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Building a Path to College Success: Advocacy, Discovery and OER Adoption in Emerging Educational Models

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ABSTRACT
In this case study we will examine the role of the library in Open Educational Resources through the lens of library value described in Megan Oakleaf’s 2010 ACRL report. While librarians in our organization have traditionally not played a role in textbook adoptions, the campus academic goal to increase online, blended and competency-based models is a strategic direction that intersects with the library’s strategic vision to increase its contribution to online learning. Further, we will describe the process of building a partnership around OER with the campus Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and articulate the impact of our combined services on faculty adoption of OER and student success.

Background
The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) is an urban research university with a commitment to access and a history of innovation in distance education. The University serves both traditional and nontraditional students primarily from the surrounding metropolitan area and the state of Wisconsin. Blended, Online and Competency-Based Degree Programs extend the campus reach as well as the University’s access mission. The library is housed in a single location on the main campus and serves on-campus as well as distance students. The library does not include textbooks in its collection development policy, but makes some textbooks available via Course Reserve. Course Reserve for print materials is not universally available to distance students. The library does not maintain a copy of the textbook for each course as is often the student perception. Some students seek copies of books and other required readings from our campus library as well as the state consortium.

The University strives to make higher education accessible to working adults by offering online, blended and competency based education as more flexible alternatives to face-to-face classes. Educational technology and pedagogy used to support online classes is also used to enhance face-to-face classes and facilitates blended learning on campus. The University’s strategic plan points to novel and emerging...
teaching methods as key to student engagement for both traditional and nontraditional students (University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, 2014).

At UWM and other institutions, new paths to a college degree are emerging making higher education accessible to a wider demographic of students. In both traditional and emerging models retention, degree completion, and overall readiness for the job market are key concerns. Online, blended and competency based education are all built on a model in which course content is front-loaded to students and assigned strategically to build understanding of required concepts, to provide a basis for online and classroom discussions and to facilitate active learning.

Meanwhile, the Florida State Textbook Survey and others have shown that the high cost of traditional textbooks is prohibitive for many students. College students increasingly forego textbook purchases and this lack of access to the text has been linked to course withdrawal and poor performance (Florida Virtual Campus, 2012). Lack of access to foundational course readings puts students in blended, online and competency based programs at a particular disadvantage because of the emphasis on self-paced learning through the textbook. This case study examines the library’s role in addressing textbook access through the lens of library value. Further it examines the process of building strategic campus partnerships to promote OER adoption as a first step to articulating the impact of Open Educational Resources on student success in emerging academic models. Typical measurements used to evaluate OER impact such as course grade, course completion and course enrollment are measurable outcomes that also serve as library value markers.

Library value

While the need for solutions to textbook costs has been established and advocacy around Open Education has grown in recent years, the 2014 report *Opening the Curriculum: OER in Higher Education* identifies several perceived barriers to broader faculty adoption of OER. These include lack of overall awareness of OER, lack of an organized discovery tool or repository for OER, lack of time to find and evaluate OER and lack of confidence in interpreting the Creative Commons license assigned to the content (Allen & Seaman, 2014) These perceived barriers point to opportunities for librarians to contribute their expertise to OER adoption. Librarians are uniquely positioned to share their expertise in organizing and selecting materials within an academic discipline and often have established relationships with faculty around collection development. Librarians can also add their knowledge of open publishing, copyright and fair use, to the conversation around open textbooks. Many librarians also have an established assessment relationship with faculty around information literacy instruction that can be leveraged to identify student learning outcomes connected to OER.

These examples of library support for OER adoption align with Megan Oakleaf’s assertion that in academic libraries especially it is necessary to align library value with institutional mission (Oakleaf, 2010). In our case study we will also discuss librarian contributions to a campus open textbook project as an opportunity to build
library value in faculty teaching. Adoption of OER to ensure student access to course materials can be seen as a starting point on the path to student success.

Combining the strengths of key campus units to build OER into the campus culture is a main focus of our project and another avenue for building library value. Our current project goal is to raise awareness of OER and facilitate open textbook adoptions. The Library and the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) are leading the initiative together. This collaborative approach was developed from a past OER project led by CETL for which the library assisted faculty in locating OER. Additional campus partners in this initiative will include the Accessibility Resource Center, the newly installed eCampus bookstore, and the Student Association. The project is funded by a campus Educational Technology Fund grant and supports UWM’s participation in the Open Textbook Network founded by the University of Minnesota. Open Textbook Network activities at UWM are scheduled to take place on December 4, 2015.

