



# Perceptions of OER in Higher Education: A Liberal Arts College Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Textbook costs remain a significant barrier to student success in higher education. Open Educational Resources (OER) offer a promising solution by reducing costs and allowing content adaptation. This study examines the perceptions and use of OER by 70 faculty members at a small liberal arts college (Franklin College) through a campus-wide survey assessing faculty knowledge, motivations, challenges, and experiences with OER. Results show growing awareness and use of OER, especially for improving student affordability and access. However, many faculty still need more support to adopt and adapt OER in their courses fully. The study identified a group of experienced faculty who are not only using OER but also actively adapting and remixing materials to fit their teaching needs. Most discovered OER through online repositories, general internet searches, and recommendations from colleagues. Overall, faculty rated the quality of OER positively, though gaps in subject-specific content and in alternative formats such as datasets and assessments remain. Based on these findings, the study offers recommendations, including institution-based training programmes, peer-led workshops led by experienced faculty, and incentives for OER adoption and creation. Overall, faculty are motivated by equity and effectiveness, and with proper support, can play a key role in expanding OER use. These insights offer a roadmap for institutions seeking to scale OER use while fostering a collaborative, inclusive, and innovative teaching culture.

## KEYWORDS

open education resources, open education practices, accessibility, higher education, teachers' perception, liberal arts

## HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

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## Introduction

The rising cost of higher education remains a concern for students, and the increasing cost of textbooks poses a financial barrier to academic success. In response, many educators and institutions have embraced Open Educational Resources (OER), teaching and learning materials that are freely available and openly licensed to permit reuse, revision, and adaptation. OER enable instructors to tailor content, incorporate multiple perspectives, and enhance disciplinary and cultural relevance, offering both economic and pedagogical benefits. Open Access materials, such as textbooks, journal articles, or research papers, are free to access but typically lack the licensing flexibility that permits modification or remixing.

This study explores faculty experiences with OER at Franklin College of Indiana. This small, private liberal arts college emphasises strong student-faculty interaction, individualised instruction, and student-centred learning. These values align closely with the flexibility and accessibility OER provide. The study's findings illuminate the pedagogical, practical, and institutional factors shaping OER adoption campus-wide and provide insights to guide future efforts to promote equitable access to quality learning materials in higher education.

## Literature Review

UNESCO (2002) defines OER as “any type of educational materials that are in the public domain or introduced with an open license” and can “range from textbooks to curricula, syllabi, lecture notes, assign assignments, tests, projects, audio, video and animation.” Hilton (2016) emphasises their availability under licenses that permit reuse, revision, and redistribution, offering flexibility absent in commercial textbooks. Faculty perception of OER remains mixed (Elder et al., 2020). While many instructors acknowledge the benefits of affordability and adaptability, concerns about quality, rigour, currency, and peer review continue to limit widespread OER adoption. Institutional culture, administrative support, and access to professional development also shape faculty engagement and perceptions of OER's sustainability.

### Textbook Affordability

Several studies have documented the rise in textbook prices over the past few decades. The textbook publishing industry was valued at \$3.18 billion for 2022 (Association of American Publishers, 2023). The price of textbooks continues to rise, increasing by an average of 6% each year, leading to a doubling of costs every 11 years (U.S. Government Accountability Office [U.S. GAO], 2005, 2013). According to Hanson (2024), textbook prices are rising roughly three times the rate of inflation. The U.S. Public Interest Research Group revealed that 65% of students did not purchase required textbooks due to cost. Even more concerning, 20% of students who fail their courses cite the inability to afford textbooks and class materials as a primary reason (Nagle & Vitez, 2020).

Despite broad awareness of the issue, institutional efforts to address the impact of textbook costs vary. In a 2019 national survey, 90% of faculty identified textbook affordability as a concern on their campuses, yet fewer than half reported being aware of any institutional initiative to lower textbook costs (FlatWorld Textbook Affordability Study, 2019).

