Free for All: An Open Source Online Based Teaching Template

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Abstract

The increasing cost of textbooks has created a demand for no cost/low cost learning resources for students. The University System of Georgia, through their Affordable Learning Grants has supported the development of no cost/low cost course transformation activities. Faculty at Clayton State University (CSU) have been engaged in the development of a number of Open Education Resources (OER) courses. This past year, an Open Source Online Based teaching template has been developed for the Introduction to Sociology (SOCI 1101) course. This teaching template provides a model for the development of an economical online learning experience that can serve as a model for similar courses at CSU and other institutions.

Introduction

The democratization of higher education provides greater access to advanced learning. With an increasing availability of learning opportunities, equal access remains a challenging task. Traditional challenges in intellectual abilities, academic preparation and cultural capital remain. Today's politics focused attention on the cost of higher education including, free tuition and forgiveness of educational loans. Even when tuition has been addressed, other costs such as textbooks remain significant economic impediments for all, but especially for those with limited economic means. Baum (2014) noted that college students, on an average, spend more than $1,000 a year on textbooks. These costs generally increase since the cost of texts for more advanced courses can be significantly higher. In the community college environment, textbooks account for approximately 39% of a student's educational costs. Similarly, at 4-year public institutions, textbooks can account for almost 15% of a student's yearly academic expenditures (Burton, 2018).

The textbook publishing field has been increasingly limited; thus, the availability of textbooks has been subject to regular price increases. In particular, Perry (2014) states that five textbook companies have a near monopoly (80%) of the $8.8 billion academic market and have been driving

prices upward by publishing new editions every 2-3 years, bundling new editions with online pass codes, and making potential student resale of textbooks more difficult. Likewise, the increasing trend for colleges and universities to outsource their bookstores to for-profit companies also has contributed to another cost inflation factor (Openoregon, 2019).

Student activists, using Twitter and other forms of social media, have protested this trend and have attempted to influence colleges, universities and educational boards to address this issue (Jacobs, 2014). Their efforts have not been in vain as an increasing number of efforts to control and reduce the financial burden of textbook costs has been initiated in the past few years.

At the national level, Senators Durbin (IL), Smith (MN), Sinema (AZ) and King (ME) were joined by Representative Neguse (CO) to introduce legislation to address the growing costs of textbooks in higher education (Vitez, 2019).

> *In the last two federal budgets, Congress set aside a combined [$10 million in temporary funding](#) to encourage adoption of open textbooks, particularly in high-enrollment classes and in career and technical education. The Affordable College Textbook Act goes further by establishing a grant program to support projects at colleges and universities to create and expand the use of open textbooks, prioritizing those with the most potential for savings, strengthening existing price transparency requirements so students can easily identify classes that use open textbooks when they register and by requiring the Government Accountability Office to report to Congress with an update on price trends in college textbooks and the impacts that open textbooks have on the market (Vitez, 2019).*

This Federal Act was encouraged by a number of state legislatures to support programs to encourage the development of Open Education Resources (OER) and other no cost/low cost options for higher education textbooks. For example, California, Minnesota, Louisiana, Georgia and other states have developed programs to support the use of open source resources.

Affordable Learning Georgia (ALG)

With strong legislative support, the Affordable Learning Georgia (ALG) project began as a pilot initiative in 2013 to address the University System of Georgia's strategic imperative of maximizing the state's resources to ensure that residents have access to an affordable, high quality and seamless educational system. The ALG student success initiative promoted the implementation of the Open Education Resources (OER) program in the form of faculty grants. The ALG Textbook Transformation Grants award up to $5,000 to faculty members for adopting no cost/ low cost ($40 or less) open access textbooks for their courses (USG Strategic Plan, 2016).

The University System of Georgia is comprised of 26 institutions of higher education and each has participated in ALG Textbook Transformation Grants. Since the inception of ALG, Georgia faculty members have submitted 566 grant applications and 334 were awarded. As of Spring 2019, the ALG grants saved Georgia students an estimated 61.9 million dollars in textbook costs (ALG, 2020).

ALG – Clayton State University (CSU)

As a lap-top required campus, Clayton State University has been an active participant in online learning for more than two decades. As a responsible institution, CSU tries to make all of our programs economical and student friendly. Demographically, CSU is a minority/majority institution, where approximately 57% of the students are Pell Grant recipients and many are attending as first-generation college students. There is a 2:1 female to male ratio and a large percentage of part-time to full-time students. CSU is largely a commuter campus and the average student age is almost 30. Likewise, with more upper-division than lower-division students and with a majority of students

working full or part-time, textbook costs are a significant issue for students, many of whom (20%) are enrolled full or part-time in online courses (CSU, 2019).

