



TO: Members of the Affordable Learning Accelerator Task Force

FROM: The U. T. System Student Advisory Council

DATE: April 27th, 2020

RE: Support for the Adoption of Open Educational Resources and Other Textbook Affordability Measures

In 2018, the U. T. System Library Directors proposed the formation of the U. T. System Textbook Affordability Advisory Council Task Force to engage in a strategic plan focusing on high-impact textbook affordability strategies that enhance student financial well-being and success. The U. T. System Student Advisory Council commends the Task Force for their efforts and work to help students overcome financial barriers related to purchasing costly learning materials on top of their tuition and fee charges.

The U. T. System Student Advisory Council has been working on reviewing student concerns related to affordability at their respective campuses. As you may suspect, students continue to express serious concerns about the barriers to success posed by costly learning materials, including traditional textbooks and online access codes. However, through our research we were encouraged to learn that all eight academic institutions have already begun implementing open educational resources (OER) in one or more of their programs/courses. We were also heartened to learn that other courses have incorporated affordable learning materials that are available at significantly discounted rates. We offer the following student testimonials to support and strengthen your work.

"I was first introduced to open source textbooks, specifically OpenStax, when I was attending Northwest Vista College for my science classes and UTSA for my Generating Educational Excellence in Math and Science class (now known as UTeachSA) in the Spring of 2016. My chemistry professor used OpenStax as the class textbook, and I felt I really benefited from using it in multiple ways such as academic and financial. Using open source textbooks promotes equity among students as they can be accessed through personal and public computers, smartphones, or even purchased inexpensively as a hardcover textbook. The content, which is written and peer-reviewed by college professors, is on-par (and in my experience, even better than) traditional textbooks. Promoting the use of open source textbooks at UTSA would benefit many students on campus."

Marielle Gaspar, B.A. Physics

"At UTEP we have some really good interdisciplinary programs. One amongst those is Environmental Science and Engineering (ESE). Being an interdisciplinary program, it allows freedom to its student to pick and choose classes/courses that will benefit them a lot towards their research and degree completion. My field of

research is Atmospheric Physics with focus on planetary boundary layer meteorology. However, unfortunately we don't have a course dedicated to this subject at UTEP. During one of my class, I learned about the OER source called COMET MetEd. This program is part of the University Center for Atmospheric Research's community program. It is a free collection of hundreds of training resources intended for the geoscience community. It's a wonderfully designed platform for students to learn more from variety of fields in Geosciences including Atmospheric Sciences and benefit from the experts who has designed the tutorials/sessions. I have been using MetEd for past two years and it has benefited me immensely in my research. This is a great tool to learn from the experts in the field of Atmospheric and Geosciences free of charge. I managed to find study material in the form of videos, virtual classrooms, PowerPoint slides and at times e-books which helped me make up for the courses that I couldn't find at UTEP."

Nakul N. Karle, Ph.D. Candidate Environmental Science and Engineering

"When I started my education at UTEP as a nursing major, I would be paying anywhere between \$75-\$200 for my textbooks and my access codes. I would try to look for rentals or used books but the cost defrayal was not much. I switched my major to Political Science, not due to financial reasons, last semester. I immediately noticed that the professors were using open educational resources to teach their classes. Since my switch, I have yet to purchase a book for my classes. The professors are very organized with the way the resources are made available to us and they tailor each to what we are doing in class. If it were not for this, I know many of my classmates would be struggling to excel in our classes. I believe that more professors should be incorporating the open educational resources into their courses to ease the burden of their students and make learning affordable and enjoyable to all."

Jessica Martinez, Undergraduate Political Science Major

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 should 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. As students, we appreciate the effort put in by the Task Force this year and commend the faculty and staff of our institutions who are helping this move forward.

Thank you for your consideration.