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### **Accessible Learning**

Research links OER adoption to improved accessibility. A study by Sergiadis et al. (2024), found that OER materials remove physical and financial barriers to learning, thereby increasing student engagement. Additionally, their research revealed that students' use of OER materials increased in the class that adopted OER, with the proportion of students using these materials two to three times a week or more, rising from 39.3% to 54.7% compared to the same course taught with a traditional textbook. In a large-scale study involving 21,822 students, Colvard et al. (2018) found that using OER not only helped lower student debt but also improved final course grades while decreasing the DFW (drop, failure, withdrawal) rates. These impacts were especially significant for Pell Grant recipients, part-time students, and historically underserved groups, highlighting OER's role in narrowing achievement gaps. Cozart et al. (2021) further support the concept of improved accessibility by showing that students who used instructor-curated OER performed comparably to those using traditional textbooks, demonstrating that cost savings do not come at the expense of learning outcomes. Their study also revealed that students valued the ease of access and the course-specific relevance of OER, which made their learning materials more meaningful and engaging. Likewise, Chang (2020) found that in classes using an OER textbook, final grades were comparable to those in classes that used a traditional textbook, while OER also helped equalise student engagement and performance, and increased attendance.

In addition to accessibility and affordability, studies indicate that OER positively affect student learning (Hilton, 2016; Trust et al., 2022). Because OERs can be customised by educators, they align better with course objectives, making learning more effective. The ability to access and engage with OER helps students revisit concepts and prepare more thoroughly for exams. Additionally, the diverse formats of OER, such as videos, quizzes, and interactive simulations, cater to different learning styles, leading to better comprehension and higher academic performance.

### **Faculty Engagement**

Despite evidence of OER effectiveness, adoption rates remain modest. A national survey conducted by Tyton Partners (2023) found that between 61% and 83% of faculty believed that nearly all of their students had access to course materials by the first day of class. However, data from the U.S. GAO (2005, 2013) and the National Association of College Stores (2022) consistently revealed that many students skip purchasing required materials due to financial constraints. This gap between faculty perception and student experience highlights ongoing challenges in improving affordability and access.

Professional development opportunities and structured workshops have been shown to improve faculty knowledge and confidence in adopting affordable alternatives such as OER (Martin et al., 2017). Additionally, providing incentives like grants, stipends, and recognition can encourage faculty to adopt and create OER (Colvard et al., 2018). However, at tuition-dependent colleges, a lack of financial resources prevents the allocation of funding and stipends for such incentives. Franklin College is fortunate to receive support for faculty OER initiatives through the Private Academic Library Network of Indiana (PALNI), a library consortium of 24 private academic institutions in Indiana committed to advancing affordable learning. However, not all institutions have access to this kind of support. Similar models exist elsewhere, such as the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI), which has played a key role in advancing OER efforts among its member institutions (Sweet & Clarage, 2020).

Open communication between students and faculty about the cost of materials, combined with textbook price transparency during course registration, has also been identified as an effective strategy for helping instructors make informed, student-centred choices (Donaldson et al., 2019). Together, these approaches support efforts to reduce costs and improve equitable access to course materials.

## Challenges

While OER offers many benefits, its adoption is not without barriers. Some challenges include finding high-quality resources, adapting content for different courses, permission barriers, and addressing technical problems (Belikov & Bodily, 2016; Luo et al., 2019). One major challenge is the time required to find, review, adapt, and use OER in a course. A study by Menzli et al. (2022) found that faculty often perceive the process of finding suitable OER as time-consuming, which can deter them from adopting them in their teaching practices. This aligns with broader concerns about faculty workload, as many educators report that the demands of teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities leave limited time for additional tasks such as integrating OER.

Faculty may also feel discouraged by the lack of institutional support, such as the absence of stipends, course release time, or support from librarians and instructional designers. In addition, since creating or using OER is often not recognised by many institutions for tenure or promotion credit, faculty may choose to focus on other professional work that is more valued by their institutions (Irvine et al., 2021). However, institutions like Franklin College, which use Boyer's model of scholarship for tenure and promotion, engagement with OER can align closely with the scholarship of application and the scholarship of teaching and learning. According to Boyer (1990), scholarly work includes not just discovery (traditional research), but also integration, application, and teaching of knowledge. Under this broader framework, activities such as adopting, adapting, or creating open educational resources and studying their impact on student success can be recognised as legitimate forms of scholarship.