The high cost of textbooks is burdensome for all students, but particularly so for many part-time, online students and dual-enrolled students. For many of these students, their only source of financial support are Pell Grants or student loans. Textbooks are just one item in a long list of student expenses. (Burton, 2019).

Senack (2014) noted that many low-income students either can't purchase their textbooks in a timely fashion or must wait for financial aid to be processed. This can result in poor academic performance, course withdrawal or delayed graduation, further extending their level of student debt. Recent Georgia funding changes for Move On When Ready (MOWR)/Dual Enrolled students are other economic concerns. Georgia no longer provides textbook funds for high school students currently enrolled in MOWR/Dual Enrolled courses. Public colleges and universities are now required to absorb the cost of textbooks (MOER, 2019). This funding change has further contributed to an environment conducive to a no cost/low cost textbook that will save both students and Clayton State University a substantial amount of money while enhancing the overall academic achievement and retention of students.

Since the inception of the ALG program in 2013. CSU faculty have been awarded 15 grants for the development of no cost/low cost Open Education Resources (OER) with a total cumulative savings of $1,821,536.73 (ALG, 2020). In addition, in Spring of 2019, the administration strongly encouraged all academic programs to investigate opportunities to further move to the use of OER resources by no later than 2021. Therefore, the chair of the Department of Social Sciences mandated that lower division courses, including sociology, would migrate to no cost/low cost learning resources by 2021 (Meddaugh, 2020).

OER Grant – Sociology (SOCI) 1101

Currently, SOCI 1101 Introduction to Sociology is taught by a variety of faculty, both full-time and adjunct, using a number of different textbooks. This results in a variety of learning experiences and different levels of preparation. The online sections have been popular with both (MOWR)/Dual Enrolled and non-traditional students. Also, traditional students, many taking this course at one of our remote learning centers, elect to take the online course because of the flexibility it provides in their schedules.

In response to the need for an online textbook OER) based Introduction to Sociology (SOCI) course, Dr. Bates and Dr. Young proposed a pilot project, initially targeted to online sections, of SOCI 1101. During the Summer 2019term open source textbooks were reviewed for appropriate content and applicability for supporting online sections of SOCI 1101.

There is an increasing number of sources for online textbooks as well as previously developed courses. The recent rise and fall of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOC) contributed to the development of a substantial number OER texts. (Keramidia, 2015). Sites such as the University of Minnesota, University of Maryland, Washington State, OPENSTAX (Rice University) and others provide solid open source texts (Perry, 2014).

The University System of Georgia's, virtual library (Galileo), provides summaries of all previously completed OER grant projects, a number of which were focused on SOCI 1101 (Galileo, 2019). These projects were reviewed, and it was decided to proceed with the development of a grant proposal consistent with the needs of an online course and reflecting the goals of the general education program and sociology major at CSU.

The overall goal of this project was to revise the online Introduction to Sociology (SOCI 1101) course and migrate to an OER textbook, develop a common shared template for the course and

create an economical and enhanced student learning experience while respecting the tradition of academic freedom for faculty.

The specific goals of this project were to:

1. adopt a no cost, open source textbook for all online SOCI 1101 courses at CSU;
2. eliminate the burden of a high cost textbook on an economically challenged student population;
3. promote academic success by ensuring quick access to the textbook, at the beginning of each semester;
4. enhance student learning by providing a variety of supplemental learning resources;
5. provide a model of adaptation that would permit individual instructors to build, if they so choose, their own course while retaining the shared components of the online SOCI 1101 course model;
6. provide a model of sustainability that would permit individual instructors to modify peripheral learning materials which may become dated;
7. provide an example for the CSU faculty of the Department of Social Sciences and faculties at other institutions transitioning to a no cost/low cost learning platform for both online and seated SOCI 1101 courses;
8. provide program leadership by senior faculty for the movement to a no cost, open source text for all sections of SOCI 1101 at Clayton State University by no later than Spring Semester, 2021;
9. provide a digital online backup program for SOCI 1101 consistent with the department's disaster response plan.