The project goals identified in our grant are tied to open textbook adoption in at least one large format enrollment course and at least two additional mid-size courses. We have identified three main areas for investigation in our current project to better understand the needs of students on our campus as well as the needs of faculty who wish to adopt an OER model in their course. These include direct dialogue with students; outreach to faculty, academic staff and librarians; and studying freshmen performance indicators.

Student centered initiative

The library’s understanding of student needs is based on high demand for textbooks at the Research Help and Course Reserve service points. Students request assistance locating textbooks in local libraries as an alternative to purchasing them. These requests mirror the data collected in the Florida College Textbook Study, which found that 43 percent of students forego purchasing the textbook (Florida Virtual Campus, 2012). Our anecdotal knowledge of student behaviors combined with national textbook trends led us to pursue student participation in our open textbook initiative.

Our initial outreach to students began with whiteboard prompts. The library has been using whiteboard prompts to gather student input on a variety of issues since 2008. Prompts are designed to engage students as the primary users of the Learning Commons. Over the course of Open Education Week 2015 we asked students to share the cost of their textbooks for a semester, the cost of their textbooks for a single course, and their most expensive textbook. Student responses were predictable—they easily identified the high cost of textbooks, especially the courses that are most expensive. Students also shared the alternatives they use to avoid purchasing books. The whiteboard exercise not only collects data which already exists in national studies on a local level, but it gives students the opportunity to be part of our local campus conversation on the cost of textbooks, illustrates student perceptions of how textbooks are actually used in their courses and allows us to respond with a conversation on openly licensed alternatives.
This was especially apparent when we brought sample copies of bound OpenStax textbooks to our fall welcome table. Students stopped between classes to visit the table, looked at the books and talked candidly about the cost of their books. A popular meme had recently circulated on Facebook stating that Bill Gates had given money to make textbooks free, legally. While the meme oversimplifies the Gates, Hewlett and other foundation support for OpenStax and open textbook initiatives generally, it certainly struck a chord with the student audience who were drawn to the familiar bold color and font design of the OpenStax books pictured in the meme. Many students reviewed the books and asked questions about the open textbook model. They asked how the model works as well as how we planned to bring open textbooks to UWM. During Open Access Week 2015 we repeated the Open Textbook sample table inside the Learning Commons in conjunction with a general textbook cost whiteboard prompt. Once again, the level of student interest in this topic was impressive. To capture this momentum we invited these enthusiastic students, along with representatives from student government and departmental student associations to participate in a student advocacy meeting facilitated by the Open Textbook Network.

Supporting faculty

Our collaborative outreach to faculty, academic staff and librarians also began in spring 2015 with a set of workshops designed to build awareness of OER. We hosted a workshop led by David Ernst of the Open Textbook Network. This workshop mostly reached our academic staff and library audiences with a low level of participation from faculty. In addition to building awareness of OER among attendees and reinforcing the value of the Library/CETL collaboration, another outcome of this meeting was a deeper understanding of the Open Textbook Network. We learned that by working with the Open Textbook Network, our campus could participate in the established open textbook review process David Ernst had established at the University of Minnesota and disseminated to other participating campuses. By connecting faculty with an open textbook and engaging them in the process of writing a review, Ernst has had success with subsequent course adoptions. We chose to work with the OTN so that we could follow their model of targeting faculty interest and building a base of open textbook adopters on our campus.

Our early outreach to faculty also included a Library/CETL presentation to the campus Online Program Council. In this presentation we outlined the goals of our grant proposal and sought to build awareness and interest among our online faculty. Our faculty who teach in online courses have varied experiences with OER. A handful of them have participated in past OER projects and some developed courses for the Flex Option—the University of Wisconsin System’s competency based degree program, which emphasized OER in the degree program design. The success of past OER efforts was mixed. Similar to the array of faculty concerns about OER identified in Opening the Curriculum (Allen & Seaman, 2014), our Flex faculty found it difficult to identify all the content they wished to curate for their students in open
textbooks and open educational resources. Several found it necessary to assign textbooks to ensure that students would have access to specialized content. By revisiting this specialty audience of faculty and academic staff involved with online learning, we hoped to revisit their early efforts but add the specialized discovery and course design support available from librarians and instructional designers.