Authenticity and accuracy also pose important challenges in the use of OER, as the open nature of these materials allows continuous reproduction, modification, and redistribution by multiple users (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2022). While this flexibility is one of OER's greatest strengths, it also increases the risk of errors, outdated information, or unintended alterations being introduced over time. Without consistent quality assurance or peer review, the credibility of modified resources may vary, potentially affecting learners' trust in the material.

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## METHODOLOGY

To examine faculty perceptions and use of OER across Franklin College, a campus-wide survey was administered to faculty members at all academic ranks from March to April 2025. The survey aimed to capture faculty's overall awareness, attitudes, and experiences related to OER. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the college's Institutional Review Board to ensure ethical conduct of the research and to protect participants' confidentiality and rights.

The survey questions asked about the primary motivation for adopting OER, as well as the challenges and successes the faculty had experienced in adopting and implementing OER in their courses. Faculty were also asked to share their experiences with resource quality, adaptability to specific course needs, and any technical challenges encountered when using open resources. This facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the practical issues and generated insights that may inform educators considering integrating OER into their teaching practices. The survey was administered online using Microsoft Forms and consisted of 19 questions: two requesting participant consent, three demographic questions, 13 multiple-choice questions, and one short-answer question (see Appendix A for the faculty survey; the first two questions, which obtained participant consent, are not included).

### Participants

Seventy faculty members from Franklin College across 23 departments, with an average of 16 years of higher education experience, participated in the survey, yielding a response rate of 48%. Figure 1 presents the survey's demographic data, showing the number of respondents and their years of teaching experience in higher education. The data are grouped into six ranges, showing that most respondents have 6-20 years of experience, with a notable portion also in the early-career (0-2 years) and late-career (31-50 years) categories.

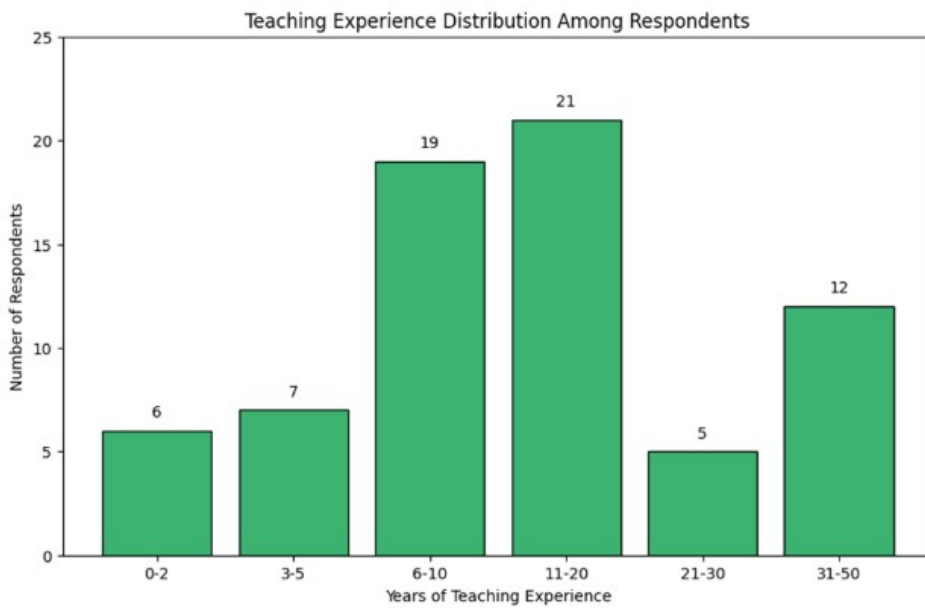


Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by years of teaching experience in higher education (excluding graduate-school teaching).

Figure 2 shows the number of respondents in the survey by academic title. Assistant Professors and Full Professors make up the largest groups, followed by Instructors/Lecturers, Associate Professors, and Adjuncts.

