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# From spark to flame

## Lighting the way for sustainable student OER advocacy framework at a community college

A decade ago, the advocacy of student leaders sparked an Open Educational Resource (OER) program at Tacoma Community College (TCC). Student advocacy remains vital to growing and sustaining our college's open culture. This article explores the fundamental pillars of an OER sustainability framework and how TCC librarians and the Open Education (OE) Steering Group continue to collaborate with students. We hope our story will show you how to fuel the sparks of OE initiatives at your campus into a flame that lights a clear path to OE sustainability.

### OER Sustainability Framework

Launching and sustaining an OER initiative requires deep collaboration and investment at all institutional levels. Viable programs must include students as engaged participants and meaningful long-term partners. Maintaining student engagement over time can be a challenge, especially at the community college level, where transitory behavior is the norm and student turnover is more rapid.

The OER Sustainability Framework, developed by higher education researcher and analyst Donna Desrochers, provides a useful model for developing and growing long term OER initiatives. It relies on three major pillars: infrastructure, resources, and culture.<sup>1</sup> There is a well-established body of research affirming the importance of librarian leadership in each of these areas.<sup>2</sup> Our work at TCC has uncovered critical opportunities for incorporating student voices and participation in each of these pillars.

Desrochers suggests that campus OER leaders engage with student organizations that are acti-

vated around OER, as these groups can become "effective advocates on campus and/or at the state and system levels."<sup>3</sup> Student organizations—specifically student government organizations, an underused ally in OE initiatives—can also help provide resources, such as seed funding for infrastructure and stipend incentives, for OER adoption.<sup>4</sup> OE leaders who can make a straightforward case for student savings and improved educational outcomes should find eager partners in their efforts.

### Student advocacy for OE infrastructure

TCC "[s]tudents have been key partners in the success of the OER project at TCC from the beginning. This is very much by design."<sup>5</sup> In 2011-12, the Associated Students of TCC (ASTCC) helped launch an initial "Liberate \$250K" textbook savings campaign, a two-year pilot project with the goal of saving TCC students \$250,000 in textbook costs by the end of the second year. ASTCC provided \$86,250 in seed funding for this pilot project, which the college matched. The college invested the initial project funding in a new OER project director position in the library and in

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faculty stipends to create OER for high-impact courses.

During the initial phase, newly hired OER Project Director Quill West created “The Liberated,” a blog to collect and share student perspectives on OER from the student advocacy group. Students articulated a nuanced and personal understanding of the benefits of OER: “TCC’s OER Project has made a significant change in my college experience and ultimately the way that I can live my life. . . . I’ve found that teachers who use OER are more involved and engaged with me as a student. . . . Although OER was designed to save students money, I truly believe it does a lot more than that.”<sup>6</sup>

In the first year of launching the project’s first OER courses, approximately 2,000 students had saved nearly \$300,000 in textbook costs in 22 different courses and 91 sections.<sup>7</sup> Our most recent data from 2020–21 shows that TCC students save more than \$1 million annually in textbook costs, and TCC’s open culture continues to expand, from developmental courses to new bachelor’s degree programs.

The college further invested in a permanent OER faculty librarian position in 2016, and the duties of the initial project director position have expanded into a collaboration between the OER faculty librarian and the director of Learning Innovation to provide cross-campus OE support for faculty, staff, and students.

ASTCC representatives continue to take part in OE strategic planning through TCC’s OE Steering Group, joining a cross-functional team with the Library and Learning Innovation division, bookstore, Office for EDI, faculty, and administrative assistants. This mixture of perspectives and expertise generates opportunities for effective collaboration on student-led and student-focused initiatives. One important collaborative initiative was developing the *TCC Student Toolkit for Textbook Affordability and OER*. In addition to providing practical tools for advancing open initiatives, this toolkit highlights the history of student OER advocacy at TCC.

This combination of essential resources and a sense of continuity and history can help mitigate the impact of student turnover at community colleges.

