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What's missing?

The role of community colleges in building a more inclusive institutional repository landscape

In 2003, the executive director of the Coalition for Networked Information, Clifford A. Lynch, declared institutional repositories “essential infrastructure for scholarship in the digital age.”¹ More than twenty years later, many colleges and universities do not maintain an institutional repository (IR), and their students and faculty do not have access to one. Community colleges—the original open access institutions²—are integral to the higher education ecosystem, educating 31% of undergraduates in the United States.³ However, only a handful of these institutions have an IR. At the time of publication, a mere ten community colleges were listed in either the Directory of Open Access Repositories (DOAR) or the Registry of Open Access Repositories (ROAR).

The precise number of community college communities with access to an IR is unknown and certainly higher than ten, but uptake is low. As a result, the rich intellectual outputs generated at these institutions are not openly shared. Repositories provide community college communities with the ability to read content they would not otherwise have access to, but to fulfill the original purposes of open access to “share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich,” it’s imperative that the faculty and students at community colleges are recognized as contributors to the scholarly communications landscape and empowered to disseminate their works, via repositories, to the larger knowledge ecosystem.⁴

If the academic research landscape in the United States is going to join the wave of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in higher education, academic librarians and other scholarly communications professionals must recognize the contributions of community college faculty scholars, including the need to preserve and distribute their work via IRs. While community college faculty make up almost 19% of all faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, these instructors and professors teach a disproportionately higher number of students in comparison to their colleagues at four-year institutions.⁵ In 2015–2016, 49% of all students who completed a bachelor’s degree had been enrolled at a two-year public college at some point in the previous ten years.⁶ Community college students are more ethnically diverse than undergraduates at four-year colleges, primarily in having fewer white students (47% versus 53%) and more Hispanic students (27% vs. 18%).⁷ And contrary to popular thought, community college graduates in 2021 were twice as likely to graduate from an academic program rather than a vocational one.⁸ While community college faculty are less

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ethnically diverse than faculty at four-year schools, there is greater representation of female versus male faculty at community colleges—55% versus 50%.⁹ The percentage of public community colleges with a tenure system is 58%,¹⁰ and while smaller than the percentage of four year colleges, it is still a significant number with close to 550 community colleges in this category.¹¹

The purpose of IRs at community colleges is no different than at four-year colleges: they organize, preserve, and showcase the intellectual life of an institution. The typical mission of community colleges is focused on teaching—to provide access to education to local students. Thus IRs possess the unique potential to expand access to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and open educational resources (OER). In showcasing a college's innovative, student-centered and culturally responsive pedagogy, these collections work to improve student learning experiences beyond the college and, as a result, raise its profile. The IR is key in sharing instructional materials, especially when openly licensed, ranging from syllabi to assignments to topic presentations and overviews. With the OER community's focus on creating equitable, inclusive materials, where many commercial publishers have fallen short, an IR provides the opportunity to share materials created through an anti-racist,¹² culturally relevant/sustaining,^{13,14} trauma-informed lens.¹⁵ An increasing number of faculty also engage students in creating OER. Given the diversity of the student body at most community colleges, the IR then plays an invaluable role in providing access to materials created by marginalized community members, providing a platform for their voices.

The community college faculty who teach almost half of all undergraduates may not have multi-million-dollar grants (though some do¹⁶) or a team of graduate students running lab experiments, but they are often experts in teaching, usually carrying a greater teaching load than colleagues at four-year schools. Most community college faculty teach a five-five load, with a lucky few, like the City University of New York (CUNY), teaching four-four.¹⁷ While community college faculty publish various types of research, their work around SoTL tends to be shared informally rather than in peer-reviewed journal articles. One study found that more than half of community college faculty surveyed produced three to five forms of unpublished, SoTL scholarship in the three years prior to the study, including presentations to colleagues about new pedagogical techniques and developing assignments to teach the most challenging course material.¹⁸ Institutional repositories can provide the platform for ensuring that this less formal community college scholarship reaches a wide audience.

With heavy teaching loads and limited time, community college faculty may choose to forego traditional publications for some of their scholarly work, and the IR plays an important role in providing access to this knowledge. For some community colleges, the dissemination of OER may be a primary objective of their IR. Following LOCKSS principles, preserving OER and other instructional materials in an IR, as well as through complementary repositories (e.g., MERLOT, OER Commons, Humanities Commons), helps to ensure long-term access for both the local and global communities.

Additionally, while community colleges often serve students seeking to transfer to four-year colleges, they also offer technical and trade programs that prepare students for direct employment. Such programs present opportunities to attract new kinds of content to IRs. For example, community colleges with programs in the culinary arts, apparel design, or carpentry can contribute knowledge in fields typically not represented in traditional academia.

IRs also support myriad less traditional scholarly works, which can include presentations, blog posts, and faculty institutional publications, among other formats.

To succeed in the current climate of shrinking library budgets, especially in the face of continuing enrollment declines, library leaders at community colleges may need to look to consortial agreements to initiate and grow an IR.¹⁹ In a 2021 Ithaka survey by Melissa Blankstein and Christine Wolff-Eisenberg, 45% of community college library leaders indicated they had experienced budget cuts.²⁰ The resources required to support an IR are significant, but a repository meets multiple institutional and individual needs, paving a path to open when one is not otherwise available. Collaboration and consortial agreements can help defray costs. The academic libraries in Utah, for example, modeled this when they created a shared repository.²¹ When CUNY launched its institutional repository in 2015, it was determined that a platform controlled by the Central Office of Library Services and managed by coordinators at each of its campuses would best ensure the long-term success of the repository across its twenty-four colleges, including its seven community colleges. The ability to search across the institutions' collections in a single repository is another benefit both for users, who can search using a single interface, and for creators, whose works reach an ever-broader audience.

The futures of open access and institutional repositories are unknown, but they are at a juncture. Infrastructure conversations continue in response to mandates from the federal government and funder coalitions, “transformative agreements” increasingly embed themselves within the budgets and strategy documents of well-resourced institutions, and the United States Repository Network has launched to support an “equitable and sustainable” research infrastructure.²² However, community colleges are not represented in these conversations and thus are absent from this vision of an open future. If the scholarly communications ecosystem is to shift, those shifts must include all who contribute to it.

Notes

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