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THE BRIGHTLY ILLUMINATED PATH: FACILITATING AN OER PROGRAM AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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The use of Open Education Resources represents a noble cause, but the idea often remains elusive for many faculty members. In 2015, librarians at Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York, implemented a campaign to promote and facilitate the use and development of OERs. The primary objective was to reduce the growing financial burden on students in textbook purchase requirements. Concomitant goals were to provide instructors with greater academic control and freedom in course content, and to add to the pool of knowledge and resources for collaborative faculty work. The core of the Queensborough campaign was the offer of grants to foster the creation of OERs. The campaign was successful, resulting in the growing presence of OERs on campus steadily gaining momentum.

Key Words: Open Access, Open Educational Resources, Grant Funding, Community College

The Objective

Open Educational Resources are increasingly becoming more popular on college campuses. The astronomical increase in the cost of textbooks has provided strong motivation for an “Open Access” revolution. Collaborative materials made available online across the curriculum have offered richly rewarding alternatives to the use of traditional materials.

Noted educator, Steven Bell (2012), posed an essential question, “What’s next for the OER movement as academic librarians continue to take a leadership role at their institutions to initiate these alternate text book projects?” Librarians at Queensborough Community College have accepted their role in this movement, illustrating Bell’s ideas. ” There is no doubt that these programs will continue to grow at all types of institutions. In many states the community college systems are leading the way” (pp.1-4).

Facilitating a Grant Program

At Queensborough Community College, to facilitate a grant program, a team of librarians, Sheila Beck, William Blick, Sandra Marcus, and Constance Williams, formed an OER committee. Financial awards were granted to faculty developing OERs, including innovations such as the development of an Open Source Textbook to be used for a mathematics course. Funding was provided by a percentage of the library budget allocated for textbook purchases. The librarian team promoted the initiative through a marketing campaign that included mass emails, newsletter articles, a poster session at an ACRL/NY conference, and several meetings and workshops, including topics such as copyright laws and the new university repository.

The benefits of Open Educational Resources are tri-fold. First, they offer inexpensive

text material for students; second, they allow faculty more control and choice in the selection and provision of course content, and finally, they add to the pool of knowledge which makes up the fabric of academia. There are implications, too, for the professional development trajectories of professors. In a valuable article Don Olcott (2012) explains that, “In the future, research will need to examine the concept of open educational practices (OEP) and OER issues relevant to faculty incentives and career advancement in the university.” (p.283) In addition to being of educational value to both students and instructors, the grant program at QCC may also provide opportunities for professional advancement.

Olcott (2012) further assures us that, “The potential for open educational resources to transform the global educational landscape is immense. OERs have emerged as one of the most powerful resources to transverse the global education landscape (along with the World Wide Web and the Internet) in the past century.”(p.283) Fasimpaur (2012, p.37) outlines principles for a successful OER program:

- “1. Start with your curriculum goals, and involve teachers from the start.
- 2. Offer high quality professional development—early and often.
- 3. Find the OERs that are right for your students.
- 4. Use OERs to customize curricula and differentiate learning.” (p.37)

Although these principles were originally designed for a K-12 setting, they can work for a community college as well, and the OER Committee attempted to utilize them to enhance their program.

After the pilot grant project was completed with awards announced, the OER team hosted an Academic Affairs sponsored

program with grant-winning participants discussing their projects. Guest speaker at this “Campus Conversation” was CUNY Scholarly Communications Librarian, Megan Wacha, who described the benefits of OERs along with the CUNY-wide institutional repository, *Academic Works*. Another speaker and major contributor to the OER project was Professor Patrick Wallach, whose online, open source textbook, *Mathematics* is entirely accessible in *Academic Works*

On any community college campus OERs seem to be highly valued, but particularly so at a school like QCC, an urban campus that serves many nontraditional students who lack financial resources. The benefits for the students are obvious, not only at QCC, but at CUNY as a whole.

Meeting the Needs

The OER paradigm is designed, like “open access,” to level the playing field. The objective is to make resources readily available irrespective of financial or other restrictions. It is evident that many underprivileged areas do not have access to the same quality of information as that of rich communities and nations. Primarily because of what is known as the digital divide, many schools use crude and outdated textbooks. OERs allow students in schools across the country and world to have the same quality of information as that of the wealthiest areas.