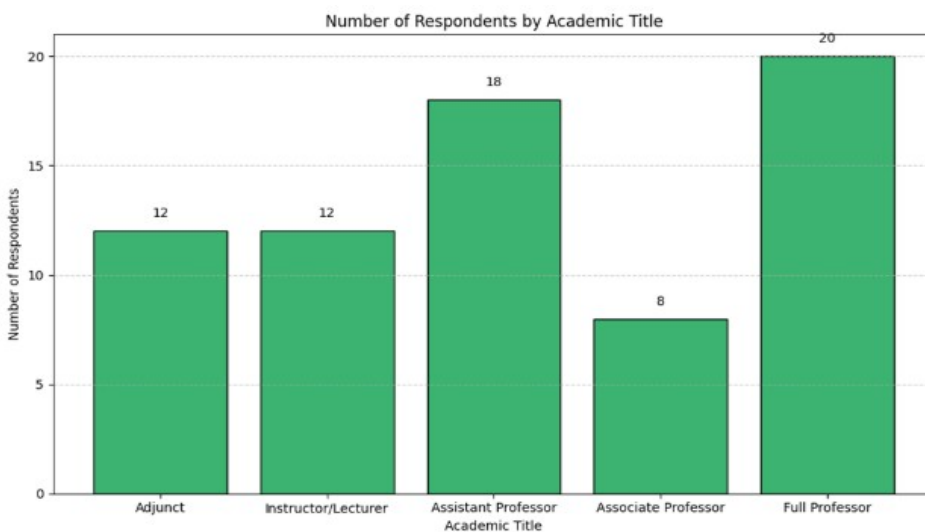


Figure 2: Number of respondents by academic title, grouped into five categories.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Survey results suggest a promising level of OER awareness, with 73% of faculty reporting at least some familiarity with OER. However, findings also revealed a gap between basic awareness and comprehensive understanding of OER principles and practices. As shown in Figure 3, more than half of the respondents

identified themselves as being in the early stages of understanding open-access materials. Notably, the five who described themselves as "very knowledgeable" represented five different departments on campus, indicating potential for cross-disciplinary, peer-led efforts, such as an OER faculty learning group. Most respondents identified as fairly or somewhat knowledgeable, while fewer reported never having heard of OER.



Figure 3: Number of respondents by self-reported knowledge of OER.

Faculty were also asked how many semesters they have incorporated OER into their courses. Figure 4 illustrates the faculty's use of OER, categorised by the number of semesters in which they have implemented these resources. Of the 70 respondents, 37 (53%) have used OER in their courses, with 23 (33%) showing sustained engagement over four or more semesters and 14 (20%) in the early adoption phase with 1–3 semesters of use. Figure 4 indicates showing sustained use of OER by some and growing interest among others.

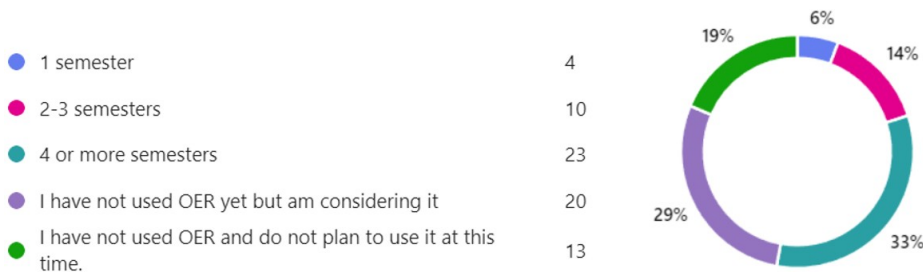


Figure 4: Faculty use of OER by semester.

There is strong potential for future adoption of OER, as 20 faculty members (29%) have not yet used OER but are considering it. Among these 20 faculty members, data suggest that interest in OER is not strongly confined to any faculty rank or level of teaching experience. However, Assistant Professors are the largest group in the sample (seven faculty), which may reflect their early career stage, as they are often not fully committed to a specific textbook or established course structure, making them more receptive to changes, such as adopting OER. It is, however, important to note that Full Professors also show a strong presence (4 faculty with seasoned experience: 15–35 years), indicating that OER is not just appealing to early-career faculty. Their extensive experience with students over the years may have given them a deeper awareness of the financial challenges students face, something newer faculty may not yet have encountered as frequently. Figure 5 shows a breakdown of this group of 20

faculty considering OER by academic rank. This group of 20 represents a significant opportunity for increased OER adoption and may benefit from targeted interventions such as mentoring by experienced faculty, enhanced library support, and exposure to positive student impact. However, given the small sample size, no discernible pattern emerges.