## Student advocacy for OE resources

Student-centered initiatives do not need to be extravagant to be effective. For example, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee librarians launched their outreach to students during OE Week 2015 with a series of “whiteboard prompts” asking them to share textbook costs for a single course and entire semester, as well as the price of their most expensive textbook.<sup>8</sup> Besides being an effective way to collect data, this strategy allows students to tell their own stories (an important component of culturally responsive teaching)<sup>9</sup> and offers an entry point for conversations between students, librarians, instructors, and college leadership.

During the initial spark of TCC’s OER pilot project, student leaders participated in campus panels to share their stories about taking courses using OER and identified advantages of cost reduction, community building, and student learning.<sup>10</sup> Students who completed initial OER courses participated in course evaluation surveys. Results showed that 87% of students taking OER courses found the materials easy to access, and more than 93% of students would sign up again for courses using OER.<sup>11</sup> This data fueled the OER pilot project, helping transform spark into flame.

A recent milestone in TCC’s continuing open culture is print-on-demand, which is in its nascent stages but is already showing great promise. During an OE Steering Group meeting in fall 2020, current ASTCC President Melissa Littleton advocated adding print-on-demand questions to the elearning department’s annual Student Technology Needs Survey. In the survey, students voiced strong need and preference for affordable print options of OER course materials: almost 40% of TCC students agreed or strongly agreed that they would prefer to have access to a print copy of an OER textbook, and would purchase an affordable print copy of an OER textbook from the bookstore.<sup>12</sup>

While there are a host of logistical and technical challenges that come with print-on-demand, student voice has been a driving force in the creation of this service.

## Student advocacy for OE culture

The foremost point of student involvement in

OER initiatives is in the realm of culture-building. Desrochers identifies students as highly effective campus OER ambassadors, but the potential for student advocacy diminishes when institutions rely primarily on serendipitous student encounters with OER to build awareness and enthusiasm.<sup>13</sup> Direct student-led campaigns can be mass drivers of awareness, support, and participation in open culture. Again, this intentional culture-building is critical in community colleges that face broader barriers to developing sustainable student cultures.

At TCC, student advocacy in OER is central to culture-building. The “rapid growth and momentum of TCC’s OER movement is intrinsically linked to the sustaining support and collaborative spirit of TCC students.”<sup>14</sup> As former ASTCC President Kristina Pogolian shared, “to remind faculty of their purpose and further encourage their work, I collaborated with [the OE Steering Group] to host a thank-you letter writing campaign on campus. Taking place during National OER Week, we collected over 150 letters from students thanking teachers for implementing low-cost and no-cost course material in their classroom.”<sup>15</sup>

TCC students have extended their OER advocacy campaign to the state government level as well, working with their peers to advance textbook affordability policies. In 2019, Pogolian provided testimony to the Washington state legislature on the labeling of courses as Low-Cost, and, in 2020, TCC student Deanna George continued the work of advocating for clear Low-Cost course labeling statewide.<sup>16</sup> While this OER labeling work was progressing at the state level, TCC student leaders worked with the OE Steering Group to establish a \$40 maximum course material cost threshold for Low-Cost classes at our college. This work led the state in setting an initial Low-Cost threshold. Once again, TCC student voices created the foundation for this work in textbook affordability, both at the institution and system level. In 2017, student leaders continued these efforts by collaborating with the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) on textbook affordability. More than 10,000 students in the Washington Community and Technical Colleges system, including nearly 800 TCC students, provided feedback in an SBCTC survey about textbook affordability.

The survey results helped establish a state-wide Low-Cost label for class registration, including the Low-Cost threshold of \$50 for course materials. These survey findings informed the expansion of proposed state legislation to include a Low-Cost definition of \$50 or less and mandate that Low-Cost classes be clearly labeled as such in online course registration systems.<sup>17</sup>

The thriving and intentional open culture at TCC reflects an institution that values student voice. Soliciting, incorporating, and acting on student voice is an important demonstration of a college’s social and ethical commitment to students. Merinda McClure and Caroline Sinkinson contend that OE is an important indicator of an institution’s capacity for care, an awareness and attentiveness to a student’s fundamental humanity and needs.<sup>18</sup> Amy T. Nusbaum’s research on OER remixing shows how the incorporation of diverse OER content in the classroom can mitigate feelings of alienation in the classroom.<sup>19</sup> At TCC, our OER efforts reflect our commitment to and belief that incorporating student voice at all stages of an OE campaign increases not just feelings of belonging, but a genuine sense of student agency and ownership over the creation of a more just and engaging college experience.

