SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING FOR SUNY OER INITIATIVES:

Why is it Important and What Does it Look Like?

Higher education is enamored with innovation. Colleges and universities are regularly on the lookout for new ideas, products, and processes that can have a transformative impact on their campuses. Colleges and universities are particularly interested in various student success initiatives that have emerged in recent years, including: technology-assisted advising, competency-based education, guided pathways, redesigned first-year experiences, and of course open education resources (OER).[1] But higher education rarely thinks about sustainable innovation.

In New York, creation of sustainable OER programs has been accelerated by the State's $4m investment in OER at the State University of New York (SUNY) System.[2] Importantly, SUNY recognized that sustainability planning should occur at the beginning of this new initiative, not as a final consideration. As a result, all participating SUNY institutions are required to develop OER sustainability plans.

rpk GROUP has worked with the SUNY System Office and OER implementation teams at four institutions to develop a set of resources to assist campuses with OER sustainability planning.[3] In addition to this overview, an OER sustainability Self-Assessment tool, instructive Field Guide, and template-based Planning Guide are also available.

The Importance of Sustainable Innovation

Sustainability planning is an important component of any new initiative. It's difficult for colleges and universities to keep innovating. Innovation fatigue quickly sets in when yet another "new initiative" is rolled out and then often abandoned when the next new, shiny innovation comes along. Faculty and staff often become discouraged when their work doesn't endure, and cycling through initiatives can reduce visibility and utilization of the initiative among students, faculty, and staff.

Sustainability considerations also encourage institutions to serve as good stewards of innovation "seed money." Although colleges and universities regularly solicit grant funding to support innovation, they often don't utilize the funding to seed the infrastructure necessary to sustain the work beyond the grant period. It's not uncommon to find that good work occurring on a campus has stopped "because the grant ran out" and that the only sustainability plan on the horizon is to "look for another grant."

It's More than Money

The key to sustaining OER lies in weaving a campus "initiative"into the fabric of the institution. This reflects a subtle shift from "OER is something we do" to "OER is what we do."

This shift in perspective can help colleges and universities think about how to embed OER into their daily operations and find the resources necessary to ensure
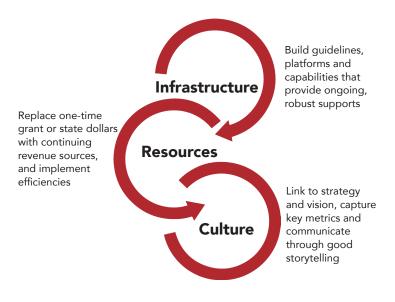
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[1] OER resources are free and openly licensed materials which eliminate or reduce reliance on commercial textbooks at significant savings to students. SUNY requires that OER designed courses use a majority (51%) of OER course materials, which permits instructors to use resources that may not be openly licensed (e.g., academic journals) and may be low-cost instead of no-cost.

[2] The City University of New York (CUNY) System received a similar State investment.

[3] The four partner institutions include: SUNY Albany; SUNY Fredonia; SUNY Canton, and Hudson Valley Community College.

long-term success. From a funding perspective, this allows colleges and universities to take existing resources and steer them to OER activities. This includes more than just dollars, but also utilizing faculty and staff time in different ways to support the work..

Sustainability isn't only about financial resources. It's also about developing the infrastructure and culture that allows OER to thrive. The SUNY sustainability resources are built around the framework shown below: [4]

Replace one-time grant or state dollars with continuing revenue sources, and implement efficiencies

Infrastructure

Build guidelines, platforms and capabilities that provide ongoing, robust supports

Resources

Culture

Link to strategy and vision, capture key metrics and communicate through good storytelling

Sustainable innovation also requires thinking about how current resources could be used differently to generate a better return on investment (ROI). For OER, ROI certainly includes quantifying the savings to students from reduced textbook purchases. But it also includes understanding

other potential financial and non-financial returns to students and institutions. For example, lowering cost barriers to course materials may help more students successfully complete courses, which can reduce costly course retakes. This also may yield a financial benefit to campuses if they no longer need to offer as many sections of those courses.

Moving Ahead

Colleges and universities that successfully implement the components in the OER sustainability framework will be well positioned to scale and integrate OER on their campuses. Colleges that are unable to navigate this transition can expect OER to remain a boutique initiative adopted by some faculty, but it's unlikely to become part of the institutional culture.

The future vision for OER may be best reflected in the evolution of online learning over time. Initially, some faculty were skeptical about the quality of online courses, concerned about comparability of student learning across formats, and nervous about the impact of student preferences on enrollments in traditional sections. Today, online learning has transformed into just another option available to students and faculty. It may be supported by instructional designers, information technology, or a center for teaching and learning, but ultimately it was embedded in departments and now serves as an example for the potential evolution of OER.

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[4] This OER Framework was developed by rpk GROUP as part of the Achieving the Dream OER Degree Initiative. SRI Education and rpk GROUP - ATD OER Degree Initiative Year 2 Report