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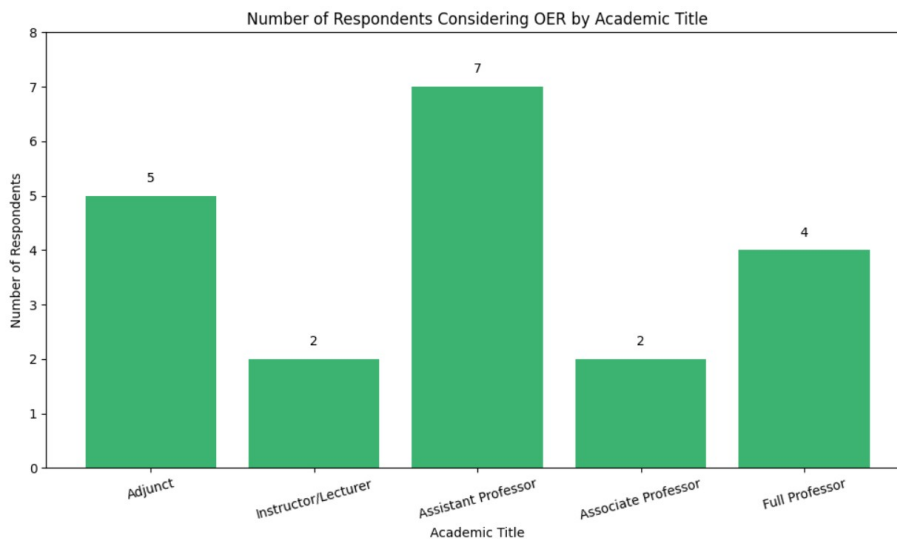


Figure 5: Faculty interest in OER by academic rank.

### OER non-experience

Figure 6 shows the distribution of 13 faculty (19%) respondents who have not used OER and do not plan to use them. Faculty with 15 or more years of experience appeared more hesitant to adopt OER, likely due to their greater investment in traditional materials, limited familiarity with newer digital tools, the effort required to transition to OER, and the challenge of finding OER resources that align well with their specific course objectives. This reluctance may also reflect comfort with established practices and reduced willingness to modify curricular materials later in their careers. Figure 6 also suggests that Adjuncts and Lecturers may feel less motivated due to limited job security or short-term contracts, which may discourage them from investing time and effort in modifying their established teaching materials and methods. Approaching their perspective with empathy and creating thoughtful and tailored interventions, including incentives, professional development, and a focus on student impact, are vital for supporting their transition to OER.

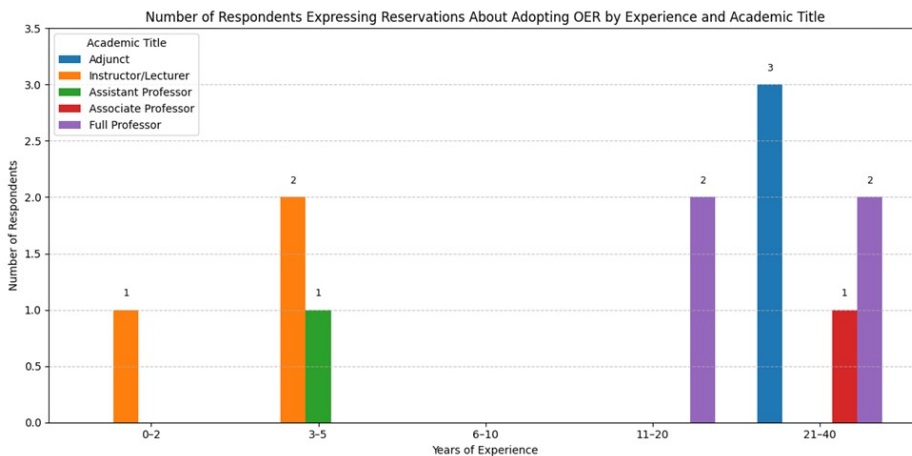


Figure 6: Number of faculty who do not plan to adopt OER, categorised by years of teaching experience and academic rank.

