

7/7/20

Statement in Support of Open Educational Resources (OER) in the Face of COVID-19 from the UT System Affordable Learning Accelerator Task Force

The ALA Task Force and OER

Since April 2019, the UT System Affordable Learning Accelerator Task Force has focused on affordable learning resources for students. The primary area of focus is Open Educational Resources (OER) and how to build institutional engagement and capacity with OER to benefit student learning, success and financial well-being, as well as the affordability of degrees across the UT System. Recommendations will center on how to increase adoption of OER and other low-cost learning resources across the UT System, with emphasis on the academic institutions.

The task force plans to issue its report and recommendations by August 31, 2020. Among the recommendations the task force will issue with its final report will be for the UT System and institutions to adopt an affordability mindset. At the heart of this mindset is a focus on the financial belonging of our students, in support of the System's student success framework grounded in Finances, Advising and Belonging. The task force will recommend a variety of actions including systemwide investment in OER with direction that any investment would have to help students at all UTs, and that faculty and departments partner within and across institutions to develop OER.

Until then, the task force is asking faculty and administrators across the UT System to strongly consider including OER as they plan Fall 2020 courses. There is an opportunity right now for institutions and faculty to adopt OER as textbook options for Fall 2020 and the reasons for doing so are many:

1. **Affordability and Adaptability:** OER solve a textbook affordability problem endemic to higher education, and across UT institutions. OER are free to students. OER are adaptable to modalities and delivery models. OER are customizable by users so that instructors can adopt and adapt them to their pedagogical and course needs. In contrast to the commercial publisher content faculty select, and students purchase each semester, OER are available to students and instructors *immediately and forever*.
2. **Return on Investment:** The return on investment to students in these difficult times is enormous. Over the past few years, UT Arlington estimates savings to students of \$2,200,460; UT San Antonio has saved students \$8,000,000. The potential return on investment for institutions through increased enrollments, retention and graduation enabled by reduced cost of attendance is also meaningful amid the uncertainty caused by COVID-19.
3. **Digital Access:** Most OER are available digitally, the right solution given the volatility of COVID-19 and in anticipation of many courses being taught online, through hybrid delivery, or needing to pivot again quickly from in-person to remote instruction.

OER are free resources that are licensed to allow for revision and reuse. They can be fully self-contained textbooks, videos, quizzes, learning modules, courseware, and more. Use of OER can improve student engagement and success; provide immediate, equitable, and perpetual access to resources; save money for students; and empower educators to maximize flexible, high-quality learning

COVID-19's Disruption and Financial Impact on Students

The COVID-19 pandemic engendered significant disruption to the ways in which UT institutions operate, to how, when and where teaching and learning take place, and to how academic resources—including textbooks and libraries—are made available. When UT institutions pivoted to remote instruction almost overnight in March, suddenly everyone needed digital access to learning materials. Library deans and

7/7/20

librarians observed an immediate increase in requests by faculty for OER at campuses. Why? Because most OER are already digital, they are free, and they are adaptable and customizable by faculty needing to alter them for their course context and outcomes.

More important than the disruption to operational continuity, the pandemic has caused financial suffering to students and their families, making financially vulnerable students even more so as—overnight—they and family members lost jobs, incomes and health benefits. The pandemic has underscored the digital divide, further complicating how, when and where students can make academic progress. And, it has exacerbated income, racial and ethnic inequities, while simultaneously exposing those inequities in ways that were previously easy to ignore. In Fall 2019, percentages of undergraduate students across UT academic institutions receiving Pell ranged from 31% to 63%. Percentages of undergraduates receiving need-based grant and scholarship aid ranged from 31% to 89%. Undergraduates account for 78% of students at academic institutions and 55% of those undergraduates are Hispanic and African American.

The high cost of textbooks has been a barrier to student access and success for decades, independent of the pandemic. The 2019-2020 Student Advisory Council wrote the following letter of support to the task force:

“The cost of obtaining a higher education degree continues to be an access barrier for students across the nation. Indeed, we continue to see tuition increases across the board. OER provides financial relief to students at U. T. institutions and mediates the impact of rising tuition and fees. We encourage the Task Force to continue supporting OER efforts and other textbook affordability strategies. Many of us already have noticed increased attention to OER on our campuses, and we are hopeful this will result in meaningful change. Additionally, we encourage the Task Force [to] keep in mind the primary goal of ensuring that all students, regardless of financial status, have the opportunity to get the best education possible at an affordable rate. “

Students everywhere, including those in the UT System, face additional—and often less visible—financial barriers to successfully pursuing their educations, including food and housing insecurity. The pandemic has created greater urgency for UT institutions to keep student financial well-being and affordability at the center of future planning and decision-making. Taking advantage of OER—with the availability of no-cost-to-students quality textbooks in so many academic disciplines—becomes not only an opportunity but also an imperative.

OER provide an opportunity now

Given the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Task Force is issuing this interim statement on the value and utility of OER and the need for OER now more than ever, a need heightened by concerns for student success and financial well-being in the face of the pandemic.

If there was ever a time for a commitment to, greater engagement with, and strategic investment in OER, it is now.

About the UT System Affordable Learning Accelerator Task Force

The Affordable Learning Accelerator Task Force members include academic leaders, library directors, faculty from the universities, as well as representation from the Faculty Advisory Council (FAC) and the Student Advisory Council (SAC). The task force recognizes the authority faculty have over the curriculum, including decisions regarding what textbooks and other learning resources to use in their courses.