



ELIMINATING THE \$60 PAPER WEIGHT

Why Open Educational Resources Save Students Money and Make College Easier

Imagine an undergraduate student named Taylor. Taylor is about to start her first day of classes for the fall semester, but she still needs to buy her textbooks. She is taking 15 credits this semester, so she anticipates buying at least eight books and some additional course supplies (maybe even an iClicker). She gets ready to checkout, and the student behind the counter tells Taylor that she owes over \$400. In that moment, Taylor sees all the money she saved this summer disappear.

Taylor walks back to her dorm in a daze, and decides to call her friend, Logan, who is going to school at the University of Cincinnati. Logan experienced a similar shock at his university's bookstore, but Logan tells Taylor that he spent about \$600 on textbooks today. As they talk, Taylor notices a stack of books in the corner of her room—books from her freshman year that she had never been able to sell back to the BYU Bookstore. Taylor realized

she has spent hundreds of dollars on books she will never need again outside of this semester, and the books she had from previous semesters were only acting as paperweights or dust collectors on her desk.

Does Taylor's story sound familiar? What if I told you there is a better way? In this article, I'll explain why our traditional textbooks are dead and what better options exist for accessing course materials. I will discuss (1) what Open Educational Resources (OER) are, (2) what benefits OER provide for students, and (3) what students can do to adopt OER.

What Are Open Educational Resources?

OER are digital textbooks and other course materials that are openly licensed and accessible for use in classrooms and online. The nature of OER means that students and educators have unlimited access to course

materials, without the cost of a traditionally published textbook. So what makes an educational resource "open"? The infographic on the next page explains what open means using the 5 Rs of OER.

Retaining, reusing, revising, remixing, and redistributing are the five permissions content creators have when they create OER. The 5 Rs allow content to be customized and shared with various courses, students, professors, and even between universities. These permissions are what distinguish OER from traditional textbooks because OER are accessible, affordable, and flexible.

What Are the Benefits of OER?

Students, educators, and universities all benefit from the adoption of OER in university courses. The following sections will discuss how OER benefit students economically, educationally, and socially.

THE 5 RS OF OER

RETAIN: Make, own, and control your content!



REUSE: use content in any setting



REVISE: Adopt, adjust, modify, or alter content



REMUX: Combine original material with other material to create something new



REDISTRIBUTE: Share copies of content with others



The Economic Impact of OER

Many college students don't have the income required to pay for the high cost of attending universities, let alone the extra cost of textbooks. Usually students only qualify for minimum wage jobs where the hours they spend at work don't compensate for the money they spend on books. Richard Baraniuk, founder of OpenStax (one of the leading resources for OER), said, "A community college student will now spend more hours in a minimum-wage job to pay for their textbook than they would sitting in a course." Students can't succeed

in their courses without the assigned textbooks, but they also can't succeed when they aren't in class because they have to work to afford their textbook.

What would you do if you had to choose between paying for your college textbooks and paying your rent? Some students have to make that choice. OER can eliminate that choice so students don't have to stop paying their rent to afford textbooks. A study from Educational Researcher has shown that 11–14% of two- and four-year university students face housing insecurity, food insecurity, or both. This data means that students can't afford to buy food or pay their rent, let alone spend upwards of \$800 on textbooks each year. By adopting OER, universities eliminate or significantly reduce the amount students pay in textbooks each year. Students are then able to use that money to pay for food, rent, utilities, health insurance, and other necessities.

Open resources are an excellent solution to students' concerns about economic security, especially considering Utah's minimum wage. In a 2021 report from the one of the top American research universities, MIT, Carey Nadeau concluded that a single person living in Salt Lake

County with no children, working full-time, had to be earning at least \$15.11 per hour to make a livable wage. Currently, Utah's minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour, which is half of the calculated livable wage. If the average college student is working a minimum wage job, textbook costs should be the last thing students have to worry about. Clearly, OER can eliminate a huge financial burden from university students.

The Educational Impact of OER

OER encourage student-centered learning, which can increase students' engagement in their education. With a traditional course design, students receive



their booklist at the start of every semester (like Taylor in our example above) to participate in a predetermined curricula that may have no real-life application to those students' lives. However, since OER encourage student-centered learning, those resources generate opportunities for students to employ skills in critical thinking, decision-making, and goal setting by enabling students to take control of their own learning and make decisions that will take their education beyond the classroom.

With OER, students can become involved in the creation and evaluation of their course materials, which creates in them a sense of responsibility for their learning. Christina Hendricks, professor at the University of British Columbia, notes "creating and revising OERs can be a valuable way for students to learn and to have their work make a larger impact

than just earning them a grade." Here, Hendricks points out that the impact of OER extends beyond one student, or even one class. OER have the potential to positively influence hundreds of other students because of one student's engagement in the curriculum.