Referring to Figure 4, with more than half of faculty members reporting prior use of OER and approximately one-third expressing a willingness to adopt it, the findings suggest a growing need to expand OER initiatives at the institutional level. Even though 19% of faculty are not willing to adopt OER, these initiatives could persuade them through targeted efforts that address their doubts about the quality of materials, misunderstandings, and concerns about the time and effort required. This aligns with Martin et al. (2017), who found that nearly 10% of faculty were unwilling to use OER, mainly due to lack of time, insufficient technology, and insufficient practice exercises.

### OER experience

Cost reduction for students emerged as the predominant motivation for adoption among 24 (65%) of the 37 respondents who have used OER in their courses, underscoring the influence of financial accessibility on instructional decision-making. Other reasons for adoption included improving student access to learning resources (6), promoting inclusivity (6), and the ability to customise materials for flexibility (1). Although fewer in number, these responses underscore additional benefits that can be emphasised to support adoption efforts further. The study by Martin et al. (2017) found that 74% of faculty responses cited reducing students' educational costs as a primary reason for using OER.

Figure 7 shows the type(s) of OER that the faculty have used in their courses. Open textbooks were the most used format, with 30 (81%) of the 37 faculty members reporting their use. This strong dominance aligns well with the faculty's primary motivation to reduce textbook costs for students and is likely due to direct savings from replacing expensive commercial textbooks with open alternatives. Open multimedia resources, including videos, simulations, and interactive platforms, were the next most commonly adopted formats, with 20 (54%) respondents reporting their use. This indicates a growing use of digital tools and technology-based resources to support a variety of teaching approaches and accommodate students' diverse learning needs. Interestingly,

the “Other” category (5 responses) primarily reported creating OER materials for their courses to better meet students' needs. This demonstrates that, despite being few, some faculty are proactively developing OER materials to support student learning.

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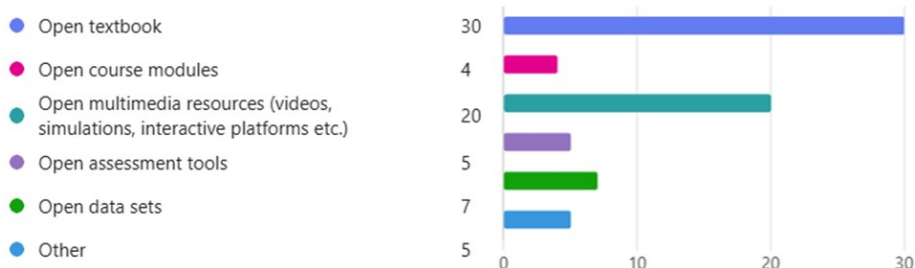


Figure 7: Faculty usage of OER types.

The survey reveals that faculty primarily find OER for their needs through external resources, with 18 respondents (49%) each identifying OER repositories (such as OpenStax, MERLOT, and OER Commons) and general internet searches as their standard methods most likely because of the ease of access and searchability. Recommendations from colleagues were also identified as one of the strongest ways to learn about OER, with 15 faculty (41%) reporting this in the survey. This highlights the importance of networking, institutional support, and departmental culture in spreading awareness and encouraging OER adoption. An institutional repository or library was used by eight faculty (22%), indicating some level of institutional support, although this remains an area with room for growth.

### OER observations

Faculty perception of OER quality was largely positive, with the majority rating their most utilised OER adoption as either "Good" (22 responses) or "Very Good" (9 responses) totalling 31 out of 37 responses (over 83%). This strong approval highlights general satisfaction with the quality of OER, addressing a common concern that open resources lack the quality of commercial materials. Only six faculty rated their OER experience as "Fair", and notably no one reported the quality as "Poor". This positive feedback should serve as motivation for other faculty to consider adopting OER. However, the "Fair" ratings do indicate some room for improvement, including a need for OER to be current, consistent, and well-aligned with specific disciplines. A similar finding was reported by Lantrip and Ray (2020), who showed that 79% of faculty rated OER as the same or better quality than the commercial textbooks or course materials they had used previously.