Beyond building a general awareness of our partnership to support OER, we are also engaged in a one-to-one recruitment effort. As librarians and instruction designers, we seek out opportunities to participate in curriculum, assessment and retention meetings. In these contexts, where faculty are already thinking reflectively about their courses, we have been successful at recommending open textbook options. At this time we are in the early stages of recruiting faculty to participate in the Open Textbook Network review workshop. Of those who have already registered, more than half were recruited as part of an Information literacy consultation. It follows that faculty visiting the library for an Information literacy consultation are receptive to the idea of a new textbook because they are already in a course design mode. At this point, our goal is to connect faculty with the Open Textbook Network review workshop. However, our partnership with the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning will allow us to recommend instructional design support for those faculty who have questions about how to remix open content, organize OER in the learning management system and design course activities that maximize the potential of OER by engaging students in remix or other active learning modes facilitated by openly licensed content.

As our recruitment develops, we are focused on identifying faculty who are interested in OER for their courses overall, regardless of the course delivery mode. Since our face-to-face, online, and competency-based programs are designed and taught by our local faculty, it is more important to identify courses for which an open textbook adoption is available first and then build adoptions that apply to multiple delivery modes. For example, our Health Sciences faculty have adopted a textbook that will be used in the face-to-face and online sections of the course and plan to adopt it for the competency-based course in conjunction with the next course refresh.

**Student success**

A final strategy we are using to identify courses where textbooks could positively impact student cost, course performance and course completion is reviewing freshmen data. Our registrar’s office provided a report on first year student performance. The data set includes the total number of freshmen enrolled in each course, the number of freshmen who performed below the C- grade level and the number who withdrew in the fall of 2014. The number of students earning a C- or below and increased withdrawals often correlate with large enrollment courses. Where we can see the convergence of high enrollment and low performance, we are investigating the cost of textbooks, and the availability of relevant open textbooks in order to extend an invitation to those faculty to participate in the Open Textbook Network workshop. By using this freshman performance report as our recruiting tool, we
hope to remove a controllable barrier to early college success by replacing traditional textbooks with open textbooks. Ultimately we will compare freshman performance data from 2014 with freshman performance data from 2016 in those courses that adopt an open textbook.

Our focus on student performance is inspired by David Wiley’s argument on the real costs of traditional textbooks. He identifies several problems that arise when students do not have access to the textbook for a course. He shows that students who do not have textbooks are more likely to earn a C- or lower in the course and are more likely to withdraw from the course. Poor performance and withdraws ultimately increase the time to degree completion for the student (Wiley, 2015). This is a confounding factor for both the access institutions and the students attending them because the risk of not completing a degree at such an institution is already very high with an average completion rate of 33% over six years (Florida Virtual Campus, 2012). We anticipate that we will be able to measure costs savings per student enrolled as well as the percentage of students who perform above the C- level.

As part of the Open Textbook Network, we will also be expected to share information on the number of textbooks that are adopted and contribute to the national discussion on open textbooks. Our local investigation of these areas provides not only talking points for recruiting faculty to review and potentially adopt open textbooks, but also focuses our assessment on student performance. This positive impact on student learning will be an opportunity to build library value through support for OER. The library’s contribution to faculty curriculum development supports the institutional goal to leverage emerging educational models for student success. This contribution is strengthened by our partnership with CETL who support faculty in curriculum design with OER.

**Next steps**

The cornerstone of our grant project is participation in the Open Textbook Network to facilitate faculty review of open textbooks and encourage adoption in current courses. Our campus workshop day is scheduled to take place in December 2015 and will include a session on advocacy for OER among library and CETL staff, a discussion of OER in campus strategic directions for associate deans, and a student advocacy session. Our workshop will be coming late in the textbook adoption cycle to impact spring 2016 courses so we anticipate that our first semester of adoption will take place in fall 2016.

Over the past year of preparing the project and recruiting faculty, we have learned that while our campus has some OER adopters already, raising awareness and developing understanding of OER is essential. Much like Allen and Seaman’s *Opening the Curriculum* survey indicates, faculty are at the beginning stages of understanding how OER can be used to save costs and build student engagement (2014). Once we have established a core of OER adopters among our faculty, we are eager to build learning engagement with OER into the faculty toolkit for course design.
To support faculty in their curriculum design, CETL will develop a series of workshops for faculty that include organizing content in the learning management system, but also model ways faculty can design assignments that allow students to curate and remix open content. Ultimately, we will move from a mode of building awareness and facilitating adoption to full participation in the potential for OER to connect students with the course content they need and engaging them in critical thinking.

References


