very well be a text that costs \$300 or more. However, the question in many instances is, “what is the point in requiring a \$300 book if half the students, or more, do not buy it?”

Open educational resources have been an emerging trend for a decade, fueled by financial need and facilitated by technology. However, OER texts have been underutilized, in part due to faculty intransigence, (Berry et.al, 2010). Fortunately, more individual faculty members, and organizations, are now exploring the potential of OER materials and free textbooks. Open educational resource textbooks, and related materials, are created without paying expensive author royalties, and are thus freely available for use by educators and students without any fees. OERs include an extensive range of digital materials, including basic ones such as classroom activities, and more fully developed resources including textbooks, multimedia applications and course models.

### **Connection Between OER and DEI Programs**

The nexus between the use of OER materials in the classroom and achieving DEI goals is key for faculty to recognize. Universities, and their faculty, can achieve the goal of broadening participation by removing financial barriers and granting access to everyone (Feldstein et.al, 2012). The OER approach makes learning more accessible and equitable, which is a common DEI goal. With OER it is possible to eliminate the cost of textbooks altogether, thus significantly reducing overall student cost of attendance. Textbooks are an important learning tool, and trying to pass a college course without a textbook is a difficult challenge. Since the evidence indicates that college students often do not buy the assigned textbook due to cost, using OER can play an important role in student success, especially for those who are face financial challenges.

### **An Example of OER Publishing**

OpenStax, (<https://openstax.org>), based at Rice University, is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit charitable educational initiative with the mission to improve educational access for everyone in an effort to close equity gaps for all students, particularly the disadvantaged. OpenStax does this by breaking down one of the most common barriers to learning – the cost of, and access to, learning materials.

OpenStax offers 42 different OER free textbooks, used by over 14 million college students in 60% of the colleges and universities in the U.S., and over 100 countries, saving students a total of \$1.2 billion in the past decade, (<https://openstax.org>). OER textbooks are available in the disciplines of science, math, social sciences, business and the humanities, and every book is available free — forever — to students.

### **Advantages of OER Textbooks**

As discussed above, OER texts are the most direct way an individual faculty member can contribute to improving access, and thus increasing the opportunity to succeed for all students.

However, there are also pedagogical reasons why OER is a good idea. OER texts are very easy to preview for potential use in a course, there's no permission needed, no phone call, no email, no sales staff. It's as simple as going to an OER website and clicking on the specific textbook that a faculty member wants to preview.

Another advantage is that OER texts are flexible. A faculty member can use whatever portion of the book they want to use, and they can combine/add content from other OER books/materials. OERs give faculty the ability to customize course materials, creating the "perfect" course packet or textbook instead of being bound to a traditional one-size-fits-all model. Customization gives faculty control over the quality of their course materials as well as the type and timing of updates to textbooks and other resources.

Additionally, most texts have import/export cartridges for easy use in Blackboard, Canvas, and other LMS systems such as D2L. Most texts also have a full complement of ancillaries, such as test banks, slides, videos, and other related resources.

The advantages for students are multiple. Most students find OER texts easy to use, with interactive features such as word search, highlighting, margin notetaking, and other functions students like. OER publishers also frequently offer tutoring, and have arrangements with educational tech software companies.

### **Texas OER Program Is an Example of a Statewide Approach**

The State of Texas has a project called Open Texas, (<https://www.tdl.org/tdl-events/open-texas/>), that supports the use of OER materials through initiatives attempting to raise the awareness of the important opportunities presented to faculty to be a part of DEI success. Sponsored by the Texas Digital Library (TDL), the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), the Digital Higher Education Consortium of Texas (DigiTex), and colleges including the University of Houston Downtown, all of which jointly organize the annual Open Texas conference to convene faculty, administrators, and other open education practitioners and advocates in Texas.

Open Texas sponsors free conferences that provide to all who are interested the opportunity to learn more about what is available in OER formats. These conferences bring together users, authors, librarians, administrators, and others in a way designed to encourage and increase the use of OER.

The Texas program has led to increased funding for OER projects. OER-based courses in which the required materials for the courses are free are now offered at the majority of Texas colleges and universities (almost 70%). Furthermore, over 75% of institutions are working to develop more courses using free OER materials, (Jimes, 2019).

### **CONCLUSION: A CALL TO ACTION FOR UNIVERSITY FACULTY**

For college students and their families, finding the money to pay for tuition is challenging enough. Many students simply do not have the resources, after paying tuition and fee, to then pay for textbooks. It's not out of realm of possibility for textbooks to cost over \$1000 per term, translating into as much as \$10,000 over the course of a bachelor's degree.

The Student Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) recently released a report investigating the real impact of high textbook prices on today's students. The report, (Senack, 2016), titled "Covering the Cost" details how college students are feeling the pinch: they can either purchase the necessary textbook and add to their financial hardship, take time away from studying to work extra hours, or go without the book and accept the consequences.

For many students, high textbook prices mean a choice with no good answer. The market is controlled by a handful of publishing giants that make large profits off textbooks, according to Ethan Senack, Higher Education Advocate at the Student PIRG (Senack, 2016).

Therefore, the best textbook decision is not necessarily the one the professor likes best or thinks is the one 'perfect' book for their course. Faculty would do well to remember the well-known Winston Churchill line, "perfection is the enemy of progress." The best textbook decision is the one that students will use, the one that will help them make progress. As a co-author, adopter, and classroom user of an OER textbook for a college course in Business Ethics, this author can say unequivocally that student textbook usage goes up

when the price goes down, leading to a greater likelihood of student success. The decision to use OER is a practical, concrete way for individual faculty to contribute to the success of institutional DEI goals.

## REFERENCES

- Berry, T., Cook, L., Hill, N., & Stevens, K. (2010). An exploratory analysis of textbook usage and study habits: misperceptions and barriers to success. *College Teaching*, 59(1), 31–39.  
DOI:10.1080/87567555.2010.509376
- Feldstein, A., Martin, M., Hudson, A., Warren, K., Hilton, J., & Wiley, D. (2012). Open textbooks and increased student access and outcomes. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*. Retrieved from <https://old.eurodl.org/index.php?p=archives&year=2012&halfyear=2&abstract=533>
- Hilton, J. (2016). Open educational resources and college textbook choices: A review of research on efficacy and perceptions. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 64(4), 573–590.  
DOI: 10.1007/s11423-016-9434-9
- Jimes, C., Karaglani, A., Petrides, L., Rios, J., Sebesta, J., & Torre, K. (2019). *Open Educational Resources (OER) in Texas Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://reportcenter.highered.texas.gov/reports/reports-and-studies-non-fiscal/oer-texas/>
- Kramer, L. (2018). *OER Basics: Why use Open Educational Resources?* Retrieved from <https://www.oercommons.org/authoring/49236-oer-basics-why-use-open-educational-resources/view>
- Open Texas. (2021). Retrieved from <https://www.tdl.org/tdl-events/open-texas/>
- OpenStax. (2021). Retrieved from <https://openstax.org>
- Redden, M. (2011). 7 In 10 students have skipped buying a textbook because of its cost. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/7-in-10-students-have-skipped-buying-a-textbook-because-of-its-cost-survey-finds/>
- Senack, E. (2016). *Student Group Releases New Report on Textbook Prices*. Retrieved from <https://studentpirgs.org/2016/02/03/student-group-releases-new-report-textbook-prices/>