Faculty generally found OER to be well aligned with their course objectives, with 22 respondents (out of 37) indicating that the OER materials aligned "very well" and another 13 reported they aligned "somewhat well" with only two faculty selecting "neutral" and zero registering "poorly" or "not at all". The overwhelmingly positive feedback (over 94%) suggests that faculty who adopt OER typically find them suitable for meeting students' learning goals. The

absence of negative ratings also challenges the common perception that OER is too generic or poorly suited to specific course outcomes. It is important to note that 13 respondents who selected "somewhat well" and the two who were "neutral" could suggest that adopted OER were either adjusted or customised to better align with the specific content of their courses.

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This concern about course alignment is confirmed by the responses to a question about whether the faculty modified or customised their OER materials or not, and if so, how they did it. The data show that 26 out of 37 respondents (over 70%) modified or supplemented OER materials, demonstrating a strong tendency for faculty to actively engage with the course materials and adapt and tailor them to better fit their teaching needs. Of the 26 faculty, 11 created additional resources to supplement the OER, eight combined multiple OER sources, and 7 modified the content to better align with the course objectives. Although this requires some time and effort, the fact that 11 faculty used OER "as is" indicates they could be of good quality and fit well with the course needs, without any customisation, saving faculty time and effort. A similar study by Jung et al. (2017) found that 13% of faculty members had adapted, modified, or improved open textbooks, suggesting that these instructors invested time and effort to customise the materials for more effective use in their specific courses. Their study also revealed that 62% of surveyed faculty perceived open textbooks as of similar quality to traditional textbooks, while 19% believed they were of higher quality.

### OER challenges

Figure 8 shows some of the most common challenges faculty faced in adopting and implementing OER with the highest reported by 21 faculty (57%) for the difficulty in finding high-quality materials and by 16 (43%) for the time required to adapt those materials to their courses. These issues suggest a need for better curation, training, and support in customising OER to fit specific learning objectives. While 11 respondents selected "Other", most of these indicated no additional challenges, with one faculty member noting that although the textbook explanations were strong, the exercises were lacking; an issue that could be addressed with additional OER support materials. Only three faculty reported technical issues, and only one noted student resistance, suggesting that usability and student acceptance are generally not significant barriers. Notably, no respondents reported a lack of institutional support, indicating a favourable institutional climate for OER adoption. Overall, while the environment for using OER appears supportive, overcoming barriers related to quality and time investment is essential for broader implementation. These findings align with the studies previously discussed in our literature review that examine the challenges associated with OER adoption (Belikov & Bodily, 2016; Luo et al., 2019; Menzli et al., 2022).

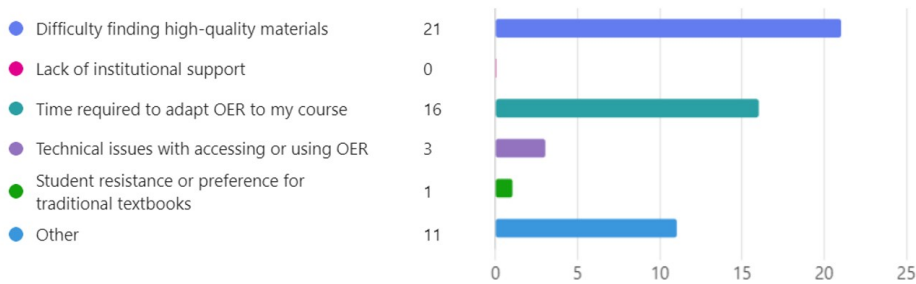


Figure 8: Faculty-reported challenges in adopting and implementing OER.

## Faculty Support

The survey revealed that the most significant support faculty need to adopt and implement OER is access to a more comprehensive repository of high-quality materials, cited by 20 respondents (53%). This indicates that while faculty may be open to using OER, they often face challenges in locating suitable resources. Additionally, six respondents (16%) identified a need for more institutional support and training, as well as funding for OER adaptation or creation, highlighting the value of structured guidance and compensation. Only one respondent selected technical assistance, suggesting that technical barriers may not be a significant concern. Notably, all five respondents who chose "Other" specified that they did not need any support, indicating a subset of faculty who are either self-sufficient or already familiar with OER adoption. These observations are consistent with previous studies that highlighted faculty calls for stronger institutional support, including adequate time, funding, training, staff assistance during the OER review and adoption process, and the availability of supplementary teaching resources (Delimont et al., 2016; Jhangiani et al., 2016). Overall, the data from the current study suggests that institutions should focus on expanding access to high-quality OER and offering professional development and financial support to foster faculty engagement.