## Notes

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2. Quill West, Amy Hofer, and Dale Coleman, “Librarians as Open Education Leaders: Responsibilities and Possibilities,” in *Conference Proceedings*, Open Education Global Conference, 2018, Delft, Neth, <https://repository.tudelft.nl/islandora/object/uuid%3A749d9863-896c-42ce-8702-70911f883ed3>.
3. Desrochers, 15.
4. Thomas L. Reinsfelder and Jacob P. Moore, “Power Dynamics in a Complex OER Environment: Who Is Leading the Way?,” *Library Trends* 69, no. 2 (2020): 370–94, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2020.0038>.
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6. I. Branch, "Why I Take OER Courses," The Liberated (blog), Tacoma Community College, January 17, 2014, <http://opentacomacc.blogspot.com/2014/01/why-i-take-oer-courses.html>.

7. *TCC OER Project Annual Report 2012/13*, Tacoma Community College, January 25, 2015, [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QzCK8\\_G3RoeHjD73Kn07s2BDdS5yrEGhDI9Jxtp8Fsc/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QzCK8_G3RoeHjD73Kn07s2BDdS5yrEGhDI9Jxtp8Fsc/edit?usp=sharing).

8. Kristin M. Woodward, "Building a Path to College Success: Advocacy, Discovery and OER Adoption in Emerging Educational Models," *Journal of Library & Information Services in Distance Learning* 11, no. 1–2 (January 2, 2017): 206–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533290X.2016.1232053>.

9. Julie McLeod, "Student Voice and the Politics of Listening in Higher Education," *Critical Studies in Education* 52, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 179–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2011.572830>.

10. Tacomacc4Reel, "OER Student Panel," YouTube Video, 2:23, June 8, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdoMP2B6yQQ>.

11. TCC OER Project Annual Report 2012/13, 1.

12. "Student Learning Technology Needs Survey," Tacoma Community College, 2021, <https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-XJQ22RR57/>.

13. Desrochers, 15.

14. OE Steering Group and ASTCC, *TCC Student Toolkit for Textbook Affordability and OER*, 5.

15. Kristina Pogolian, "Working for a greater purpose," Legislative News (blog), Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, March 15, 2019, <https://www.sbctc.edu/blogs/legislative-news/2019/working-for-a-greater-purpose.aspx>.

16. Boyoung Chae, email to Candice Watkins, March 31, 2021.

17. Ibid.

18. Merinda McClure and Caroline Sinkinson, "Caring for Students in Postsecondary Open Educational Resource (OER) and Open Education Initiatives: Inviting Student Participation and Voice," *Reference Services Review* 48, no. 3 (January 1, 2020): 473–87, <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-03-2020-0018>.

19. Amy T. Nusbaum, "Who Gets to Wield Academic Mjolnir? On Worthiness, Knowledge Curation, and Using the Power of the People to Diversify OER," *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* 2020, no. 1 (2020), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1253867>. *ZZ*

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*("Looking through the COVID fog," continued from page 363)*

dissemination of research data by developing platforms for sharing content and advocating for open access.

Services are changing, as well. Self-serve options for materials pickup are leading to the prioritizing personalized, in-depth human interactions over transactional ones. Reference and instruction will transform, with services delivered in person and online. The availability of real-time research assistance where and when the patron needs it will allow libraries to integrate into researchers lives more fully. Special Collections and Archives will digitize more of their collections to increase access and provide online research services. This will elevate the impact of these collections for both research and pedagogy.

## The way forward

While nothing is certain, we think that as campuses fully reopen, they'll do so with a more focused purpose and new role to play to foster community, support creativity, and create impact for students and communities through experiential learning. Pre-pandemic pace and workflows won't be fast enough to understand what's happening and respond, and so agile service and staffing models will be needed to help spaces, services, and systems adapt. Experiential learning and the right suite of support services will be the priority as libraries propel learning and research forward by bringing together the people, information, and tools needed. To enable access and advance equity, services and collections will be reimaged to increase awareness, access, and usage with greater flexibility. *ZZ*