

Report to the Provost: Provost's Standing Committee on OER

August 2023

Executive Summary

The Provost of the University of Pittsburgh founded the Provost's Standing Committee on Open Educational Resources (OER) in 2018 in response to a Student Government Board resolution calling for support for OER to decrease student textbook cost burden. OER are any format of teaching, learning, and research materials (for example, textbooks) that are no-cost and have been released under an open license. The cornerstone of the committee's work thus far has been coordinating, administering, and supporting the Provost's OER Grant program, which incentivizes faculty by providing funding to adapt, adopt, and create OER for use in Pitt courses. The funded projects have impacted an estimated 33,000 Pitt students to date. The estimated cumulative savings to Pitt students since the inception of this program is \$3,024,000. This is a 1213% return on investment. Moreover, the impact goes beyond monetary in supporting faculty designing educational resources for their students that are more aligned with student needs than what is commercially available. The Committee hopes to continue this work with annual funding for Provost's OER Grant Awards.

Background: Open Educational Resources (OER) and the Provost's Standing Committee on OER

According to the Education Data Initiative, in the 2021-2022 academic year, the average postsecondary student spent between \$628 and \$1471 annually for books and supplies.¹ This is not a feasible cost for many students, forcing them to choose between going without the textbooks necessary to succeed in their courses and going without food or other necessities.^{2,3}

In January 2018, the University of Pittsburgh's Student Government Board passed a resolution supporting expanded use of OER and open textbooks as a means to control costs. The resolution calls on faculty to expand the use of OER, the administration to support faculty with grants and incentives, the library to assist with resources, and the government to support the Affordable College Textbook Act.

Definition: Open Educational Resources (OER) are any format of teaching, learning, and research materials that are no-cost and have been released under an open license. Open Textbooks are just one example of OER, where experts author texts in their respective disciplines, making them freely available in digital format or providing an option for an at-cost print version.

In response to the Student Government Board's resolution, and out of an interest in keeping access to course materials as affordable as possible for students, the Provost convened a standing committee to learn about current practices and trends, and explore opportunities with OER. The Provost's Standing Committee on OER was thus founded in 2018.

Committee Charge

The Committee will evaluate the current availability of OER, awareness of OER on campus, barriers to OER adoption, and models for creation of these resources by Pitt faculty. It will make recommendations to the Provost on how to support and advance the use of OER at the University.

¹ Average cost of college textbooks [2023]: Prices per year. Education Data Initiative. Retrieved July 10, 2023, from <https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college-textbooks>

² Nagle, C. (2021, February 24). *Fixing the Broken Textbook Market, Third Edition*. Student PIRGs. Retrieved Aug 21, 2023, from <https://studentpirgs.org/2021/02/24/fixing-the-broken-textbook-market-third-edition/>

³ Donaldson, R., Nelson, D., & Thomas, E. (2012). *2012 Florida Student Textbook Survey*. Florida Distance Learning Consortium (FDLC). <https://www.oerknowledgecloud.org/record2629>

The Provost's OER Grant program

Goals of the Grant program

The cornerstone of the committee's work thus far has been coordinating, administering, and supporting the Provost's OER Grant program. Since 2018, this grant program has incentivized faculty by providing funding to adapt, adopt, and create OER for use in Pitt courses. With an initial goal of reducing the financial burden of textbooks and other educational resources on Pitt students, the Provost's OER Grant has paved the way for the adoption and creation of OER by Pitt faculty. It quickly became clear that using OER in courses came with another, non-monetary benefit: it allowed faculty to adapt their educational resources to their learning objectives and to their students' needs, as opposed to adapting their teaching to a commercially available textbook. Thus, the goals of the grant program today are two-fold: to reduce financial textbook burden on students; and to provide the flexibility for faculty to customize their teaching to their students and learning objectives, thus improving the student experience.

Achievements of the Grant program

From 2018 to 2022, this committee approved funding of 58 proposals submitted by faculty from the Pittsburgh, Greensburg, Johnstown, and Bradford campuses, awarding a total of \$230,301.56. These funded faculty have developed and adapted a diversity of teaching tools, from standard textbooks and laboratory manuals, to websites, videos, computational and digital programs. Many of these OER replaced commercially available required or recommended materials such as textbooks, access codes, or lab manuals. Assuming these OER have been used every time the associated course has been taught since, they have impacted approximately 33,000 Pitt students to date. The estimated cumulative savings to Pitt students since the inception of this program is \$3,024,000.⁴ This is a 1213% return on investment.

Moreover, the scholarly and educational benefits of developing and integrating OER in a course go far beyond the monetary impact on students. Many grant recipients sought support to author materials not currently available at any price, or to reduce cognitive load by authoring a textbook more aligned with their curriculum than commercially available options. Additionally, awardees are finding that sharing their authored materials openly with the world is reaping dividends: for example, professors elsewhere are getting in contact, expressing gratitude for the use of these Pitt-created OER, and offering their own work in extending or improving the resources in return. This is building Pitt a reputation for excellence among the global OER community, in addition to improving our students' experience.

⁴ Estimated based on the cost of commercially available items the OER would replace, as reported by the award recipient, and assumes each student in the class would have purchased said materials.

Student and instructor reflections on funded projects

Matt Kropf, associate professor of Engineering Technology at Pitt Bradford, was awarded an OER grant in 2019, which he used to create an OER to cover energy basics for non-major students, as he couldn't find any published textbook that would adequately cover such a foundational topic. He integrated into his ES 110 course on the LMS a compilation of text, presentations and assignments accessible by any student at Pitt. This is his reflection on the impact:

“Students came to class more prepared and more willing to refer to the text while completing in-class assignments. Students also mentioned that they were actually willing to use and read the textbook outside of class when they wanted more information on a concept. Students specific[ally] mentioned that the reason they were able to do this was because it was a free textbook.”

Lorraine Denman, teaching professor of Italian on the Pittsburgh campus, was awarded an OER grant in 2020 to create a full textbook for the first two semesters of Italian language and culture (ITAL0101 and 0102), in order to fill the need for an affordable textbook that would meet her students' needs. The two-semester OER are now being used as the main educational resource for Italian language and culture students in the French and Italian Dept, saving hundreds of students an average of \$150 each per class. This is her reflection:

“Students appreciated that the content was fully integrated into Canvas and that the interface was user friendly and easily accessible. Students also felt that the integrated online exercises and assessments were practical, easy-to-use and beneficial to their linguistic development.”

Future Goals of the Committee

The Committee hopes to continue this work with annual funding for Provost's OER Grant Awards. In 2023 the committee awarded Office of the Provost funding to 10 faculty proposals and we look forward to reporting the outcome of those and future projects when completed.