At QCC, students are from diverse and very often disadvantaged backgrounds. Instead of paying up to \$300.00 for a single textbook, students can have access to similar and highly relevant information at little or no cost through the use of open source textbooks. Thus, this is a means of significantly reducing student expenses. Faculty members can also bring a unique signature to each of their texts. Some useful Open Education Resource sites include OER Commons, Lumen Learning, and MERLOT. On these sites faculty

can share what has worked for them in their classrooms, removing the need to reinvent something that has already been created and is ready for use. This gives faculty the opportunity to save valuable time in constructing course materials.

Towards a Greater Good

The William and Flora Hewlett foundation has stated that Open Education Resources are founded on two convictions: that knowledge is a public good and that the internet a good way to share knowledge. (Hewlett.org, 2016). Bearing these principles in mind, the QCC librarians have been encouraged to promote and facilitate opportunities for teachers to construct and use OERs in their courses. The Institutional Repository represents one of the most efficient tools at CUNY to enable the sharing of working models of OERs.

Bell, however, advised caution and the involvement of administrative figures in the establishment of OER programs “While there are many benefits to OERs , its reasonable that academic administrators will want to proceed cautiously, in consultation with their library deans, college store managers, technology advocates, faculty governance leaders and student government to develop a well thought out strategy for developing an approach to revolutionizing student learning materials” (Bell, 2015, pp. 1-4). The OER committee was were cognizant of these needs, involving the e-learning committee, as well as looking at options to incorporate and embed open resources in the online learning system, Black Board, and its online immersion courses. Yet, the process has been arduous, and progress has been slow. There are still quite a few loopholes and issues to work through before major conversion to OERs can take place.

Some opponents feel that the open educational texts are not as authoritative as published

books in print. Some fear that bedlam may be generated with every course “doing its own thing.” A relationship of trust between faculty and administration on campus is vital for such a revolutionary movement. Anita Walz (2015) highlights means of building OER functionality, itemizing four steps:

- “1. Access your potential audience and build awareness.
- 2. Analyze and find audience needs.
- 3. Review, redesign/ redevelop and adopt. Provide authoritative assistance and OER development review with rubrics.
- 4. Implement and share. Encourage, incentivize, or automate, sharing author’s works.” (pp.27-28).

While the initial trial pilot grant program for OERs on campus is simply the first step in introducing the campus to these invaluable tools and methodology, it was a successful step. Our program increased awareness, aroused interest, and ultimately established some tools that are now working in classes across the campus. This would not been possible had the OERs not been endorsed by the administration, or become part of a growing CUNY-wide movement.

Another significant factor is the importance of informing faculty of their rights under copyright law, as well as regulations against infringement. Since open access requires adherence to these laws, workshops on these issues would also be beneficial. The library department at QCC held a meeting to discuss options and criteria for creating OERs and disseminating them through our CUNY-wide institutional repository, *Academic Works*. Addressed were differing levels of academic open access available for faculty authored articles. It is important to remember that OERs are part of the open access movement.

Towards an Institutional Repository

Studies have shown that faculty were either not aware of, or aware with little knowledge of their institutional repository. The institutional repository is a powerful tool and is important to the open access movement. It would seem that the greatest challenge to faculty use of this resource is lack of awareness. An institutional repository and OERs go hand in hand. Promotion and marketing are essential to the effectiveness of both. Not only do institutional repositories create ideal collaboration and sharing options; they also provide effective means of storing OERs for an academic community.

At QCC, the progress towards building a repository collection has been slow, but steady, focusing not only on collections, but also on innovative OERs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through the institutional repository and a grant program, the Kurt R. Schmeller Library of QCC has established major goals in open access and the use of OERs. Following the guidelines of important educational thinkers, librarians at QCC formed an OER committee to foster the development of these goals. Following marketing and promotional activities, they offered grant awards for the development of OERs by faculty, utilizing textbook money. With newsletter articles, email to listservs, community, university, and college workshops, and administration sponsored programs, as well as institutional repository promotions, QCC librarians have made a promising start on the path to the new world of OERs.

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