Another educational benefit for students is OER allow students to have complete access to their courses anytime, anywhere. OER can be accessed through PDF downloads, mobile devices, or computers. This means learning environments are mobile, accessible, and flexible. When students have access to mobile learning environments, they no longer have to haul a carry-on bag full of textbooks home for the holidays. With open course materials, Students have the freedom to access their coursework in a time and place that works best for their schedule.

The Social Impact of OER

OER are a benefit to students from all backgrounds because they eliminate many barriers to accessibility. According to a

research brief from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) National Network, approximately "19% of undergraduate students and 12% of graduate students have disabilities." Those numbers mean traditional printed textbooks aren't accessible to many university students. With OER, text, images, and videos can be added or altered to meet the needs of students with visual or hearing disabilities. Accessibility features such as background contrast, font size, and alternative text for images are all available with open resources. Using OER in classrooms makes college education more inclusive and benefits students who may often be overlooked.

What Can Students Do to Adopt OER?

What can we do as students to encourage the adoption of OER in our courses at BYU? Here are three suggestions that can help you start.

Talk to your professor. Do you have a favorite course that you think would be a good candidate for OER adoption? Talk to your professor! Discuss whether she or he knows about OER, and share why you think OER would benefit that professor's course. (In addition to talking to your professor, share this article with her or him. The article discusses the barriers faculty face



when adopting OER and solutions to overcome those barriers.)

Propose projects. If you need to create a project proposal for an assignment or you are looking for research to do with other students or faculty, try proposing an OER project. I mentioned earlier in this article that students become more engaged and gain more from their education when they are responsible for it. An OER project is a perfect way to take control of your education and make connections with your peers and professors. These resources will not only benefit you, but they will also benefit students who will use the open course materials in the future. Plus, an OER project looks great on a résumé.

Review existing OER. Maybe you are currently taking a class that uses OER, or maybe you have taken a class like that in the past. One of the 5 Rs of OER is revise. Because OER are meant to be current, they need to be revised as

information changes.

Anything from broken links to outdated statistics can be easily updated in open course materials. As a student with access to OER, you can make note of the changes that need to be made and contact the content creator or your professor with your suggestions.

The days of traditional, outdated textbooks are over. In place of the \$60 paperweight in their courses, students can use Open Educational Resources that are free, openly licensed, and accessible. The benefits of OER extend into every aspect of a student's life by benefiting students economically, educationally, and socially. OER are also valuable for universities and educators.

Many of the concerns faculty face over student engagement, retention, and accessibility are significantly reduced or eliminated because of OER. With all the advantages of OER, there is no reason we should not be using them. OER are the future of university education, and the sooner we adopt these resources, the sooner we can refocus on our education.



1 "Cost of Attendance," BYU Enrollment Services, Brigham Young University, accessed April 27, 2021, <https://enrollment.byu.edu/financialaid/cost-of-attendance>

2 "Open and Affordable Course Content: Textbook Costs: A Social Justice Issue," Research Guides, Virginia Commonwealth University, last updated June 25, 2021, accessed July 16, 2021, <https://guides.library.vcu.edu/acc/socialjustice>.

3 "Defining the 'Open' in Open Content and Open Educational Resources," David Wiley, accessed July 15, 2021, <http://opencontent.org/definition>

4 Richard Baraniuk, as cited in Emma Whitford, "Textbook Trade-Offs," Inside HigherEd, July 26, 2018, accessed July 15, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/07/26/students-sacrifice-meals-and-trips-home-pay-textbooks>

5 Katharine M. Broton and Sara Goldrick-Rab, "Going Without: An Exploration of Food and Housing Insecurity among Undergraduates," *Educational Research* 47, no. 2 (December 2017): 121-133.

6 Carey Nadeau, "Living Wage Calculation for Salt Lake County, Utah," Living Wage Calculator, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, accessed July 15, 2021, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/49035>.

7 Christina Hendricks, "Students' Vital Role in OER," Inside Higher Ed, December 13, 2017, accessed July 15, 2021,

<https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/views/2017/12/13/students-have-vital-role-creating-and-spreading-oer>.

8 Rob Gould, Sarah Parker Harris, and Courtney Mullin, "Higher Education and the ADA," ADA National Network, 2019, accessed July 15, 2021, https://adata.org/research_brief/higher-education-and-ada.

9 Julie Irvine, Royce Kimmons, and Jacob Rogers, "Recognizing and Overcoming Obstacles: What It Will Take to Realize the Potential of OER," *Educause Review*, 2021.