Faculty respondents expressed robust support for OER, as evidenced by 35 of 37 survey participants who reported they would recommend OER to their fellow faculty members. This strong endorsement suggests that those who have engaged with OER recognise its value in enhancing teaching and learning. Notably, no faculty responded with a definitive "No," further reinforcing the favourable perception of OER across the board. The two respondents who answered "Maybe" may reflect uncertainty due to lack of experience, concerns about quality, or unfamiliarity with available resources, rather than outright opposition. Overall, this high level of willingness to recommend OER signals a promising opportunity for institutions to support further and expand OER initiatives, leveraging peer influence to increase adoption. Similar results were obtained in a study by Bond et al. (2021), which found that faculty held largely positive views about OER and its use.

The study also shows that the majority of faculty (20 out of 37) received "mostly positive" feedback from students about OER materials, indicating general satisfaction with accessibility and usefulness. Seven respondents reported "neutral" feedback, suggesting a lack of strong opinions. At the same time, ten

received "no feedback" at all, which could be due to faculty not actively seeking student input or a lack of student engagement. Importantly, no faculty reported "mostly negative" feedback, showing that OER adoption has not led to any significant dissatisfaction. This suggests that OER materials are generally well-received but may benefit from more structured student feedback. Hilton (2020) conducted a comprehensive review of 36 studies encompassing more than 121,000 students and faculty to examine the effects of OER on student performance and perceptions. The review concluded that both groups generally reported favourable experiences with OER and demonstrated a sustained interest in their continued use. Moreover, the findings suggested that OER adoption may contribute to enhanced student retention and overall academic success.

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Findings from the current study revealed that some faculty reported difficulty locating discipline-specific OER, particularly in specialised fields such as athletic training and statistics. Others noted issues such as outdated links or incomplete coverage with existing OER. One faculty member raised a philosophical concern about the unintended consequences of contributing free labour to resources that may be absorbed and repurposed by artificial intelligence (AI) systems. Nonetheless, there is a strong current of optimism, with many faculty eager to learn more about OER, seek institutional support, and participate in broader discussions and training opportunities. Overall, the comments suggest that while adoption is not without hurdles, the motivation to improve access and equity for students is a powerful driver for expanding OER use.

### Limitations

Since the study was conducted within a single liberal arts college, the findings may not be widely applicable to larger institutions, community colleges, or research universities. The small sample size (n=70) and context also restrict the ability to conclude disciplinary variation in OER engagement. Also, the current study focuses solely on faculty engagement and perceptions. Future research that incorporates students' experiences with OER, including its accessibility, usability, and impact on learning, would provide a more complete picture. This is an important area that could be addressed in future studies to complement faculty perspectives and assess the overall effectiveness of OER initiatives.

## CONCLUSION

Faculty perspectives, as revealed in this study, reveal a complex yet generally positive and multifaceted outlook on OER. Several respondents specifically noted that financial barriers prevent students from purchasing required textbooks, highlighting the benefit of OER in reducing costs and promoting greater engagement, access, and academic success. Faculty also noted the pedagogical flexibility of OER, particularly its capacity for customisation and integration with emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence, which can support the creation of discipline-specific content. Respondents reported high awareness and increased satisfaction with OER quality, and many expressed interest in expanding their use. However, limited confidence,

discoverability challenges, and varying faculty motivation signal the need for coordinated institutional strategies.

Overall, the study indicates an encouraging trajectory for OER engagement among faculty at liberal arts colleges, providing valuable insight into faculty experiences within a sector that is often underrepresented in OER research and highlighting the potential to lead initiatives aligned with their institutional values. Structured professional development, faculty-led mentoring, improved resource visibility, and recognition programs can help move OER from isolated individual efforts to a sustained culture of open education. By continuing to invest in these strategies, institutions can extend the benefits of OER to both faculty and students, strengthening teaching, access and educational equity across disciplines.

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## Ethics Statement

Approval was obtained from the college's Institutional Review Board to ensure ethical conduct of the research and to protect participants' confidentiality and rights.

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