ALG – Round 15 Proposal

Bates and Young proposed to revise the online Introduction to Sociology (SOCI 1101) course by adopting an OER textbook, developing a shared template for an economical, flexible and enhanced student learning experience. This template takes advantage of the pedagogical possibilities associated with the university's online learning management system (LMS – D2L) and the experience and expertise of the two senior faculty members in the sociology program.

A shared course template was developed, based on the OER, with a basic course format which included a course syllabus, chapter quizzes and examination questions. Supplemental YOUTUBE videos, written articles and instructor developed videos were designed for each chapter. A series of discussion posts were embedded in the general format to encourage interactive learning. The shared template was consistent with the expectations of a Quality Matters product and with the American Sociological Association's standards for an Introduction to Sociology course (ASA, 2015). The development of the template, however, will allow each instructor to adapt and modify the course to their expertise and expectations, if they so choose. The flexibility of the LMS allows and encourages experienced faculty to create their own courses while maintaining the program consistency of a shared curriculum and text. Likewise, the use of shared template and OER, helps less experienced faculty teaching the online version of SOCI 1101. This course flexibility addresses the need for content consistency while respecting the academic freedom of each faculty member and promotes the sustainability of the course in the future.

Bates and Young reviewed and adopted Introduction to Sociology, 2nd Edition by Griffiths, et. al. through OPENSTAX in July 2019 for use in their shared curriculum model. They developed a preliminary shared template for SOCI 1101 and began preliminary testing of material during the Fall 2019 semester. The proposal for the course was submitted in early September and the grant was funded at $10,800 dollars in October 2019.

Student feedback in terms of pre/posttest evaluations were initially developed and have been compared to student performance from previous years at the end of each semester during the grant

process. In addition, a brief preliminary survey of student satisfaction with the online text and the open source learning experience was developed and utilized during the Spring/Summer 2020 semesters.

The student performance on the course (2019) pre/posttest assessments were comparable to those of previous semesters using standard textbooks. Assessment comparisons are being made during the duration of the grant.

A primary goal of the project was a more economical online learning experience for SOCI 1101 during the Fall 2019 semester (1 course) and Spring 2020 (2 courses). In the Fall 2019 course, 37 students were enrolled, and the textbook savings were $4,403. In Spring, 2020, 77 students were enrolled in the 2 sections for a savings of $9,163. The combined savings for the 2 semesters so far is $13,560.

Annually, the Department of Social Sciences offers 16 sections of SOCI 1101 with an average enrollment of 35 students per section and an estimated total annual student enrollment of 560. When the entire SOCI 1101 course offering, both traditional and online, use the open source text the annual savings for CSU students is estimated at more than half a million dollars ($560,000). These student savings do not include the potential savings that CSU will experience by not having to pay the textbook costs of the MOWR/Dual Enrolled students.

Conclusions

The democratization of higher education created a need for access to no cost/low cost learning resources, especially for non-traditional, minority and other economically challenged students. The University System of Georgia, through their Affordable Learning Georgia grants, has supported over 400 faculty members in developing courses based on open learning sources.

Faculty at CSU have actively been engaged in the development of a number of Open Education Resources (OER) courses. This past year, an Open Source Online- Based Teaching Template was developed for the Introduction to Sociology (SOCI 1101) course. This teaching template provides a model for the development of an economical online learning experience and serves as a model for similar courses at CSU and other institutions.

Having completed a full year of using an open source text, a shared template has been developed and continues to be refined. This learning template is primarily designed for online sections of SOC 1101 but will the basis for further adoption by traditional sections in the sociology program at CSU.

The shared template provides the opportunity for each instructor to adapt their course to their expertise and expectations. The flexibility of the LMS provides and encourages experienced faculty to create their own courses while maintaining the program consistency of a shared curriculum. This potential course flexibility addresses the need for content consistency while respecting the academic freedom of each faculty member and promotes the sustainability of the course. In addition, the development of the shared course template has significantly lowered student cost and it has saved the university the cost of textbooks required for enrolled high school students.

The development of the Shared Curriculum Template for Sociology 1101 is a successful use of an Open Education Resource through the application of a flexible Learning Management System (D2L). This project meets the need to provide a significant savings to all students. Finally, Affordable Learning Grants support faculty members in the development and application of open-source based courses which also supports the Strategic Plan of the University System of Georgia.

A copy of the Shared Curriculum Template for Sociology 1101 will be available through Galileo, the Digital Library of the University System of Georgia, after December 2020. Till then, copies of the template are available through Bates and Young at CSU.

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