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OER SUSTAINABILITY CASE STUDY:

SUNY ALBANY

Using OER Fellows to Educate, Evangelize, and Engage Faculty

August 2019

The State University of New York at Albany (UAlbany) is a public research university with about 13,500 undergraduate students (17,700 total students). Prior to receiving SUNY system grant funding to support expansion of courses utilizing Open Educational Resources (OER), the University didn't have a coordinated OER strategy.[1] OER did not have a visible presence on campus and there was little local expertise—most faculty were unfamiliar with free and openly licensed course materials and only a few were known to use OER in their courses. Students, however, had voiced their concerns about textbook costs to University leaders.

UAlbany used the initial grant funding to increase faculty awareness and buy-in around OER. The Interim Director of the Institute for Teaching, Learning, and Academic Leadership (ITLAL) was tasked with implementing a program to educate faculty about OER, and worked in conjunction with the Office of Online Teaching and Learning to administer the grant funding. The grant funding served as the catalyst for cultivating an OER strategy, which was in the formative stages.

Lowering the cost of higher education is a component of the University's strategic plan, although OER is not specifically identified as a way to improve affordability. However, the current strategic plan is under revision and could present an opportunity to highlight how OER connects to the University's goals.

OER History

Although UAlbany does not have strong campus-wide roots in OER, there was an earlier effort to develop OER courses. Some individual faculty members were offering courses using open materials, which enrolled more than 1,400 students in spring 2018. In 2017, UAlbany received an Innovative Instruction Technology Grant (IITG) from Open SUNY to incorporate OER into online courses. The $20,000 grant supported nine faculty as they successfully developed 11 undergraduate or graduate courses in seven disciplines. The faculty were required to attend an OER workshop and participate in follow-up support consultations to revise an online course that adopted OER materials. Faculty also were required to calculate the savings to students from eliminating the cost of textbooks.

Library guides, librarians and SUNY OER services all provided critical support for the project. However, some common challenges emerged, including limited resources in some disciplines (particularly at the graduate level) and the time required to supplement existing resources. An online OER community was established in Blackboard as part of the grant, but participation was not robust and only occurred because it was required. These initial OER efforts were not sustained when the grant concluded.

Approach, Supports, and Vision

UAlbany's OER effort is led by a small team that includes senior-level staff from the Provost's Office of Online Teaching and Learning, the ITLAL, University Libraries, the Educational Technology Center, and Institutional Research, Planning & Effectiveness. Although team members do not necessarily have strong backgrounds in OER, they are leveraging their expertise around curriculum development, instructional design, and library services to increase awareness of OER among faculty. The University does not have a central location or "point person" to provide faculty with guidance around OER resources and support services; however, beginning in 2019 a "Provost's OER Liaison" is providing part-time support to faculty.

[1] The information included in this case study was drawn from a team interview with 5 members of SUNY Albany's OER Sustainability Plan project team on August 28, 2018, as well as OER documents provided by the team, and information from the SUNY Albany website. Additional information on the OER Fellows Program was drawn from a presentation at the OpenEd18 conference on October 12, 2018.

UAlbany primarily focused on education and outreach in 2018 by supporting four OER Fellows. Beginning in fall 2018, stipends were broadly available to faculty teaching courses that utilized OER materials. A $300 stipend was provided to those faculty members offering the 16 OER sections reported in fall 2018 (using previously developed OER); the stipend will also be provided to faculty who teach OER courses in spring 2019. This unique approach of providing stipends for teaching—instead of developing—OER courses was adopted as a gesture of goodwill, as previously unknown pockets of faculty using OER have emerged.

UAlbany already has some academic support services in place, but would benefit from a more organized strategy around OER services. The Library played a supportive role in the IITG grant and lessons from that collaboration could be applied to the current initiative. Similarly, the IT/ID staff have technical experience loading OER courses into the University's learning management system, but would benefit from more formal channels to advise faculty about the services they can provide. UAlbany continues to work towards implementing a data system and process for reporting OER courses. A central system that identifies the number of OER courses does not yet exist, and adding that feature to legacy enterprise systems may continue to require manual reporting.

As the UAlbany team considers options for developing a sustainable OER model, it envisions a parallel approach that includes an OER coordinator as well as organic growth through faculty awareness. A faculty-to-faculty model is the current approach for recruiting additional faculty rather than having a support unit, such as the University Library, lead the work. However, the Library or ITLAL may be best-suited to coordinate OER activities in the future. At this stage in the initiative, UAlbany hasn't yet considered the resources that might be needed to support OER in the future.

Exemplary Practice: OER Fellows Program

UAlbany used the initial OER funding provided by the SUNY system to build more expertise around OER. They developed an OER Fellows Program to recruit and develop an OER talent pool; the program was associated with the Provost's office which conferred a level of prestige and credibility for the work. Four fellows were selected from different departments to serve for one year (January-December, 2018); they received a $5,000 stipend and their departments received a $1,000 bonus to establish goodwill and generate buy-in for program participation.

The Fellows were asked to provide support to other faculty and serve as evangelists for OER. The Fellows were responsible for researching OER in their own disciplines and similar disciplines in their college, including possible OER platforms. The Fellows were also asked to expand upon their own OER-related work (e.g., complete an OER text; improve usability of existing OER text; investigate resources for open statistical packages). Importantly, the Fellows also provided essential outreach around OER. They participated in two OER workshops, and presented at departmental meetings and other forums to expose faculty, Deans, and departments to OER.

Lessons Learned: Some early learnings have already emerged from the Fellows program. The most beneficial portion of the work has been the community building among the faculty and among the Fellows themselves. The Fellow role provided greater access to multiple types of audiences and the Fellows reported that the faculty-to-faculty communication has given OER more credibility; it also allowed them to discuss how OER might impact diverse areas of the colleges. The full impact of the Fellows program on faculty recruitment hasn't been determined yet, as it was still in the first year of implementation.

The Fellows have encouraged continued education across campus because many faculty and administrators still are not familiar with OER and its benefits, and questions persist about the quality of the resources. Faculty also will need additional guidance and support from instructional designers and developers and librarians, and would benefit from an OER coordinator.

Looking Ahead: Sustainability Planning

As UAlbany works to increase the scale and scope of its OER efforts, it should focus on continuing its communication activities as well as framing and building out its OER infrastructure. In the proposed sustainability framework, priority areas for UAlbany are highlighted in blue and initial recommendations are provided below.

Infrastructure

» UAlbany has already expressed a vision for its mature OER model; the next steps would be to outline this framework and develop the infrastructure to support the desired model.

» The support units are critical to OER's sustainability and should be leveraged to assist with professional development and efficiency improvements around course development and launch.

» Continue investment in data systems and processes to identify the number of OER sections offered and students served.

» UAlbany expressed interested in receiving mentoring support from another SUNY research university and should inquire whether the SUNY system office can arrange this support.

Resources

» Resource considerations should not be a primary concern for UAlbany until they have a better understanding of the structure and supports that are needed.

» Some concerns were raised about the availability of future resources for activities related to library support, IT support, and data reporting requirements. A more developed support plan would help identify the resources required.

» Consider whether additional funding is needed (e.g., for new positions), or if existing staff time can be reallocated to support OER.
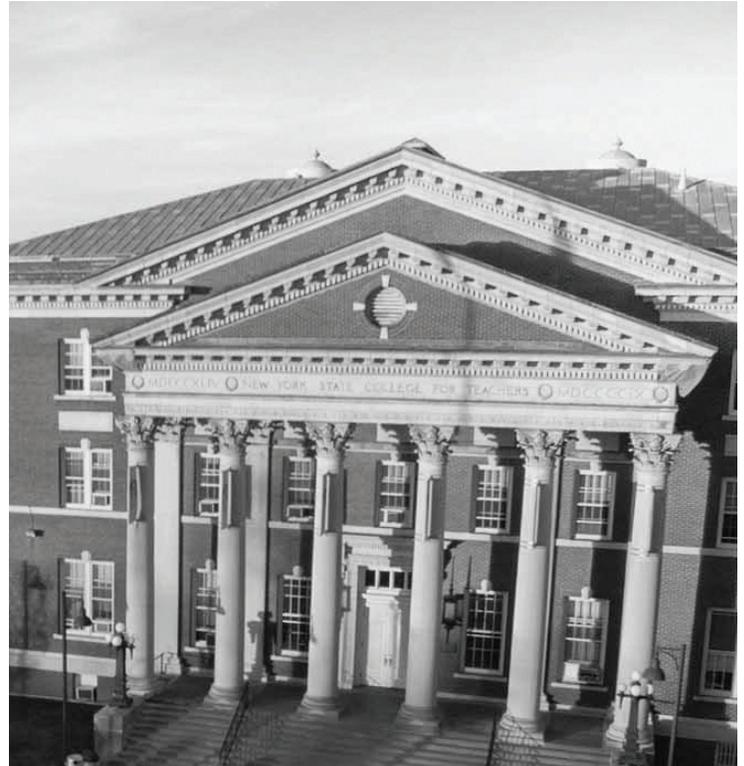
Culture

» UAlbany should continue to build grassroots support among a coalition of faculty. A new cohort of OER Fellows could help continue this work, as could the inaugural cohort of OER Fellows by clarifying their post-fellow roles and activities.

» Develop a communication plan that illustrates how OER is responsive to student concerns about textbook costs.

» Communicate to college leaders how OER connects to the strategic plan by improving student affordability, and potentially even student success.